

Analysis of Diet in Daśakumāracarita

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ABSTRACT

Mahākavi Daṇḍin's Daśakumāracarita is a significant piece of Sanskrit prose literature that portrays the social, cultural, and moral life of early medieval Indian culture realistically and vividly. In addition to recounting the valiant lives of the ten Kumars, this book gently conveys the way of life, behaviours, and ideals of the era's society. In Daśakumāracarita, food is shown as both a bodily requirement and a sign of cultural refinement, social elegance, and moral worth. The food and eating practices discussed in the book have been thoroughly examined from a social and moral perspective in this paper. This study demonstrates that food is not only a means of subsistence but also a useful tool for comprehending society, lifestyle, and values in Sanskrit literature through a coordinated approach of text-analysis, socio-cultural interpretation, and moral evaluation.

KEYWORDS: Daśakumāracarita, food, society, morality, Sanskrit literature, etc..

INTRODUCTION

Ten young princes' life experiences are methodically described in Daśakumāracarita, a significant narrative treatise written by the renowned poet Daṇḍin, the foremost prose author of Sanskrit literature. As they visit numerous states, these princes come across a range of social, cultural, and moral circumstances. This work is renowned for its realistic portrayal of modern society's everyday existence in addition to its rhetorical and elegant language style. Understanding the social system is aided by the book's nuanced and colourful description of subjects like cuisine, festivals, hospitality, and royal courtiers. Daśakumāracarita depicts food in a multifaceted way.

Diet - the basic basis of human life

Diet, clothes, and housing are considered fundamental components of human life, with diet holding the top spot because it directly supports the maintenance and advancement of life. The type and quality of food affect a person's health, longevity, and overall well-being. As a result, eating should be examined as the fundamental foundation of life rather than just as a biological requirement. According to the Charak Samhita, food nourishes and strengthens the body, supports its proper

functioning, and promotes the growth of lifespan, vitality, energy, memory, Ojas (Vital Vigor), and Agni (digestive fire). (Cha. Su. 28/3)¹

Diet in the Vedic tradition

The Vedic heritage is intrinsically tied to the evolution of Indian food culture. Food has been viewed as the foundation of religious, social, and health-related behaviour in ancient sacred scriptures such as the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda, in addition to being a source of subsistence. A. B. Keith (1925)² claims that throughout the Vedic era, food was not only a means of subsistence but also a crucial component of religious behaviour and ritualistic sacrifices.

Rigveda: Numerous hymns in the Rigveda discuss food, agriculture, and livelihood, demonstrating their significance in early Vedic society. Y. Athanassakis (2024)³ claims that during that time, barley, wheat, and rice were the most common plant-based foods. In daily life and rituals, milk and milk products like butter, ghee, and curd were essential. Ghee in particular was used to make sacrifices to the gods. Although non-vegetarianism was also common at the time, as seen by the sacrifices of cows, goats, and horses, Sen (2014)⁴ claims that the Vedic society's perception of non-vegetarianism evolved throughout time, and in later writings, vegetarianism was favoured for spiritual purity.

Yajurveda: The Yajurveda covers many food-related customs, including sitting upright when eating, making offerings to the gods, and using water to purify food and utensils. These customs were seen to be crucial for preserving cosmic balance, spiritual purity, and physical well-being. Acharya K.T. (1998)⁵ state that food should be consumed when sitting on the ground facing east or north rather than while standing, walking, or lying down.

Sāmaveda: The Sāmaveda praises grains, milk, ghee, and soma to illustrate the purity of food. It also discusses the significance of food preparation and sacrifices in society.

Atharvaveda: The Atharvaveda has numerous mantras and rituals about daily life management, prosperity, health, and medicine. It is the most useful Veda in terms of food and health since it contains prayers and rituals pertaining to food, nourishment, and the protection of crops and livestock.⁶

Concept of Food in Indian Philosophical Tradition –

The Indian philosophical tradition holds that life is more than just engaging in physical pursuits. The fulfilment of life, according to Sanskrit literature, is the balanced well-being of body, mind, and soul; food plays a crucial role in attaining this equilibrium. The effects of food on the mind and spirit are also thoroughly discussed in ancient books.

