Jaisa Anna, Waisa Mana: Reading 'Food for Thought' in the Ancient Indian Literature

Jasmine Anand*

Abstract

The Upanishadic dictum, "Food is the Supreme Being" (*Anna Brahma*), asserts a metaphysical recognition of sustenance as an embodiment of the divine. Food, thus, transcends its material necessity, representing a spiritual communion with the cosmos, embodying the cyclical processes of nature and the divine energy that underpins existence. This understanding reflects the profound significance of food in Indian thought, suggesting that consumption is not merely an act of survival but a conscious engagement with the universe's larger order. This paper critically examines how the sacred and philosophical dimensions of food in *Upaniśadas* (500 BCE), popular North Indian idioms, and Indian fiction intersect with contemporary discussions on sustainability, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2: Zero Hunger, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, SDG 12: Responsible Consumption, and SDG: 15 Life on Land). The wisdom embedded in traditional food culture offers an indigenous framework for understanding ecological balance, resource management, and societal well-being. By conducting a close cultural reading of the texts, the paper seeks to uncover how these narratives offer profound insights into addressing modern sustainability crises, environmental degradation, and communal harmony. In today's globalized world, where the challenges of climate change and sustainable development are urgent, the revival of traditional Indian knowledge systems through interdisciplinary research emerges as a critical pathway toward achieving global sustainability and ecological equilibrium.

* Assistant Professor of English, Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh. Can be reached at jasmine18anand@gmail.com

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ब्रह्मार्पणं ब्रह्म हविर्ब्रह्माग्नौ ब्रह्मणा हुतम् |
ब्रह्मैव तेन गन्तव्यं ब्रह्मकर्मसमाधिना || 24||

brahmārpaṇaṁ brahma havir brahmāgnau brahmaṇā hutam
brahmaiva tena gantavyaṁ brahma-karma-samādhinā

The twenty-fourth verse of *Bhagavad Gita's* Chapter 4 is a profound meditation on the unity of all existence, emphasizing that every action, especially the act of eating, is a sacred ritual rooted in the realization of *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. The *mantra* declares that *Brahman* (the universal consciousness) is present not only in the offering, the process of offering, and the one who offers but also in the fire that consumes the offering. This insight suggests that food is not a mere object for consumption but part of a cosmic cycle in which matter, energy, and spirit are inextricably linked.

In this holistic worldview, eating transcends mundane activity and becomes a metaphysical communion with the universe. Food is *Brahman*—the material world, the giver, and the act of giving manifests the same ultimate reality. Consuming food is participating in the eternal cycle of creation, transformation, and renewal. The fire of digestion is compared to the sacred fire of the Vedic rituals, where offering food becomes a spiritual practice, leading the individual closer to self-realization and alignment with the cosmic order.

The understanding of food as sacred in the *Upaniśadas* and the *Gita* encapsulates the ancient Indian perspective that life is sustained by a delicate balance between human action and nature's rhythms. This spiritual framing of sustenance fosters a relationship of reverence between humans and their environment, where food is not commodified but respected as a vital link between the individual and the universe. The offering of food to the fire of digestion is metaphorically similar to the offerings made to the sacrificial fire in ancient rituals—a

cycle where giving back to nature ensures continuity and harmony.

Such philosophical foundations underscore the intrinsic value of traditional Indian food culture, where food is revered for its nourishing qualities and spiritual significance. This idea directly reflects the UN's Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 (SDG 2 and SDG 11), emphasising the importance of food security, sustainability, and community well-being. In modern times, the revival of this sacred perspective on food can solve contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and the alienation of communities from their ecological roots.

In its broader application, the *mantra* invites us to view food as a holistic expression of life's interconnectedness. The realization that *Brahman* is action, that all actions, including the act of eating, are part of the cosmic order, echoes a more profound recognition that mindful consumption is a form of *yajña* (sacrifice), where the individual contributes to the collective well-being by respecting and protecting the earth's resources. Through this lens, food becomes a medium of spiritual evolution, where balance, moderation, and sustainability are inherent values.

