



## THE UPANISHADIC CONCEPT OF *PRIMA MATERIA*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper reflects on the Upanishadic concept of food as the *Prima Materia*. The paper first highlights Kharia tribal concept of dream as the food. Furthermore, from a spiritual perspective, food is symbolical of life and gods. Food symbolically takes on collective unconscious characteristics.

**Keywords:** *Upanishad, Prima Materia, Kharia tribe, Food, Collective Unconscious.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Food is anything that gives *potere* (ability)—power—by virtue of which biological organism sustains health, promote growth or activity and prolong life. Modern man who is engaged in manifold activities fails to see food as the natural locus of life. For the primitive tribal, on the other hand, whose principal occupation is directly in terms of food (agriculture and hunting), it is much more than just one of the aspects of life. It not only reflects the traditional sublimation of the instinct to eat, procreate and live in the rituals of harvest festival, it has a constant psychological connotation throughout the lifespan, constituting his personal unconscious and, being a part of mankind's mythological and chronological history, the whole of collective unconscious because dream is food.

### Food and Dream

According to the Kharia ancestral thought on dreams, dream is food. Dream is the food for soul, spice of sleep: “*Lamed Chakna.*”

Lamed means sleep. *Chakna* is basically food but it is considered as especial. The word *chakna* for food is mainly used on the occasions when one is drinking. *Golang*—rice beer—is the traditional drink of the Kharia tribe. Also called *haria*, it is a sacred drink because gods gave the knowledge of its preparation. It is used on all festive occasions and it is also a part of one's diet in daily life. Like all other tribes, drinking always means something especial to Kharias whether it is an auspicious day or not. The very presence of *golang* makes the moment precious and the food served with the drink too acquires especial status and title—*chakna*. For example, meat when taken with *golang* is not called meat but *chakna*. Any food item served with *golang* is called *chakna*. *Golang* is like an elixir of life for Kharias and *chakna* too receives the same virtue. Dream, which is something very special to life and sleep (which is quite an intoxicating experience just like getting drunk), is therefore called *lamed chakna*.

It can thus be stated that the meaning of food is both physical and psychic, conscious and unconscious: conscious life centered on food emerge from the unconscious food—dream.

### Food and Life

“Life is established upon food” (Maitri Upanishad, VI, 11). Non-hylozoistic view on life differentiates the living from the dead in terms of breath and body that consumes food. Everything that breathes has a body and every form of body that breathes is based on food. “All that is breath has its life in food” (Aitareya Upanishad, I-3.10). That makes breath food in-itself: “Verily, Prana...is food, and the body is the eater; the body is established upon Prana” (Taittiriya Upanishad, III.7). Ultimately it is breath as food that constitutes biological existence: “From food man was born. Verily, man, this human being, is made of the essential substance of food” (Taittiriya Upanishad, II.1). It is rightly pointed out in the famous animated movie ‘Babe’ (1995) in which we find a quotation that what you eat today lives and talks tomorrow. “If a person does not eat...he has to give up his life at the end; on the other hand, if he takes food again, he becomes richly endowed in life” (Maitri Upanishad, 6.11). Food, therefore, is life, which is against non-existence: “In the beginning all was covered by hunger that is death” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, I.2.1).

Food from the lowest perspective is an instinctive aspect of life. Man labor for years to build a career in order that he may become fit for employment which gives him food, and it is food that makes home. The center of home is the

kitchen. Living in a room without a kitchen, or in a hostel or hotel is merely a tentative shelter. House becomes complete, whether one is staying alone or with others, only when there is a kitchen, no matter how temporary the set-up is. In the traditional architecture of tribal homes it is common to find hearth actually located in the center. Relationships flourish around food. Breakfast, lunch and supper are especial moments when all the members of a family leave their individual activities and come as one in everyday life. Food is an essential part of socialization, formal or informal.