The Philosophical Nature of Food in the Upanishads-

The terms 'Anna,' 'Aahar,' and 'Food' are employed in Sanskrit literature to refer to more than just food; they also refer to the nutrients of life energy. According to the descriptive explanation in the second chapter of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, food is the fundamental cause of life. It asserts that food is the source of all life on Earth, provides nourishment for it, and ultimately unites all living things. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad claims that eating allows a person to properly utilize all of his senses. Therefore, food is also the foundation of the senses' activity and functionality.⁷

Diet in Ayurveda –

Ayurveda places a high value on diet for lifespan, prevention, and overall health. Ayurveda defines diet as including not only the amount and quality of food consumed, but also its preparation, timing, and mental state at the time of eating. Among the three pillars of Ayurveda, eating holds a major position since it is the foundation for the normal functioning of the digestive fire, the balancing of doshas, the nourishment of body metals, and the growth in vitality. Just as useful as medication is a healthy, natural diet. According to Ācārya Cāraka,⁷ one should regularly consume foods that preserve health and prevent the emergence of diseases that have not yet arisen. In Ayurveda, a balanced diet refers to the harmony of the Vata, Pitta, and Kapha doshas in addition to nutrients. Numerous illnesses are brought on by eating too little, too much, or incorrectly. Ayurveda states that food must properly incorporate the six tastes: sweet, acidic, salty, bitter, and Kashaya. The food composed of the five elements is the primary source of the body's flaws, metals, and waste. This diet balances the needs of the body and the mind. Ācārya Suśruta has separated the diet into three categories. (Su.Su.20/3)⁸

1. Ekanta Hitakara:- Materials turn into Ekanta

Hitakara, due to their ecological adaptability, includes rice, milk, water, and Ghrita.

2. Ekanta Ahitakara: substances that are always bad for the body, such as Agni and Visha, etc.

3. Hitahitakar: Hitahitakara refers to substances that are compatible with one another but incompatible with others. For instance, Taila is Ahitakara for Pitta and Hitakara for Vata, but it is incompatible for Pitta and Vayu. This is the reason why Dravya's Guna, which is opposite to Pitta's Guna and comparable to Vata's Guna, causes Pitta to decrease and Vata to rise simultaneously.⁹

Foods found in Daśakumāracarita

Rather than being merely a source of nourishment, food has become a vehicle for expressing social identity, class differentiation, and moral principles. While the modest food of the common people reflects the social and economic conditions of the society of that period, the royal dinners described in the text represent the culture of luxury and power. The intellectual aspects of detachment, self-control, and moral principles are also evoked by the reference to the austere diet of sannyasins and ascetics.

In the framework of Daśakumāracarita, food has been examined in this study as a cultural and moral symbol. It is evident from this analysis that food, morality, social classification, and literary beauty are all closely related. Food and drink are particularly important for the survival of a society. Only when the level of nourishment in a society is adequate can it become strong and aware. The culture of a society is reflected in its culinary choices, preparation techniques, and food science.

Mahākavi Daṇḍin has discussed the significance of food in relation to both physical attractiveness and health. An elderly courtesan felt that it was her duty to feed her courtesan daughter the greatest food possible so that she might grow in terms of her appearance, complexion, energy, and intelligence. Another benefit of a healthy diet is the proper maintenance of the seven *Dhatus* required for the body. Both *Niramisha* (vegetarian) and *Samisha* (non-vegetarian) cuisines were prevalent in the society of that period. Although *Samisha* cuisine was particularly popular during that time, non-vegetarian food has remained prevalent throughout history.

During the Daśakumāracarita period, the majority of the common people's food and beverages were sattvic. Rice was the main food consumed by the people. Particularly in eastern and southern India, rice was regarded as an important component of the diet. It was consumed with meat, veggies, or lentils. There were many different types of rice available during that period, and Acharaya Dandin mentions the rice as 'Śāli', as mentioned in Ayurveda. We learn about the prevalent practices of using rice or paddy at that time from the narrative of Mitragupta.

The Daśakumāracarita claims that Śaktikumāra states, "Bhadre, I have two and a half to three pounds of paddy," to gauge a young woman's aptitude. Do you know how to turn it into an entire delectable meal? In this regard, Daṇḍin has eloquently explained the whole process of turning paddy into rice. In order to separate the good rice from the broken rice and the husk, the girl first dries the fragrant paddy in the sun before grinding it with a pestle and light hands in a mortar. After that, she sifts the rice, takes the canna out of the soup, and thoroughly kneads it. After the rice has boiled, prepare it by adding five times as much water. As a result, this approach to cooking rice is entirely compatible with the contemporary method. Along with grains, lentils, and vegetables were particularly significant components of the Niramisha meal.