As the paper unfolds, it will explore how this ancient understanding of food as divine sustenance has been inherited and echoed in Indian literary traditions. The symbolic representation of food in *Upaniśadas*, Indian fiction, and idioms reveals a continuity of wisdom that offers pathways for addressing the ecological and social issues of the modern world. In reflecting on these traditional knowledge systems, I engage with a philosophy that acknowledges the sanctity of life and offers a blueprint for sustainable living, where human existence is in harmony with the greater cosmic cycle.

Upaniśadas: Nourishing Wisdom

The Punjabi idiom '*pet na payian rotian sabhe galan khotian*' (all is frivolous if one is not adequately fed) reflects a profound philosophical alignment with the traditional Indian conception that spiritual growth must coexist with the fulfilment of worldly needs. In Indian thought, pursuing spiritual advancement (*moksha*) does not negate the importance of material sustenance; rather, the two are intertwined. The fulfilment of *laukik* (worldly) responsibilities is essential for progressing toward *pāralaukika* (otherworldly) duties and ultimate transcendence.

This idiom encapsulates the recognition that without the necessities of life, symbolized by food, higher pursuits, whether intellectual or spiritual, lose their grounding. In the broader Indian philosophical context, it acknowledges that the body, sustained by food, is the vessel through which both earthly and spiritual obligations are performed. Thus, nourishing the body becomes not merely a physical act but a prerequisite for engaging with the spiritual dimensions of existence. It reflects the wisdom that sustenance is the foundation upon which the pursuit of higher consciousness is built, reinforcing the idea that the material and spiritual are deeply interdependent.

In the *Praśna Upaniśada*, the first inquiry posed by Kabandhi, a seeker of wisdom and descendant of Katya, to the sage Pippalada revolves around the origin of all living beings. The response is profound: "... Everything survives on food grains, whether in a dense form or subtle. All forms are ultimately manifestations of food grains (2011, 59)." This underscores the *Upaniśadic* view that the essence of life, the very principle of *Brahman*, is encapsulated in food. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniśada* echoes this, asserting that *Brahman* is the omniscient source from which all things emerge, *hiraṇyagarbha*, all names, forms, and, most importantly, food grains (2011, 79).

The *Taittiriya Upaniśada* further elevates the significance of food by declaring it a panacea. It is not only the sustenance upon which all creatures depend but also the very substance from which they are composed. This idea likely inspired the popular idiom '*jaisa anna, waisa mana*' (as is the food, so is the mind), reflecting the deep interconnectedness between what we consume and the quality of our thoughts and consciousness. In the *Upaniśadic* dialogue between Bhrigu and his father Varuna, Bhrigu learns various lessons that food is synonymous with *Brahman*, and it is from food that the elements themselves are created. Food sustains all life, and in the cycle of cosmic dissolution, all elements return to it.

The *Upaniśadas* emphasize the sanctity of food, instilling in us a reverence for its life-sustaining properties and urging the avoidance of wastage.

> "Prajapati is there in the space of twenty-four hours. That part of him which is life exists there in the day. And that part of him which is food grains exists there in the night".
>
> "Prajapati is there in the food grains. When food grains are digested, the life force is obtained. And it is from this that all living beings are born". (2011, 63.6)

They posit that food is the primordial substance—created before all other elements—and is both the source and the sustainer of life. At the time of death, all living beings return to food grains, thus completing the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. The sacredness of food is further highlighted by those who worship food grains as *Brahman* itself, acknowledging that it is food that creates, sustains, and ultimately reabsorbs all life. Such

worshippers, the *Upaniśada* suggests, never suffer from scarcity, for they honour the divine essence inherent in sustenance (2011, 109.3-111.6).