In conservative societies, like India, relationships between males and females are generally with one person only and long-lasting is not merely due to less financial independence of females, or their up-bringing which makes them submissive to men and many hardly know what a female is without a male, or reserved attitude towards break-up or divorce, or orthodox views on sex. High percentage of long-lasting relationships in India is primarily and unconsciously due to the importance and sensitivity shown towards food and its preparation. Males and females generally enter into emotional and sexual relationship with the instinctive motive to establish a kitchen, i.e. marriage and home. Preparing to manage kitchen, and consequently home and its inmates, before the joy of emotional and sexual relationship is quite different from focusing first on dressing up and beautifying to look attractive, searching for a mate to suit one's unconscious type, and waiting for the first and right opportunity for love and sex.

Kitchen for an Indian maiden is a school in-itself in which she learns the art of maintaining the house and the relationships. It is in the kitchen wherein she is practically initiated into her womanhood and future life as a wife and mother. It makes a big difference when a young girl perceives the kitchen primarily as her home and practically makes efforts to grow in its warmth before she entertains the fantasy and actual experience of happiness which the bedroom has in store for her in her future home. In the life of an Indian maiden kitchen is introduced as a remote preparation of her future and takes precedence over bedroom. Kitchen being the locus of woman's life, it is a symbol of relationship with the opposite sex in terms of marriage. Marriage—*matrimonium*—means and is emphasized in Catholicism as 'the office of the mother.' Being the office of the mother, kitchen is considered sacred. Kitchen for an Indian female is traditionally as sacred as a temple. She takes utmost care to keep the kitchen clean and in order, and she steps in the kitchen without slippers just like it is a habit in India to enter the temple barefoot. What makes kitchen more sacred in act is the Indian tradition of food being served first to the husband (and other members of the family) by the wife and she eats only after all the members of the family have eaten. Being a woman, the caretaker of the hearth, which is the symbol of the 'domestic sun,' she is the passive principle, the receiver, at the service of her lord and master, the husband who is an active principle, and the love-union is between the masculine principle (fire) and the feminine (the receptacle). In relationship, from Indian perspective, husband is revered as a god (*pati-parmeshwar/devata*) and wife is respected as a goddess (*devi/Laxmi*). Husband is the manifestation of Shiva, *Jagat-Pati*, and woman is the manifestation of Shiva's consort Parvati. If marriage is divinely ordained, a sacrament, and marital act is also the union of two souls. The traditional Indian view ideally makes all the efforts to keep the sanctity of relation.

The traditional beliefs, however, are fast diminishing as modern Indians consider kitchen as just one of the rooms in the house and views on relations are being influenced by the Western trends. As long as woman keeps herself mortified in tradition her image in the society remains reserved and is worthy of reverence. Once she begins to denude herself from the chains of tradition she welcomes the desecration of her own image. Whether it is a glamorous career or conservative work, woman's freedom is vulnerable and fatal if not self-controlled. Even the most covered and unrevealing dress does not provide protection to a woman but the walls and the symbol of kitchen do. While the symbol of kitchen focuses on the maternal instinct that values faithfulness to the spouse, child rearing and obedience to family members, as opposed to the animal instinct to seek physical relation with more than one as and when one wants, its negative aspect is the mass falling into narrow-mindedness. On the other hand, being open-minded does not mean that one should not have moral conviction and conscience.

Relationship without a kitchen only results in flirting, fornication, adultery, one-night stand, bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, prostitution, career as an adult-video idol; or, to speak in a moderate language, easy and mass availability of opposite sex for relationship. Thus, the role of an Indian woman is emphasized as the keeper of kitchen and home in general—an Indian maiden is eligible for emotional and sexual relationship only as a wife and she is fit to be a wife only when she has learnt how to cook, and a woman who is a good cook is also a faithful wife, a home-oriented lady in spite of a career, and a good mother to the whole family. Female as the symbol of relationship is not to be perceived by others only in terms of seductive and sexual capability.

In primitive cultures, it is a ritual to celebrate on the occasion of the plantation, the first sprout and later when growth matures. Such festivals are closely related to human sexuality—fecundity and fertility. From socialization to sex, from the community to the home, from the mass to the individual food is not merely the locus of the world but world in-itself: "This whole world, verily, is just food and the eater of food" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, I.4.6).

On a broader social level, food again has a central role in social gatherings, like party or marriage, or on festive occasions. When “life dries up without food” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 5.12) festivity without food is equally dry. Greetings of the festivals are commonly expressed through and accompanied with food. There are especial food items for each festival. Christmas has cake and Easter has egg.

