FROM THE GOD'S KITCHEN: THE MAHĀPRASĀD IN SHRI JAGANNĀTH TEMPLE, PURI, INDIA

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Abstract

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः। **All living bodies subsist on food grains.** Food is, therefore, irrefutably linked with the physical, social, moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence. If we see the Anthropological discourses are replete with numerous examples of eating either as a social and cultural experience or as a collection of associated beliefs affecting the physical body. Hence, many anthropologists have attached paramount importance to food as a symbol of identity, which has further been endorsed by scholars like Lévi-Strauss, Jack Goody, Sidney Mintz, Robin Fox, Ravindra Khare and many others from their vantage point. However, there are several contrary views suggesting that food does not necessarily symbolize identities, forcefully addressed by Jeremy MacClancy, Jon Holtzman, James Staples, Arjun Appadurai, among others. With this polemic at the background, using auto-ethnographical method, an attempt has been made in this paper to empirically demonstrate how spiritual food can serve both the ends meaningfully at the same time. On one hand, it embodies the typical food culture of a region, while on the other it temporarily breaks the rigid rules of commensality when eating. Although spiritual food can be prepared and shared in households or communities, I have chosen a famous 11th Century Hindu temple in India, where the tradition of eating together the leftovers of the offerings to the Deities (*Prasādam*) has created a special space in the minds of the devout Hindus, defying the rigid rules of commensality, taboos and caste barriers, replicating what Turner would have called an "anti-structure" (1969). So the paper elucidates here the case of the spiritual offerings, popularly known as *Mahāprasād* of a Hindu God, Lord Jagannāth of Puri, in India.

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Further it demonstrate how this structural disorientation while eating this offering (*Prasād*) fits into the paradigm of 'communitas' or anti-structure much like Turner conceptualizes it as a 'liminal' and existential opposition to rigid and hierarchical structures of a society.

Keywords: Mahāprasād, Lord Jagannāth, Spiritual food, Caste hierarchy, Hindu kinship, Liminality and Communitas, Anti-Structure.

Introduction

Anthropological discourses are replete with copious examples of eating either as a social and cultural experience or as a collection of associated beliefs affecting the physical body, popularly dividing "anthropology of food" from "nutritional anthropology" (Dirks & Hunter 2013: 3). Food is, therefore, irrefutably linked with the physical, social, moral and spiritual dimensions of the human existence. But within the broader domain of "anthropology of food", an attempt has been made in this paper to discuss eating as an intense spiritual experience, and describe beliefs and taboos associated with this form of spirituality. Although spiritual food can be prepared and shared in households or communities, I have chosen a famous 11th Century Hindu temple in India, where the tradition of eating together the leftovers of the offerings to the Deities (*Prasādam*) has created a special space in the minds of the devout Hindus, defying the rigid rules of commensality, taboos and caste barriers, replicating what Turner would have called an "anti-structure" (1969).

In recent times, food has almost become a social science obsession for various reasons. In this connection it has been observed by Sidney Mintz, widely regarded as the father of anthropology of food, that "Vogues in social science are sometimes difficult to explain. So, what is it about food? To the staggering overflow of cookbooks and of television food shows can now be added books – anthropological, poetic, historical, sociological – about food…. Never before have there been so many books about food itself, the experience of eating, the relation between taste and smell, the sensual and sensory of food – food and sex, food and gender, food and obesity, food and ethnicity…" (Quoted in Antrosio & Han 2016). In order to justify its significance, it is said, "… the study of food and eating is important both for its own sake since food is utterly essential to human existence (and often insufficiently

available) and because the subfield has proved valuable for debating and advancing anthropological theory and research methods. Food studies have illuminated broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation, and the social construction of memory." (Mintz & Du Bois 2002: 99). But with the proliferating literature, what is found intriguing is the polysemous nature of food, extending from "a highly condensed social fact" to "a marvelously plastic kind of collective representation" (Appadurai 1981: 494), demanding a fastidious analysis of the phenomenon from many possible dimensions. Appadurai further adds that duality is also manifested here as "… food, in its varied guises, contexts, and functions, can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance …" (ibid.). However, we cannot possibly review here the entire bourgeoning literature on anthropology of food from James Frazer (1890) to date, and repeat the exercise, which is already available elsewhere in much greater detail (Albala 2013, Klein & Watson 2016; Mukhopadhyay 2011; Macbeth and MacClancy 2004, etc.).