This reverence for food elevates it beyond mere physical nourishment to metaphysical significance. It is the best possible medicine for living beings, the origin of the elements, and the substance that consumes and is consumed by them. In this philosophical framework, food is the cornerstone of survival and the very fabric of existence, embodying the cyclical nature of creation, sustenance, and dissolution. This *Upaniśadic* wisdom compels a deeper ethical reflection on modern issues of hunger, food security, and sustainability, urging us to see food not as a commodity but as a manifestation of the divine order. The second lesson of *Brahmanandavallyadhyaya* from *Taittiriya Upaniśada* mentions:

> Food grains created all living beings that exist. Food grains sustain life. After death, living beings merge into food grains. Food grains were created before all life. Food grains are the best possible medicine for living beings. There are those who worship food grains as the Brahman. After all, food grains create, sustain, and destroy all living beings. Such worshippers never suffer from a shortage of food grains. Food grains were created before all the elements were created. That is why food grains are the best possible medicine for living beings. The elements are created from food grains. Moreover, once they are created, the elements are sustained by food grains. The elements eat food grains. Eventually, the elements themselves are devoured by living beings. (2011, 111.6)

In lessons seven, eight, and nine of the *Upaniśadic* teachings on *Brahman*, Bhrigu learns a profound truth: *Brahman* begins with food grains, and therefore, food must never be criticized, neglected, or wasted. It must be revered and nurtured, for the "breath of life" sustains the physical body (2011, 124). The text emphasizes that the breath of life grants and sustains food, implying an essential interdependence between nourishment and existence. The one who truly understands the nature of food grains is not only blessed with an abundance of sustenance but, metaphorically, "becomes like food grains himself", fully integrated into the cycle of life, a reflection of the cosmic order (2011, 124).

This sacred connection between food and the divine is further expanded in lesson ten, where the dictum of '*atithi devo bhava*' (the guest is God) takes on a deeper philosophical dimension. According to the Indian ethos, one who comprehends *Brahman* follows the principle that "guests must never be refused sustenance (2011, 127). Bhrigu is taught that food grains must be reserved for guests, for offering food is not merely an ethical or social obligation but a spiritual exchange that aligns the householder with the cosmic rhythm of giving and receiving. The act of making and sharing holy communion, charity kitchens, or the *langar* in the Indian context, too, takes its flight from the idea of equality and prosperity for all. The Punjabi ethos of Guru Nanak's teaching of '*vand shako'* (sharing with others) and the aspect of '*sanjha chulha'* (shared hearth) symbolizes the communal sharing of food in Punjabi culture, which fosters a sense of unity and equality. It reflects a sustainable way of living, where resources (such as fire and food) are pooled and used collectively. In contemporary times, it relates to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), promoting a culture of shared resources and minimal waste. The *Upaniśadic* lesson emphasizes that food grains are returned to the giver equally when shared with guests. Whether in abundance or scarcity, the reciprocity of offering food establishes a sacred continuity in which generosity ensures future sustenance. The *Upaniśada* also mentions, "He who appropriates all the food grains for himself, is never freed from his sins" (2011, 274.1). In Indian culture, sharing food is seen as a sacred duty, and the saying '*dān karnā maha punya hai*' reflects the idea of communal responsibility. It connects to modern concepts of food security and social equity, reinforcing that food must be shared with those in need, which relates to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality).

This teaching reflects the cyclical nature of existence, where acts of generosity, particularly food offerings, are inseparable from the laws of cosmic balance. By serving food to others, especially to guests, one participates in the divine economy of life, where sustenance is both a physical necessity and a metaphysical principle. The wisdom imparted to Bhrigu, therefore, serves as a reminder that the ethical and spiritual practices surrounding food reflect one's alignment with *Brahman*, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all beings through the medium of nourishment. In this light, food is not merely sustenance but a manifestation of *Brahman*, and sharing it is a sacred duty that transcends individual existence, embodying the very essence of life itself.