Besides festivals, food is equally central to an ordinary ritual, in India, to sweeten the mouth, i.e. eating something sweet before going for a good work for the first time, or it is considered a good social etiquette to offer something sweet to a new guest who comes home for the first time. Any happy news or event is shared and enjoyed with something sweet to eat. Happiness and laughter, in general, caused by jokes too is universally divided into vegetarian (censored) jokes and non-vegetarian (uncensored) jokes.

In India, food is also important to the businessmen in general. It is a common practice to find a lemon and a few green chilies punched in a line with a thread hanging on the entrance or inside the shop, or even inside the vehicles (public buses, vans, trucks) for prosperity and to ward off evil eye. For those who are in food business, the cook who prepares some food item daily for sale offers his first preparation to the fire on which he cooks.

Thus, in all aspects of modern life food is a powerful content of *psyche*.

Indians are no doubt very sensitive about food. Food eaters are strictly divided into vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Vegetarian diet is considered to be the food of the *brahman-jati* therefore it is superior to non-vegetarian diet, which is perceived as aggressive (like meat eating animals) and cruel (due to bloodshed). Among the non-vegetarian people selling and buying the meat is divided into two categories: *halal* and *jhatka*. *Halal* is a style of killing that gives slow death to the creature. The neck is cut (not chopped) so that all the blood comes out of the body. *Jhatka*, on the contrary, gives sudden death to the creature (one blow—first and final cuts off the head). Single stroke death retains some blood inside the body. Each manner of killing is believed to have some nutritious value. Meat, according to Muslims, is also divided into clean and that which is unclean, like the pig. Vegetarian diets too display extra-sensitivity towards food as it is divided into vegetarian and pure-vegetarian diets. A vegetarian is simply the one who is not a non-vegetarian. While the term pure-vegetarian is often used to mean that one is strictly or only vegetarian, the actual meaning, in the Indian context, goes back to the days of reformation of Hinduism when Buddhism and Jainism emerged. The common feature of Buddhism and Jainism is *ahinsa* (non-violence). But it is the principle of *ahinsa* as preached by *Swetamber* Jainism that influenced and characterized the eating habit into a separate class of pure-vegetarian. A pure vegetarian is an extreme vegetarian as he follows the principle of *ahinsa* in eating habits. He is so awake in the practice of *ahinsa* that every attempt is made to avoid killing of even tiny and invisible germs that one cannot see with eyes, thus respect life in completeness. *Swetamber* monks and nuns cover their mouth with a piece of cloth as there are germs in the air and while speaking they could enter the mouth and get killed. They also discourage people from eating any food that grows under the ground because they might contain some germs. So even today there are Jains who do not eat onions, potatoes, brinjals etc. as they grow under the ground. They do not use leather articles. They filter (not boil) the water for drinking (which in modern day practice is not religiously influenced). They never eat at night as in the low vision of the night they might kill some germs present in the food. Eating each day must finish before the sunset.

On the whole while eating is so instinctive, regular, habitual and never ending, not eating is another aspect of food and life.

Hibernation, starvation and fever etc. are cases when intake of food is either suspended or affected. Fasting is yet another phase when certain food is not taken or one simply does not eat anything. Fasting basically has religious motives, though it is sometimes practiced with sociopolitical motives too. Not eating anything for a certain period was a regular part of ascetic life. Today it is mainly limited to some form of fasting, like not consuming certain things, while maintaining one's regular diet. Faithful Christians abstain from eating meat on Fridays and during the Season of Lent some regular consumption, like meat, cigarette or wine etc., are sacrificed to exercise self-control. Some Indian maidens, desiring to find the suitable match, abstain from food on Mondays and pray to Lord Shiva. *KarwaChauth* is a well-known Indian festival celebrated by married ladies—young and old—on the 4th day of the dark half of Karthik, during October-November, in order to ensure long-life and prosperity of their husbands. They observe strict fast and worship Shiva, Parvati and their son Karthikeya along with ten karwas or small earthen pots with spouts filled with sweets. The fast is broken only at night after offering water to the Moon by holding a lamp in left hand and pouring water with the right hand on the ground seven times. The ceremony ends with a grand celebration.