Out of the entire gamut of literature on anthropology of food, one can easily notice some passionate discourses on whether or not food is a marker of identity. While discussing "You Eat What You Are", Fox appositely relates different national identities with the most preferred cuisines (2014: 2-3). But within the nations, there are also regional specificities of food preferences and eating habits (Narayan 2004, 2020), or intricate gender relations intertwined with food and commensality (Counihan 1999). Many anthropological studies have thus pertinently summarized how "Food has historically played a role in maintaining the social boundaries between ethnic groups (Douglas 1984, Goody 1982), social classes (Bourdieu 1979) and castes (Appadurai 1988). In addition to reflecting forms of social organization and social structure, food has played a role in shaping both national and regional identity ideals and projects." (Matta and Garcia 2019: Para 5). Concatenating identity of various hues with food and cuisine exemplified above is at best a half truth, as many anthropologists have compellingly rejected such naïve correspondence between them. For example, MacClancy, taking cue from Barth, argues that "… identity is essentially relational: that to study an identity, one must look at what it is defined against, and how that definition may change over time." (2004: 63-64). He further adds that "Anthropologists cannot prescribe exactly which food-related dimensions promoters of local identity may wish to focus on. They may stress particular foods, combinations of foods, particular

prohibitions, styles of cooking, particular tastes or textures, structures and timing of meals, size of portions, table manners, and so on. It is up to the fieldworker to find out exactly which are being used to drive the vehicle of identity." (ibid.). MacClancy's stand is further vindicated by Holtzman (2009) who contends that symbolic, sensuous, social and material experience of food is frequently in "conflicting layers" and hence, it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between food and identities of different types. He asserts that "Food is so deeply embedded at many levels that it need not resonate in ways that are wholly consistent" (ibid: 48). This perplexity has been aptly addressed in the case of South Asia because "The extent to which caste identity affects who might eat together in south Asia, or what they might eat, where and when, is complex, contingent and highly variable, with considerable variations noted across regions, time periods and shifting social contexts." (Staples 2016: 74). Many other examples by Khare, Appadurai, Caplan and others advocating a ramified against a unified perception of food in South Asia have been deliberated in other sections of this paper.

With this polemic at the background, we endeavor in this paper to empirically demonstrate how a spiritual food offered to a Hindu Deity could serve both the ends meaningfully. On the one hand, it symbolizes the typical food culture and eating habits of the region where the shrine exists, while on the other, it negates, transient though, the stringent rules of commensality, the hallmark of the Hindu social organization. As our example, we have taken the case of the left overs of the spiritual offerings, popularly known as *Mahāprasād* or *Abadhā*[1], to a Hindu God, Jagannāth, of Puri in India. Huge quantities and 56 varieties of these quotidian offerings, locally called *Chhapan Bhog* are prepared and sold to thousands of devotees every day, who believe that its partaking leads to liberation from rebirth or *Moksha* (Routray 2019: 55-63). Eating of the *Mahāprasād* or *Abadhā* by hand either directly from the cooking pot or on a banana leaf (See Image 3) by squatting on the floor in the temple premises, is devoid of any commensal restrictions whatsoever in the rigidly hierarchical and exceedingly caste-ridden Indian society confirms to the polysemous nature of food and its layered meanings. We would further demonstrate how the sacramental food, partaking of which signals an ephemeral negation of strict rules of commensality, fits well into the paradigm of "communitas" or "anti-structure" in the sense Turner (1969: 358-374) hypothesizes it as a liminal and existential opposition to rigid and hierarchical structure of a society.

Methods Used

Empirical data have been collected using an auto-ethnographical method for this study and writing the narratives partly from my own experience, but not really autobiographical. However, conscious of the common drawbacks of auto-ethnography that "The introspective and subjective performances that are, to a greater or lesser extent, inevitable parts of the auto-ethnographic act still raise questions about the value of each auto-ethnographic account and which accounts are to be published and counted as research" (Denshire 2014: 831-832). This apprehension is countered in our case due to the emphasis laid on reflexivity in the narratives that are presented in this paper and rigorous cross-verification of data, both from secondary as well as from first-hand sources. I have born and brought up in the Eastern Indian state of Odisha, where the cult of Jagannāth is a household name and intimately connected with the daily life, history, politics, literature and religious identity of all the Odia speaking people. Lord Jagannāth is the *Ista Devatā* or the cherished deity of the households in Odisha insofar as the first invitation goes to Him on any auspicious occasion like a wedding or a threading ceremony (*Upanayan*). I have had the privilege of participating in many year-round festivities in the temple, the most important being the annual chariot festival or *Ratha Jātrā* and partaking of *Mahāprasād* or *Abadhā* several times in the temple premises. Therefore, it is but natural that I'm the participant observers and have a fair knowledge of what goes on inside the temple precincts and outside it. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this paper, several temple cooks (*Suāra* and *Mahāsuāra*), temple servitors (*Sevāyat*), temple administrators, researchers on the Jagannāth cult as well as common pilgrims visiting the temple from different corners of India have been interviewed with a semi-structured schedule to elicit information with regard to the preparation, offering and partaking of the *Mahāprasād* or *Abadhā* of Lord Jagannāth and the beliefs associated with them.