The invocation, prayer, or expression of gratitude for food, once integral to Indian tradition, is rapidly fading in the face of modern convenience and the allure of instant, ready-made meals consumed not with a *bhāv* of *rasa* but in a hurry. The *Chandogya Upaniśada* offers profound insights into this ancient reverence, mainly by explaining the hymn *udgītha*. This hymn, composed of three syllables, *ut*, *gi*, and *tha*, carries layers of symbolic meaning. The *Upaniśada* reveals that each syllable must be individually revered: *ut* symbolises the "breath of life", *gi* also symbolizes the "breath of life", and *tha* represents "food grains". These syllables further correspond to cosmic realms: *ut* signifies "heaven", *gi* represents the "sky", and *tha* embodies the "earth". They also align

with the sacred knowledge of the *Vedas*: *ut* for the "Sama Veda", *gi* for the "Yajur Veda", and *tha* for the "Rig Veda" (2011, 162.7). Those who honour these syllables, the text tells us, will always possess an abundance of food grains, reflecting the sacred connection between breath, food, and the cosmos itself.

In *Adhyāya* five of the *Chandogya Upaniśada*, the essential relationship between breath, food, and water is further explored through a metaphysical narrative. In a cosmic struggle for supremacy, the senses—speech, sight, hearing, and mind—each attempt to assert their primacy. However, in the end, all fall short, and only the breath of life (*prāna*) emerges as the true victor, the animating force of existence. In this symbolic battle, *prana* asks the other senses, "What will be my food?" They reply, "You will be entitled to all the food grains". When *prana* inquires about its covering, the senses respond, "All the water will be yours" (2011, 203.4). This exchange encapsulates the essence of life itself—*prana*, sustained by food and enveloped by water, stands as the ultimate life force, binding the material and spiritual realms. By nourishing the breath, food becomes a conduit for maintaining the balance between the individual and the universal. Thus, in revering food, one honours the breath, the sustaining force that unites the self with the larger cosmic order.

In the sixth *Adhyaya* of the *Upaniśada*, it is proclaimed that food is the foundation enabling a person to utilize all faculties of mind and body. The sages emphasize that purity of thought is intimately linked to the purity of food, and in turn, purity of thought leads to a sharpness of memory. When memory remains intact, the knots that bind an individual to the temporal world begin to loosen, paving the way for spiritual liberation. This connection between sustenance and cognition reveals a deep philosophical belief in the transformative power of food, both in the physical and metaphysical realms.

This ancient view finds echoes in Western thought as well. Ben Jonson's 'theory of the comedy of humours' in English literature, which attributes human behaviour and characteristics to the balance or imbalance of bodily fluids, resonates with the *Upaniśadic* idea of food's decomposition within the body influencing one's temperament. It is through speech, a product of the food we consume, that an individual manifests as either virtuous or malevolent. The *Upaniśadas* underscore this by stating that all forms of energy—whether manifest in speech, thought, or action—stem from the nature of the food consumed.

The *Adhyaya* articulates this process with remarkable specificity:

> When food is consumed, it is divided into three parts: the gross part becomes waste, the medium part turns into flesh, and the fine part nourishes the mind.
>
> When water is drunk, it is similarly divided: the gross part becomes waste, the medium part becomes blood, and the fine part fuels the breath of life.
>
> When energy is digested, its gross part becomes bones, the medium part marrow, and the fine part gives rise to speech. (2011, 220.8)

In this philosophical framework, the mind is considered the repository of food, breath is the repository of water, and speech is the repository of energy. The analogy is extended further with the churning of curds, wherein the fine part rises to become clarified butter; similarly, the finest part of food nourishes the mind, the finest part of water sustains the breath, and the finest part of energy nurtures speech.

The narrative of Śvetaketu, recounted in this *Adhyaya*, serves as a profound metaphor for the indispensability of food for intellectual and spiritual vitality. Śvetaketu, consuming only water in a fast for fifteen days, found himself unable to recall the sacred Vedic *mantras*. His father, the sage Gautama, instructed him to eat, and upon doing so, Śvetaketu's memory was restored, demonstrating that intellectual and spiritual faculties are intrinsically linked to the nourishment of the body.

Gautama's teaching becomes clearer with his analogy of the fire. A small coal left from a raging fire can ignite nothing on its own; however, with dried grass and air, it can be reignited into a flame. Similarly, when Śvetaketu ate food, his inner flame—intellect and spiritual awareness—was rekindled. This metaphor emphasizes that the mind, like fire, requires sustenance to function fully. The *Adhyaya* thus illustrates that food is not merely sustenance for the body but the foundation of mental and spiritual clarity.