Acharya Daṇḍin did not give many direct details about the dal and vegetables, but it is clear from indirect sources that these were the main parts of the meal. Spices like salt, chilli, asafoetida, cumin, and dry ginger were used to make the food tasty. This is called Sanskara in Ayurveda. According to Daśakumāracarita, a young woman asks her mother for ingredients like greens, ghee, curd, oil, amla, and tamarind to prepare delicious food. The water obtained after cooking rice was known as *Māṇḍ*. It was often prepared by tempering it with salt, asafoetida, and cumin seeds. Oil and ghee were also used along with spices in food preparation, serving as flavour enhancers and improving the palatability of other ingredients.

Acharya Dandin's portrayal of the unmeated meal and its serving order is exquisite. In the past, hot beverages were offered to ease exhaustion and cheer the mind. A tiny bit of rice, lentils, ghee, and greens came next. People favored drinking cold, perfumed water. To keep the water cool, new clay pots were utilized. To serve the guests, the water was scented with Patāla and agaru flowers. The visitor's nose would be refreshed, and their tongue would be satisfied if they drank it. After meals or on regular occasions, scented betel leaves were offered. Dandin notes that fragrant betel leaves are common in various locations in the Daśakumāracarita. For instance, Daruvarma provides Balachandrikā a betel leaf that contains camphor, whereas Princess Ambalikā sends Kaṇṭaka a fragrant betel leaf.

Another significant part of the Niramisha diet was milk. Milk was used to make a wide variety of products at that time. The inhabitants particularly valued goods like curd, kheer, butter, and ghee. Serving three flavored curds, cold Kañjī, and whey to the visitor Śaktikumāra is described in the Daśakumāracarita. Because there were plenty of cattle, milk was readily available and consumed extensively. Fruits were also particularly significant in society's diet during that period. Fruit trees were abundant in the forests, public groves, and home orchards that people frequently visited. Bārahala, bananas, mangos, and other fruits were among them; mango intake was particularly common. The abundance of mango trees is mentioned multiple times in Dandin's work, demonstrating its significance. It also demonstrates that wild tubers, fruits, flowers, and meat were the primary dietary sources for those who lived in the forest. In one episode, Dhānyaka feeds tubers, roots, wild veggies, and meat to an unidentified hungry and crippled man in the wilderness.

Meat was also regarded as a frequent food during the crucial period. Meat could be consumed by anyone from any caste or class. Though some Brāhmaṇa did consume meat, the Brāhmaṇa class generally avoided it. Hunting and meat were particularly important to the Kṣatriya monarchs and the ruling class. Daśakumāracarita claims that Lāteśvara Mattakāla rests in the forest to go hunting after his conquest. There were numerous ways to eat meat in the modern age. It appears that some sections were deemed unfit for consumption. According to the Daśakumāracarita, Viśruta removed the deer's fur, skin, and

guts, tied the thigh, bone, and neck in bars, and cooked them over a forest fire, satisfying everyone's appetite. Therefore, one way to make the flesh edible was to tie it in bars and roast it over a fire. In addition, meat was used by frying it in spices and oil. Along with meat, wine played a significant role in Samish cuisine. Alcohol consumption was common in society during that period, and people from all social strata used to consume it. According to Apahārvarma's depiction of drinking in Daśakumāracarita, when under the influence of alcohol, a person reverts to his previous behaviors. The society of prostitutes had the greatest rate of alcohol consumption. Festivals and royal family celebrations made considerable use of alcohol.¹⁰

CONCLUSION-

In summary, food in Daśakumāracarita was not only a source of nourishment but also a reflection of the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of the time. The food customs of the era seem to be in line with Ayurvedic ideas. In addition to reflecting the success of agriculture and animal husbandry, the abundance of grains, lentils, vegetables, and dairy products supports the Ayurvedic tradition of a tissue-nourishing, sattvic diet. On the other hand, the eating of meat, wine, and extravagant feasts is a sign of the upper classes' affluence and the social inequality that still exists. The variety of foods, the use of spices, and the different ways that meals were served indicate that the culture valued flavour, nutrition, and effective resource management. The widespread usage of spices at the same time was meant to maintain body balance (doshas) and strengthen digestive fire (Agni), demonstrating the practical application of Ayurvedic knowledge. Overall, the eating habits detailed in Daśakumāracarita indicate not just the society's cultural and economic affluence but also its Ayurvedic health culture, which saw food as a tool for the harmonious development of the body, mind, and society.

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