The Shrine of Lord Jagannāth in Odisha, India

The ritual offering that constitutes the focus of our discussion in this paper relates to the Hindu Vaishnavite God, Lord Jagannāth, worshipped in the city of Puri in the state of Odisha, on the eastern coast of India. Hindus believe in four cardinal centers in India as the holiest places of pilgrimage, which are called *Dhāms* or the sacred abodes of the Supreme God, Vishnu. Badrināth (in Uttarakhand) in the North, Rameswaram (in Tamil Nadu) in the South, Dwārakā (in

Gujarat) in the West and Puri (in Odisha) in the East are the four *Dhāms* that are the most sacred centers established by His Holiness Adi Shankarāchārya in the 8th Century AD (Varma 2018). He named his *Matha* or monastery in Puri as the Govardhan *Matha*, which is now a part of the temple of the Lord Jagannāth.

The temple of the Lord Jagannāth (Image I) is the tallest stone temple in the state of Odisha with a height of about 214 feet and is a splendid example of the Kalinga style of temple architecture[2]. The huge temple complex is spread over an area of about 400,000 square feet with a 20 feet high fortified outer boundary wall, popularly known as the *Meghanāda Pācheri*. Besides the main temple or the sanctum sanctorum, known as the *Deula* or *Vimāna* or *Garbha Gruha*, it has three more distinct structures, *viz. Mukhashālā/Jagamohan* (the entrance or the audience hall), *Nāta Mandapa* (the dancing hall) and *Bhoga Mandap* (the offering hall). The temple has four *Dwārs* or gateways on East, West, South and North; the East being the main gate, known as the *Singha Dwār* or Lions' Gate with two imposing colossal structures of stone lions. The Jagannāth temple complex is incredibly large as besides the seven main deities seated on the *Ratna Bedi* in the sanctum sanctorum, there are about 120 shrines with many of them having their small temples inside the main temple premises.

Seven idols are worshipped on the *Ratna Bedi* or the bejeweled platform in the sanctum sanctorum, which include the Hindu trinity of the Lord Jagannāth, His elder brother Balabhadra, sister Subhadrā, Lords Sudarshan (the weapon of Lord Jagannāth) and Mādhav (the idol of Vishnu, all made up of sacred neem wood

Image 1: The Temle of Lord Jagannāth in Puri, Odisha, India
(*Source:* Opindia, 12 February 2018)

(*Azadirachta indica*), called *Dāru*. Two idols made of precious metals of Bhudevi and Sridevi, the consorts of the Lord Jagannath are also seated on the platform. Introducing the Jagannāth triad will not be complete without mentioning the unique and strange forms of the idols. None of these wooden idols has legs or arms except two stumps each projecting out, but with a face each and two large eyes without eyelids. Hindus believe that the open arms are in an openly embracing posture towards the devotees. While the idol of Jagannāth is painted black, idols of Balabhadra and Subhadra are colored white and yellow respectively (See Image 2), representing three major races of the humankind: the Caucasoid, the Negroid and the Mongoloid, according to some scholars (Ghadai 2004: 83).

Although an authentic history of this temple is difficult to establish, it is believed that the cult and the temple date back to the pre-Christian era. The present huge temple, however, was later built by the King Ananta Varman Chodaganga Deb of the Ganga Dynasty in the 12th Century AD, as revealed from the Kendupātnā Copper Plate inscription. Most likely, his mighty grandson King Ananga Bhima Deb III (1211-1238 AD) had added some structures to the original temple during his reign. The exact year in which the temple construction was completed is not yet ascertained (Das 2010)[3].

Similarly, in the absence of dependable historical, epigraphic or archeological evidences, dating the origin of the Jagannāth cult is problematic. Several claims have been made regarding its mythical, tribal, Vedic, Buddhist, Tantric and Vaishnavite origin of the Jagannāth cult (Patra 2011). No matter from where the cult

Image 2: Shri Balabhadra, Maa Subhadra & Shri Jagannath (from left to right)
(*Source:* Opindia, 11 June 2020)

originated, the importance of this shrine in Hindu minds now can best be understood from the fact that "…everything associated with this place is expressed in superlatives. Like the God is *Mahāprabhu*, [the] Goddess is MahaLaxmi, Lord Balabhadra is *Badathākur*, the temple is *Badadeula*, the sea is *Mahodadhi* and the *Prasād* offered to Lord is *Mahāprasād* and the kitchen where the food is cooked is treated as the biggest kitchen in the world" (Routray op.cit: 55).

The Tradition of Spiritual Foods in Places of Worship in India

Every religion is identified with accepted and tabooed foods of some sort or the other. Hindus usually prefer vegetarian diet and avoid beef, although urban India is more cosmopolitan in its eating habits. Traditionally the most accepted foods are offered to the Deities at the places of worship, which are locally available and easily sustainable. The devotees visiting these shrines partake the offered foods, which are considered sacred and sanctified to earn merits. Eating, for the Hindus is not merely for subsistence, but is a ritual in itself, inextricably integrated with their cosmological beliefs. The food is invariably sacrificed to the Supreme before eating with the recognition that the purity of the process of cooking, purity of the object(s) of cooking, purity of the cook, and purity of the individual who ingests the food are integral parts of a cosmic process that supports life.[4]

One of the ways, therefore, of understanding spiritual India is generally through its food and faith, and precisely looking at numerous occasions of feasting and fasting, praying and accepting *Prasād* or the spiritual food (Narayan 2020, op.cit). Most of the major shrines in India offer holy *Prasād* either freely or for a price to the devotees almost throughout the year. All these spiritual foods have a strong connection with the history and identity of the shrines in India.