Finally, the sage Gautama concludes with a reflection on the interconnectedness of all elements: food is born from water, and without water, there can be no food. The body, therefore, owes its origin to food grains, just as food grains depend on water, and water in our body is "like a cowherd or a shepherd" (2011, 220.8). This cyclical relationship underscores the centrality of food and water in sustaining physical and spiritual life, affirming the cosmic harmony that binds human existence to the natural world.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upaniśada*, *Adhyaya* six of *Brahmana* four, we find a detailed account of how the food consumed by the mother during conception is believed to shape the mental and intellectual constitution of the unborn child. This notion is grounded in a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between nourishment and the mind, reflecting the ancient sages' belief in the transformative power of food. According to the *Upaniśada*, the type of child parents wish to rear can be influenced by the specific dishes consumed during

pregnancy, thus attributing a metaphysical significance to dietary choices.

The text conveys this knowledge, held by sages such as Uddalaka, Moudgalya, and Kumaraharita, who prescribed various food combinations to achieve particular outcomes in the offspring's intellectual and physical traits. For instance, if parents desired a fair-skinned son who would study one of the *Vedas*, they were instructed to prepare and consume rice mixed with clarified butter. Should they wish for a darker hue child destined to master three *Vedas*, the combination would include rice, water, and clarified butter. The specificity of these dietary prescriptions highlights a deep philosophical connection between the physical body, mind, and the nature of sustenance (2011, 375.8).

Additionally, for those seeking a daughter endowed with wisdom, the consumption of rice mixed with sesame seeds and clarified butter was recommended. Meanwhile, for a son capable of studying all the *Vedas*, rice mixed with the meat of a bull was advised (2011, 376.3). This intricate linking of food with desired intellectual and spiritual outcomes demonstrates the holistic worldview of the *Upaniśada*, where food transcends its material function and becomes a vessel for shaping the very essence of life. The *Upaniśadic* reference to beef consumption for intellectual and spiritual prowess contrasts sharply with contemporary bans on beef in India, revealing the selective interpretation of ancient texts to align with modern socio-religious narratives. Historically, dietary customs were fluid and context-driven, often linked to ritualistic practices rather than universal prescriptions. However, present-day cultural nationalism and religious sentiment have redefined these traditions, sidelining historical complexities. This selective engagement with texts raises critical questions about the politicization of tradition, where certain aspects of scripture are embraced while others are ignored. A nuanced approach is necessary—one that recognizes the evolving nature of dietary ethics and engages with traditional wisdom critically, rather than as rigid doctrine, to foster a more inclusive and historically aware discourse.

The Hunger Within: Food and the Modern Soul

In contemporary society, pervasive violence manifests in various forms—imbalanced sex ratios, environmental degradation, hunger, mental health crises, weakened immunity, etc.—problems all intricately tied to the food systems that sustain us. The *Upaniśadas* and ancient medical texts like *Caraka* emphasize that physical and mental well-being are fundamentally rooted in the quality and type of food we consume. Food, the cornerstone of life, must be consumed, cultivated, and preserved with care. However, modern agricultural practices, often characterized by industrialization and commodification, have severed this vital relationship.

In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva critiques the masculinist paradigm of industrial food production, which has been marketed under various labels such as the 'Green Revolution' and 'scientific agriculture' (1988, 92). She argues that this model, focusing on productivity, profits, and mechanization, neglects the essential interdependence between nature and human sustenance. Instead, she advocates for a return to an organic, feminine approach to agriculture—a model that aligns with the rhythms of nature and prioritizes sustainability. Shiva illustrates this with eco-movements led by women, such as the Chipko movement, where women fought to protect their forests, not only as an environmental cause but as a necessity for agricultural survival. The forests, providing direct and indirect inputs like soil fertilization and cattle fodder, were integral to maintaining the balance of the rural agricultural ecosystem.