Spiritual foods, while on the one hand, are shrine-specific, these are also person-specific. In Asian religious thought, and particularly in Hinduism, food does not only contribute to the maintenance of the physical body, but also has a profound impact on the mental and spiritual faculties of a person. This has been emphasized repeatedly in numerous Hindu religious texts. Therefore, it has been aptly said that "…at the most abstract level, the production and consumption of food are part of a single cycle of transactions with the gods." (Appadurai 1981: 496).

In *Ayurveda* and *Yoga Shāstras*, food is divided into three types viz. *Sāttvic* (pure and light), *Rājasic* (food with a stimulating effect on

human mind like caffeinated drinks, overly spicy and salty, etc.) and *Tāmasic* (food with a sedative effect on mind, like fish, animal flesh, egg, etc.). Only *Sāttvic* food is offered to the gods and therefore, the leftovers are also *Sāttvic* or spiritual foods for the devotees.

Sacred Food Preparation and Offerings in Shri Jagannānth Temple

The History and Siginificance of the Mahāprasād

It is still uncertain as to when the *Mahāprasād* offering in the temple of Lord Jagannāth began, as different sources suggest different periods. But it is certain that the local kings had the profound authority to decide the nature of the offering since substantial wealth to the temple was donated by them in the form of land and jewelry. Change in menu, therefore, seems to be quite a routine affair during the reigns of different kings of Odisha. No matter what is the menu, the method of preparation and ingredients used have hardly undergone any change over time, retaining the sanctity of the *Mahāprasād*.

According to the *Skanda Purāna*[5], the *Mahāprasād* is the destroyer of all sins – physical or mental - of the devotees, even though it is stale, dried or carried to a long distance. This has converted the temple kitchen into one of the mega-kitchens of the world. It is not only in the *Skanda Purāna*, but in at least 26 other Hindu religious texts, a reference to *Mahāprasād* has been made (Routray op.cit: 56). These texts exacerbate the sanctity of *Mahāprasād* by mentioning that it is cooked by none other than the Goddess Mahālaxmi, one of the consorts of Lord Jagannāth and the Hindu Goddess of wealth, to the liking of the Lord. The kitchen fire, named as *Vaishnavāgni*, is never put out and is considered to be the most sacred. The intriguing part of the offering is that it becomes the *Mahāprasād* only when it is re-offered to the Goddess Vimala after initially offering to Lord Jagannāth, thus revealing the Tantric[6] influence on the cult (Kanungo 2007: 53-55). Many servitors and devotees, whom we interviewed in Puri, believe that the aroma of the *Mahāprasād* becomes unique after re-offering to the Goddess Vimala, thus completing a spiritual transformation from *Prasād* to *Mahāprasād*.

Types of Mahāprasād

Mahāprasād offered to the Lord is divided into three distinct types: perishable or *Sankhudi*, non-perishable or *Sukhuli*, and *Nirmālya* or

dried. The *Sankhudi* offering or *Bhoga* to the Lord includes many varieties of rice dishes, thick lentil soup, lentils cooked with different vegetables popularly known as *Dālmā* in Odisha, curries of mixed vegetables like *Besara*, *Mahura*, leafy vegetables, etc. and sweet porridge, which are the typical cuisine of Odisha. On the other hand, *Sukhuli Bhoga* consists of dry sweetmeats and cakes like *Khajā*, *Gajā*, *Ladö*, *Kānti*, etc. made of *Maidā* (finely polished wheat flour), polished rice flour, gram flour or *Besan*, sugar, *Ghee* (clarified butter) and condiments of various types that are the popular snacks in this part of India. The third type of *Mahāprasād* is known as *Nirmālya*, which is the cooked and sun-dried plain rice in a separate space inside the temple premises earmarked for drying, which could be stored for a long period of time.

Any discussion about Lord Jagannāth would remain incomplete without identifying the Deity with an ordinary human being, which are reflected in the everyday temple rites (Mahapatra 2009: 84-87), the description of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the Deities brush teeth, take bath, put on designated colored dresses on different days of the week, adorn *Ocimum* leaves, flowers and ornaments, give audience to the devotees, eat and sleep only after watching the *Mahari*[7] dances. The Deities are specially decked up in attractive costumes (*Beshā*) thrice a day and 13 special types in a year on various auspicious occasions (Dash 2009). They are offered food six times daily from breakfast to late night supper with varieties of *Sāttvic* foods and delicacies that the local Odias usually relish. Of course, special food is prepared and offered on festival days thus making the Lord's kitchen as one of the largest kitchens in the world. Needless to mention here that the food culture of Odisha is veritably reflected in the *Mahāprasād* of the temple that is offered to the Deities. The ingredients and the vegetables used in the *Mahāprasād* are locally procured and cooked. Therefore, the structural parallels between Gods, kings and the village heads in Odisha have been allegorically recounted in several studies on castes in India (Mahapatra 1976: 51-72).