The feminine principle in agriculture, as Shiva describes, is rooted in the harmonious relationship between trees, animals, and crops, a balance maintained primarily by women through their traditional roles in farming. Unlike industrial agriculture, which relies on external inputs and disrupts natural cycles, this holistic model is self-sustaining, with resources like seeds, soil nutrients, and pest control being internally recycled within the ecosystem. The Punjabi proverb '*Khetan di maari mitti, lokan di maari ritti*' highlights how the wastage of the soil of the fields will cause the people's customs and traditions to perish. This proverb emphasizes the importance of nurturing and preserving the environment (SDG 15), particularly agricultural land, for the survival of traditions and livelihoods. Soil erosion poses a critical challenge in India, exacerbated by the shift from diverse, sustainable cropping systems to monocultures. Traditional agricultural practices, deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, emphasized the production of organic matter to nourish the soil and the ecosystems that depend on it. These systems relied on carefully recycling crop residues and animal waste to sustain soil fertility, preserving the delicate balance between agricultural productivity and environmental health. This interdependence between land and life is reflected in the cyclical integration of organic materials, preventing soil erosion and ensuring the soil's regenerative capacities.

The shift to hybrid crops and cash crop cultivation, driven by the imperatives of the Green Revolution, has disrupted this delicate balance. These new agricultural models are characterized by high water demand and minimal conservation measures, leading to alarming

rates of soil degradation. The over-extraction of water for irrigation has resulted in severe soil nutrient depletion, waterlogging, salinization, and, ultimately, the onset of desertification in once-fertile lands (1988, 152). This phenomenon reflects what Vandana Shiva critiques as an ecologically destructive paradigm of modern agriculture, where the commodification of nature results in the degradation of its regenerative capacities.

Shiva's analysis extends into real-world movements, such as the *Mitti Bachao Abhiyan* (Save the Soil Campaign) in North India. This movement emerged as a form of resistance to the environmental consequences of large-scale irrigation projects, like the Tawa Dam in the Narmada Valley. Before the dam's construction, the region thrived with rainfed cereals like wheat and sorghum, oilseeds like sesame and linseed, and nutrient-rich pulses like pigeon pea and *moong*. These crops maintained the soil's fertility and provided essential food supplies and market surpluses, creating a self-sustaining agricultural ecosystem. However, the imposition of irrigation systems that disrupted natural water flow led to widespread waterlogging, degrading soils, displacing food crops, and destabilizing local markets. A poignant example comes from a woman in Byavra village, who reflects on the devastation brought by these changes: "Our house used to be filled with food grains like the Narmada River is filled with water. Today, we have no food at all" (1988, 141).

This account speaks not only to the material loss but also to the symbolic erosion of a way of life intricately tied to the land and its cycles. Once a source of abundance and life, the soil has become barren, a casualty of an agricultural model that privileges profit over ecological sustainability. The restoration and rejuvenation of soils cannot be achieved through the continued reliance on market-driven paradigms as the organizing principle of agriculture. Proper recovery necessitates a reconnection with natural regeneration processes, where nature's intrinsic cycles are respected and integrated into agricultural practices. This fact calls for a fundamental shift in our understanding, recognizing that the soil itself holds an inherent right to partake in the fruits of its labour. Only by allowing the soil to reclaim its share of the yield for self-renewal can we restore its vitality and ensure the sustainability of agricultural systems. This philosophical reorientation invites us to transcend the commodification of nature and embrace a more reciprocal, ethical relationship with the earth, one that acknowledges the soil as a living entity deserving of care and preservation.

Shiva's critique extends to the broader socio-economic implications of patriarchal models of development, which measure well-being through sales and profits, often at the cost of genuine human flourishing. The global hunger crisis, especially in the Global South, is a direct consequence of this commodified approach to agriculture, which shifts control of food systems from women and local peasants to multinational corporations, effectively disenfranchising those most closely connected to the land. In Shiva's ecological perspective, agriculture cannot be separated from its surrounding natural systems—forests, water, and animals are all integral parts of the same life-sustaining network.