Time and Items of Daily Offerings

Daily offerings to the Lord Jagannāth are quite elaborate and the reason is simple. The Hindus believe that Lord Vishnu graces four different holy places (*Dhāms*) in India with his presence. He takes bath at Rameswaram (South), meditates at Badrinath (North), rests at Dwarka (West), and dines at Puri (East) (Routray op.cit: 57). This naturally has prompted an extensive arrangement of offerings for

the Lord and the left overs for the devotees. Daily offerings to the Lord are made six times a day with varieties of dishes. Except the offering at 11.00 AM (*Bhoga Mandap Bhoga*), the other five offerings are called *Kotha Bhoga*, which are cooked in the kitchen earmarked for this (*Kotha Bhoga Rosha*), distributed only among the servitors on duty as *Khei*, and not for sale[8]. The daily offerings to the Lord are as follows:

1. *Gopal Ballav Bhoga*[9] (Breakfast at 9.00 AM): It is a dry seven item treat – *Khuā* (Condensed milk), *Lahuni* (Butter), sweetened coconut grating, coconut water, and *Khai* (Popcorn sweetened with sugar), curd and ripe bananas.
2. *Sakāla Dhupa* (Morning Meal at 10.00 AM): This is the first cooked meal offered to the Lord. It consists of *Kānikā* (sweet rice), *Khechudi* (rice with lentils), *Dāli* (thick lentil soup), vegetable curries, *Sāga* (green leaves), *Pithā* (cakes), etc. and various preparations of black gram. This offering is made inside the *Garbhagriha* or the sanctum sanctorum by the priest or *Pujā Pandā* in 16 *Upachāras*[10].
3. *Bhoga Mandap Bhoga* (Supplementary offering at 11.00 AM): Since this offering is performed in the *Bhoga Mandap* and not in the sanctum sanctorum, it has been named like this. Huge quantities of rice, thick lentil soup (*Dāli*), varieties of curry, cakes of different kinds, green leaves (*Sāga*), etc. are prepared in specially designed earthen containers (*Hāndi* or *Kuduā*) and are offered to the Lord. Since this offering is for sale, the temple cooks prepare these varieties as per the demand of the devotees. On special occasions and festivals, still larger quantities of offerings are prepared several times to meet the demand of the pilgrims. This is also called *Chatra Bhoga* and was believed to be introduced by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century to help pilgrims share the temple food.
4. *Madhyānna Dhupa* (Midday Meal between 12.30 PM to 1.00 PM): This is also an elaborate offering to the Lord. Generally different types of sweet cakes are offered during this *Pujā*. Three *Pujāpandā sevakas* perform the *Bhoga Pujā* in the *Pokhariā* (the space around the *Ratnavedi* in the *Garbhagriha*) with *Sodasa Upachāras* in the same manner as in the *Sakāla Dhupa*.
5. *Sandhyā Dhupa* (Evening Meal between 7.00 PM and 8.00 PM): The items of this *Dhupa* are mostly *Pakhāla*[11] (watered rice), and varieties of *Pithā* (cake) and confectionaries. The items

are offered in *Shodasa Upachārs* like the morning offerings by three *Pujāpandā sevakas* to the triad.

6. *Badasinhāra Dhupa* (Late Night Meal at 11.15 PM): This is the last meal offered to the Deities before *Pahuda* or retirement for the night. Therefore, it is less elaborate. Again, three *Pujāpandā sevakas* offer these items in *Pancha Upachāra*, which is short and simple offering with just five steps (*Sugandham*, *Pushpam*, *Dhoopam*, *Deepam* and *Naivedyam* meaning sandal paste, flower, incense, light and offerings, respectively).

The Kitchen of the Jagannāth Temple

The kitchen of the Jagannāth temple is commonly known as the *Rosaghara* (literal meaning the kitchen), which is situated in the south-east corner of the outer boundary wall of the temple. The size of the kitchen is about 150 feet long, 100 feet breadth and 20 feet high. It spreads over an area of about one acre with a secured boundary wall. It has the capacity to cook food or *Mahāprasād* for more than 100,000 pilgrims every single day. The kitchen has 32 rooms and 752 earthen ovens, where about 600 cooks (*Suāras*) and about 400 kitchen assistants work every day for preparation of the *Mahāprasād*. Entry into the *Rosaghara* is strictly forbidden for anyone other than the cooks on Lord's duty (*Pali*) for the day and their assistants. Women are not permitted to enter into the *Rosaghara* at any time of the year.

Mahāprasād in the temple kitchen is prepared in three different kinds of hearths. These are known as *Anna Chuli* (rice hearth), *Ahiā Chuli* (rectangular hearth between two rice hearths) and *Pithā Chuli* (hearth for snacks and desserts). Each rice hearth is 3 feet long, 2.5 feet broad and 3.5 feet high that can accommodate 9 earthen pots[12] sufficient to feed 100 persons. There are 175 such hearths for cooking rice. *Ahiā Chuli* are rectangular in shape with a dimension of 9 feet by 3 feet, which are meant for cooking thick lentil soup (*Dāl*) and different types of curries. Fire wood is not used in *Ahiā Chuli*. There are 45 *Ahiā Chuli* in the temple kitchen and each hearth can accommodate 27 earthen pots at a time. 20 *Pithā Chuli* are used exclusively for the preparation of snacks (*Pithā*) for the purpose of *Kothā Bhogā*. It is said that "The Holy kitchen where the *Mahāprasād* is prepared is an institution by itself. It is not only vast, well organized, and disciplined but also permanent in nature. Basic features and old values are scrupulously prescribed here. The fire in Holy kitchen never extinguishes. It is a continuous process" (Routray, op.cit:

61). The firewood used in the kitchen is mostly the locally available dry *Casuarina* shoots that grow abundantly on the sandy beaches of Puri. Water for cooking *Mahāprasād* is only drawn from two old wells named after the *Gangā* and the *Yamunā*, two perennial rivers of India originating from the Himalayas. The use of the following vegetables is a strict taboo for the preparation of *Mahāprasād*: potato, tomato, cauli flower, cabbage, capsicum, beans, drumsticks, okra, bitter gourd, etc. (ibid.), which are considered to be foreign in their origin and hence, non-indigenous. Onion, garlic and chili are never used in any of the offerings as these are considered to be *Tāmasic* foods. Only clay cooking pots (*Hāndi* or *Kuduā*) of various sizes are used for the preparation of *Mahāprasād* in the temple kitchen and are supplied for generations by the traditional temple potters who live in Kumbhārpadā in the outskirts of the Puri town. As this is a hereditary service to the Lord, they have been given land grants by the temple for this service. The pots are half-baked and red in color to withstand high heat. These pots are made up of laterite soil, which is abundantly available around the temple town of Puri.

Mahāprasād Sharing and the Hindu Social Structure

In common parlance, the Hindu society is ritually stratified with many castes or *Jātis*, which are hereditarily endogamous, linked with specific occupations. At the top of the hierarchy are the upper castes (such as the Brahman, Kayasth, Bania, etc.) and at the bottom are lower ones (like washermen, barbers, leather workers, etc.), leaving a large number of others as intermediate castes. All these castes are linked with a four-fold *Varna* model of Brahman, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Sudra for the determination of their ritual status (Chakravorty 2019). One of the major characteristics of the caste system in India has been preordained commensal rules (Ghurye 1969), the vestige of which still pervades the Hindu food behavior. The classical anthropological literature on village studies in India in the 1960s and 1970s (Mayer 1956, Marriott 1968, etc.) have sufficiently articulated how caste and commensality are directly related in Indian villages, and also how adoption or imitation of vegetarianism as a pure food indicates the process of "Sanskritization" among the lower castes to elevate their status to higher ones (Srinivas 1956: 481- 496).

The tradition of village studies of 1950s and 1960s have given way to the study of emerging caste and commensality in urban India in 1970s and later. For example, Marriot's (1978) ethnosociological approach has made his earlier assumptions upside down by hypothesizing that

"intimacy and rank are positively correlated" between castes such that more unequal is the caste status, more intimate is the food transaction. Other studies have explored additional parameters of commensality, *viz.* preparing, taking and receiving food, community eating, etc., and how commensalism transgresses the consideration of caste to gender and age among the middle-class population in urban India in domestic as well as in extra-domestic domains (Caplan 2008: 120).

Arguably, therefore, we propose that the relationship between caste and commensalism is far from monolithic and follows a definite pattern in all contexts. This has led Appadurai to suggest that "… food in South Asia can serve *two diametrically opposed* semiotic functions. It can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation. Any specific semiotic outcome is a matter of the particular food substance, the actors involved in the transaction, and the context and audience of their transaction" (italics added) (op.cit: 496). He has convincingly portrayed this in his study of gastro-politics in Tamil Hindu households, marriage feasts, and temple *Prasādam*. However, he asserts that gastro-politics in the temple can lead to "bitter and prolonged schisms" between castes engaged in the service of the God, sometimes culminating in litigations in the courts of law. Appadurai following Khare (1976) suggests that food has a bearing on "moral properties, cosmic meanings, and social consequences" (ibid.) and compares the intricacy of commensality with the "deep play" involved in the Balinese cockfights articulated by Geertz (1973).