As Shiva observes, the movements led by rural women to protect forests and rivers are not merely environmental or political; they are deeply tied to preserving agricultural livelihoods. For the Chipko women, the forest provides not just timber but food for their families, fodder for their cattle (viewed as extensions of the human family), and nutrients for the soil. Thus, protecting the forests is synonymous with protecting the sustenance of their entire community. Shiva's analysis calls for a radical rethinking of agricultural systems that recognize the intrinsic value of ecological and social sustainability over profit-driven models of exploitation and depletion.

The *Upaniśadas* refer to seeds as fundamental energy sources, embodying life's regenerative power. However, in modern times, this intrinsic vitality of seeds has been compromised, particularly with the advent of high-yielding varieties (HYVs). These so-called "miracle seeds" are a misnomer, as they lack the natural capacity for reproduction and vitality. Instead, their productivity depends on large-scale inputs of irrigation and chemical fertilizers. This shift in agricultural practice represents a profound rupture in the ancient food chain, where, for millennia, peasants, particularly women, had sustained food systems through the selection, preservation, and replanting of seeds. In their traditional role, women maintained the genetic diversity of crops and symbolized the feminine principle of self-renewability in agriculture.

For thousands of years, seeds emulated nature's self-regenerative capacity, embodying the connection between human sustenance and life cycles. Women and peasants in India had long conserved this delicate balance, ensuring the preservation of genetic diversity and the continuous regeneration of plant life. The Green Revolution, however, disrupted this natural harmony, introducing hybrid seeds that marked a radical departure from traditional farming practices. As Vandana Shiva observes, the Green Revolution replaced the diversity and self-replicating nature of seeds with "miracle seeds", which, rather than fostering sustainability, imposed a system of commercial dependence. These hybrids, celebrated by figures such as Norman Borlaug, for whom the Nobel Prize was awarded, effectively ushered in an era of corporate control over food production (1988, 115).

The shift to hybrid seeds represents a technological transformation and a philosophical one. Seeds, once viewed as a source of life and sustenance, have been reduced to instruments of private profit. The hybrid varieties do not reproduce themselves; their vitality is not passed on to subsequent generations. Farmers are forced to purchase new seeds each year, severing their connection with the natural regenerative cycles of agriculture. This transformation mirrors the broader commodification of nature under capitalism, where the means of life—food, water, and genetic resources—are subject to private control and profit.

Shiva also critiques the myth of the so-called food surplus generated by the Green Revolution. As she cites economists such as V. K. R. V. Rao, this surplus is illusory, created not by actual abundance but by widespread poverty and "lack of purchasing power", and despite the rapid increase in food stocks from 1966 to 1985, per capita consumption of food declined during the same period (1988, 121). Dr. C. Gopalan, a leading Indian nutritionist, further argues that these buffer stocks indicate the masses' impoverishment more than any genuine food surplus (1988, 121). Thus, the Green Revolution's claims of success are hollow, masking more profound structural inequalities in access to food.

Moreover, Shiva frames the Green Revolution as an Orientalist project that not only displaced indigenous seed varieties but also entire agricultural systems in the Global South. Traditional crops, once central to local economies and food systems, were reclassified as "primitive" and "inferior" by the Western agricultural science rooted in capitalist patriarchy (1988, 121-122). Nutritious and drought-resistant grains like *ragi* and *jowar* were dismissed as "coarse" and "marginal", reflecting a biased view of food production prioritising profit over ecological sustainability and nutritional value. The indigenous millets were always seen as part of the impoverished peasants' diet. Millet is coarse and simple, but it is important for the strength it bestows. Munshi Premchand's *Godaan*, Chapter 14, reflects the same when Hori's wife, Dhania, cooked the day's *bajra roti* over the open fire. It was not much, but the coarse bread, tough as their lives, gave them the strength to face the injustice of the landlords and the tyranny of fate. Vandana Shiva claims the nutritional wealth of the millets with her anecdote, "A woman in a Himalayan village once told me, 'Without our *mandua* and *jbangora*, we could not labour as we do. These grains are our source of health and strength'" (1988, 122). Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* also demonstrates how millet or poor crops, far from being forgotten, are potent symbols of resilience, tradition, and the intimate connection between rural communities and their environments; for the villagers of Lusibari, the millet fields held as much value as the mangrove forests. They understood that without the frugal food they prepared each morning, their struggle for survival would be relentless, with no end in sight, as "in Lusibari hunger and catastrophe were a way of life" (2009, 79). This marginalization of traditional crops is part of a broader epistemic violence that dismisses the knowledge systems of indigenous and peasant communities.