While Appadurai's narrative of distribution of *Prasādam* in Sri Parthsarathi Swami Temple, a Vaishnava shrine in the city of Madras lands up in protest movements by the lower caste temple servitors against the Brahmin priests for the reason of "gastronomic humiliation", we have noticed a contrary trend of blurring of caste hierarchy while partaking the *Mahāprasād* in the temple of Lord Jagannāth. However, we concede to the fundamental principle espoused by Khare, Appadurai, Caplan, Staples and others that the semiotic function of food in South Asia could serve two diametrically opposed functions, which depends on the nature of food, the actors involved and the context in which it is presented. In the case of sharing of the *Mahāprasād*, we consider that downplay of strictly divisive caste hierarchy in Indian society is a sort of re-play of what Victor Turner terms "liminality and communitas" in his discussion on ritual anti-structure.

Victor Turner's theoretical contribution lies in the adoption of a processual view of ritual, which was primarily adopted from Arnold van Gennep's concept of the rites of passage (1960/1909). Turner believes that there is a larger dialectics between structure and "communitas" in every human society. While structure stands for authority, hierarchy and normative order in organizing a society, there are rooms for anti-structure also, which are liminal or transitional experiences of rituals. He calls this anti-structure as "communitas", which is a liminal and existential experience contrary to the existing order, but eventually to be re-incorporated into the structure at the end of the liminal period.

Turner has articulated this in his book, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). More than half a century before Turner, van Gennep held that rites of passage or rituals generically were liminal in nature in the sense that they extricate an individual or a group from the strict societal norms or rigid statuses, albeit temporarily, fixing them in a state of neutrality, until they regain their old status or assigned a completely new status. This state has been explained by Turner that "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (ibid: 95). Turner cites the example of an installation rite of Ndembu chief-elect the night before he is formally declared the chief and the humiliations and insultations he faces by the Kafwana and other commoners of the tribe, which Turner prefers to call "The Reviling of the Chief-Elect." (ibid: 100). Turner names this phenomenon as "communitas", and "liminality and communitas" together constitute, what he calls, "ritual anti-structure". Turner holds that "From all this I infer that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality." (ibid: 97).

We propose that when the devotees flock to Puri round the year for a *Darshan* or ritual audience of the Lord Jagannāth and visit the *Ānanda Bazār*[13] (the market area of *Mahāprasād*) for purchasing and partaking the Lord's leftover sacred offerings, they experience an extreme state of ecstasy and an ephemeral state of communitas, as partaking of *Mahāprasād* is not limited by the consideration of caste or kinship or community in a highly hierarchical Hindu society.

The issues raised by Caplan (op.cit: 118-142) with regard to the age and gender in food sharing is an additional dimension in the context of eating the offering of the Lord. In Indian joint

families, the women invariably cook food for all the members of the family, but are the last to eat after serving the male members of the household and the children. The elderly men in the family ideally receive priority in eating because of their age, followed by the other men and the elderly women. A deviation to this domestic norm is noticed while eating the *Mahāprasād*. Husband, wife and children share the spiritual food simultaneously, served on one big banana leaf, without any restriction. Even the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law do share this food from the same leaf-plate without any inhibition, which is a strict taboo back home in India. We have noticed sharing of *Mahāprasād* by mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law from the same banana leaf, which is rather an abominable practice in many households of India. On the other extreme is the sight of sharing together of *Mahāprasād* by friends of higher and lower caste origins, which is uncommon, if not impossible, even in urban and industrial India today, where caste has its sway to a large extent (Staples op. cit). Although India's high/low caste divisions are more often than not exemplified by its food culture, *viz.* vegetarian/non-vegetarian, *Kuchha* (raw)/*Pucca* (cooked) food dichotomies, this characterization is utterly blurred since centuries in the Jagannāth temple of Odisha with regard to communal dining of the sacred food or *Mahāprasād*.

The *Mahāprasād* is never ever served or eaten by spoons and forks, and the only way to serve and eat the *Mahāprasād* is by hands. It is invariably served on clean banana leaves and those who partake

Image 3: *Mahāprasād* Served on Banana Leaf
(*Source:* puripolice.nic.in)

the *Mahāprasād* have to squat on the floor on the designated zones of the temple premises, as eating the *Mahāprasād* sitting on chairs and tables is considered disrespectful to the God. Even when the *Mahāprasād* is taken out of the temple town for serving to guests during other rituals like threading and wedding, squatting on the floor and partaking on banana leaves is still a tradition. The *Mahāprasād* is ceremonially exchanged when new relationships are established between individuals and families, and is considered auspicious before starting a new business or relocating into a new area. Indian women are tied in ritual friendships by offering the *Mahāprasād* and address to each other as *Mahāprasād* or *Ābhadā* instead of their names. In sum, the *Mahāprasād* transcends all rigid boundaries of caste, kinship and community hierarchy and is offered to and accepted by all without any disinclination. In fact, the *Mahāprasād* is a spiritual medium of liminal state of castelessness and comradery in a highly divided Hindu society based on purity and pollution. The *Mahāprasād* consolidates human bond beyond discrimination of any kind, sanctifies the sacraments and unites mortals with the cosmic force or God.

Conclusion

Although the physical necessity of food for the human body is an irrefutable fact of life, the social, cultural and spiritual beliefs woven around the food cultures are multiple and layered, and sometimes contradictory, depending on the "… food substance, the actors involved in the transaction, and the context and audience of their transaction." This has been forcefully verified in the past in the writings of Appadurai, Khare, Staples, Caplan, among others. If we further filter down to the level of spiritual food, it belongs to a still distinct genre of food with very rigid taboos in certain respects and very relaxed norms in certain others. The rigidity pertains to the arenas of who is cooking, what is cooking, how is cooking, and where is cooking, etc. But the relaxation is insofar as completely shattering the traditional structural boundaries of food sharing, creating an aura of "anti-structure". In this paper, we attempted to show that the spiritual food, the *Mahāprasād*, in the Indian Hindu temple of Lord Jagannāth in Puri is a fit case that on the one hand it meticulously represents the typical food culture of the region where the shrine is located, that is Odisha, and on the other, it transcends the rigid boundaries of caste, kinship and gender, while sharing the spiritual food among the devotees. We have found Turner's concept of ritual anti-structure appropriately explaining the liminal portrayal of laxity

of structural parameters only at the time of sharing the sacred food, the *Mahāprasād*, which otherwise would not have been possible in Indian rural households or communities.

Notes

1. *Abadhā* is an Odia word meaning the food that may not necessarily be served on plates, but can be directly eaten from the container in which it is cooked.
2. See Saxena Sourabh 2020. https://puratattva.in/2020/03/25/kalinga-temple-architecture-5546 for details.
3. Different chronicles mention different years with regard to the completion of the Jagannāth temple like 1196, 1197, 1205, 1216, 1226 AD, etc.
4. In the *Bhrigu Valli of Taittiriya Upanishad* (It is a part of Yajur Veda, written in about 6th Century BC), for example, *Anna* or food is said to be the first manifestation of the *Brahman* or the life force, which is evident from the *Sloka* or the verse, "*Annam Brahmeti Vyajānāt*" (meaning "He knew food for the Eternal.").
5. The *Skanda Purāna* is one of the 18 *Mahāpurānas* or great epics or religious texts of the Hindus. It is believed to be written in the 8th Century AD by the sage Vyasa. The *Utkala Khanda* of this *Mahāpurana* vividly describes the cult of Jagannāth and about the *Mahāprasād* offering to the Lord.
6. After the king Jajati installed Jagannāth in Puri and made rules for his worship, out of respect for tantra, he seems to have promulgated the Lord's worship in tantrik methods. In the tantrik cult, Lord Jagannāth is regarded as Bhairava and the Goddess Vimala as Bhairavi. Thus it is said, "*Utkala Navi Deshescha Bimalā Purushottame / Bimalā Bhairavi Yatra Jagannāthastu Bhairava.//*".
7. A typical ritual dance form of Odisha traditionally performed by temple dancers or *Devadāsis* before Lord Jagannāth, from which the modern classical Odissi dance form has originated.
8. Personal communication with Shri Biswanath Samantray, Secretary, Suar Badu Niyog, Puri.
9. *Bhoga* and *Dhupa* are used in this paper interchangeably as both these words mean the same thing, that is the offering to the Lord.
10. For Hindus "Shodasa Upacahar" is a complete process of performing the *Pooja* or the worship. In Sanskrit "Upachar" means service and "Shodasa" means sixteen. So, there are 16 Upachars to be executed for worship: *Dhyānam* (prayer), *Āvāhanam* (invocation), *Āsanam* (offering seating), *Pāādyam* (washing of feet), *Ārghyam* (washing of hands), *Āchamanam*, (offering water to drink)**,** *Snānam* (bathing with water or *Panchāmrutham*), *Vastram* (new clothes), *Ābharanam* (ornaments), *Yajnopavitam* (sacred thread), *Gandham* (sandal paste), *Archana* (flowers), *Dhoopam* (incense), *Deepam* (oil lamp), *Naivedyam* (offering of specially prepared food), *Tamboolam* (offering betel Leaves and betel nuts), and *Namaskāram* (salutation).
11. *Pakhāla* is a typical and popular rice dish of Odisha, which is prepared when cooked rice is cooled down and watered or little fermented overnight. In hot and humid summer, it is a preferred dish in Odia households.
12. All *Mahāprasād* items are cooked in clay pots only of various sizes. Interviews with the temple cooks confirm that rice cooks here in 12 minutes and curries in 15 minutes flat.

13. *Ānanda Bazār* is the temple market admeasuring about 293 feet in length and about 223 feet in breadth, situated on the northeast corner of the temple inside the outer boundary wall, where the sacred *Mahāprasād* is sold in many stalls and partaken by thousands of devotees together every day in its huge courtyard, forgetting their caste, creed and social status. According to Lisa Zũfle (2017: 281-308) the process of production, distribution and consumption of *Mahāprasād* is both a business and a ritual, which are like two sides of a coin. In a moderate estimate, the daily sale proceeds of the *Mahāprasād* are about Rs. 800,000 to Rs. 1000,000 or approximately US $ 11,000 to US $ 13,500.

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