However, the recognition of the ecological and nutritional value of indigenous crops has begun to shift the discourse. The United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization's designation of 2023 as the International Year of Millets (IYM 2023) represents a critical re-engagement with traditional food systems. Millets, long marginalized by the Green Revolution's emphasis on high-yield crops, are now recognized for their health and nutritional benefits. This renewed focus on indigenous grains is part of a more significant movement to reclaim agricultural sovereignty and return control of genetic resources to the communities, particularly women, who have conserved them for generations. In the myth, when Lord Hanuman, after assisting Lord Rama in his victorious return to Ayodhya, sought to return to Kishkindha, he expressed a simple yet profound wish—to take *ragi* (finger millet) with him. This choice, humble in appearance, sparked a conflict between *ragi* and rice, with rice feeling disgraced by Hanuman's preference. As rice sought divine justice, Lord Indra was summoned to settle the dispute. His verdict was clear—*ragi*, a fresh grain for years, was superior to rice, which had already succumbed to weevils (Ravi, 2020). Philosophically, this tale reflects the more profound wisdom in Indian culture, where sustenance is not merely about luxury or status but about resilience, sustainability, and long-term survival.

The Forgotten Feast: Rediscovering Ancient Food Wisdom

The resurgence of traditional knowledge presents a vital epistemological counterpoint to the crises of modernity—environmental degradation, unsustainable resource extraction, and systemic inequities. Grounded in a relational ontology that sees human life as embedded within natural rhythms, traditional wisdom offers a holistic paradigm antithetical to reductive, market-centric logics.

Ancient Indian texts articulate this integration of self, society, and nature, envisioning existence as an ethical ecology. Thinkers like Vandana Shiva extend this tradition, foregrounding seed sovereignty and biodiversity as modes of ecological resistance and socio-political empowerment. Such practices, rooted in local autonomy and organic cultivation, echo Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) such as Zero Hunger and Life on Land (SDG 2 and 15), aligning ecological justice with social repair.

Traditional food cultures—embedded in classical literature and contemporary Indian fiction—advance a philosophy of nourishment that transcends anthropocentric utility. Millets and other native grains symbolize a non-exploitative ethic, recognizing the regenerative rights of soil, water, and biodiversity. These narratives implicitly critique industrial agriculture and advocate for a return to balance, moderation, and interdependence.

Philosophically, traditional epistemes dismantle extractive paradigms that objectify nature, proposing instead a cosmo-ethical framework where life is interconnected and sacred. Reviving such wisdom is not regression but a radical reorientation toward futures attuned to planetary limits and ethical co-existence.

Incorporating traditional knowledge into sustainability discourses is both ethically imperative and pragmatically necessary. Ancient idioms and indigenous epistemologies offer normative insights that reframe food not merely as a commodity, but as *Anna Brahma*—sacred sustenance. This reconceptualization challenges the alienation engendered by industrial food systems, where disconnection from production obscures the ethical and ecological consequences of consumption.

Food, when approached with consciousness and care, becomes a site of existential meaning and socio-ecological responsibility. It fosters a praxis rooted in awareness, potentially informing public policy and personal ethics alike. Governance frameworks that embrace these relational dimensions may catalyze more mindful and sustainable food environments.

The *Upaniśadic* reverence for food as divine aligns with SDG imperatives, offering a timeless model of sustainability, equity, and ethical consumption. By engaging with this wisdom through ancient texts, contemporary ecological critique, and regional literary representations, we cultivate a critical consciousness that resists commodification and affirms interconnectedness. Rather than nostalgia, this is a philosophical praxis that demands empirical engagement and comparative inquiry, making ancient insights legible and actionable in the contemporary struggle for planetary survival and holistic well-being.

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