With every consumption of food, on auspicious and non-auspicious moments, man satisfies himself and unconsciously desire to continue with celebration of life in material and mental prosperity as he steps into every next and new moment of life, like the Indian bride who enters her new home with the right foot by which she spills a bowl of rice for health and happiness of all: rice is a common symbol of wealth and prosperity in life.

As man goes on consuming and celebrating the virtues of food so instinctively it is matter of spiritual reflection whether one lives to eat or eat to live.

### Food and God

Like the primitive who worshipped rice, the vision of the mystic or deeply spiritually oriented individual perceives food as a medium through which he humanly commune with the Divine—food which nurtures body when sublimated nurtures soul.

When life is a constitution of food—“Lo, all this that was born as form, is no other than food” (Aitareya Upanishad, I.3.2)—and the entire creation is given to man for consumption—“And God said, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so” (Genesis 1:29-30)—it is to be accepted that “Food, verily, is the Lord of Creation” (Prashna Upanishad, I.14) because without food there is no germination and growth of body and without sublimation of food there is no energy for the soul. “Worship then food as thy very Self” (Maitri Upanishad, VI.12).

In the sacramental life in Baptism we are born again to the divine life, strengthening the divine life in us by Confirmation, restoring the divine life when it is lost due to sins by Penance, transmitting the divine life by Holy Order, receiving the divine life by Holy Matrimony, sustaining the divine life in the hour of death by Extreme Unction, and it is by the Eucharist that we supply daily nourishment to the divine life. Eucharistic celebration, an act of sacrifice of the Church to God and offer worship that is due to Him, is the center of the Holy Mass, which is done in remembrance of Christ as He commanded (“this do in remembrance of me” Luke 22:19) and in commemoration of the Last Supper—the most sacred and sublimated food ceremony:

“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” (Matthew 26:26-28).

Besides lamb and fish, bread and wine are common symbols of Christ. Just like Hindus bring something to eat—*prasad*—as a symbol of divine life from the temple, Christians too receive the experience of divinity in the form of bread and wine. *Prasad* is a similar concept like *lamed chakna*. Any food item taken in the temple or brought home from the temple or distributed in the name of God is called *prasad*. The slight difference between the two concepts is just that *prasad* is only considered as spiritual food. It is something that substantially unites man to God, which is again similar to the concept of Holy Communion. The Holy Communion is not just a notion or a prayer, it is an act of the body receiving and participating in the mystical body of Christ.

Prayer for the divine food—“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11)—to the Food Divine becomes more clear when we recall the manner in which Christ revealed Himself. In the gospel according to St. John, which is the only mystical gospel, there are seven self-revelations of Christ out of which two reveal Christ as the Food Divine.

1) “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

2) “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

3) “I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7).

“I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9).

4) “I am the good shepherd: the good Shepard giveth his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

“I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine” (John 10:14).

5) “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5).

“I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness” (John 12:46).

6) “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman” (John 15:1).

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

7) “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Spirituality from food perspective, therefore, is to realize that food is much more than merely physical. “Moses gave not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world” (John 6:32-33). Jesus has clearly differentiated between the bread and the true bread of Heaven. Bread that fills up the belly and facilitates physical life is not from Heaven. The true bread from Heaven, which gives life unto the world, is Christ Himself, the Spirit that is the creative seed/food for psychic evolution—intellectual and spiritual. It is true that hungry stomach cannot serve God but the bigger truth is that when hunger and thirst of stomach and heart is fulfilled it is a temporary state and it does not naturally take man to a higher level. We definitely need material food but in the process we forget consuming spiritual food, and although many of us have a habit of visiting the house of God we fail to see the simple fact that life without sublimation is instinctively just like that of animals—who also communicate, socialize, procreate, and care for the offspring—and we are not parishioners but we are still prisoners of food and instinct living in the shadow of Plato’s cave. Our understanding of food pulls us down to the dark realm of the unconscious that leaves no difference between the primitive and modern man in the basic act of eating, for the former ate and left the latter to eat. However, our hunger and thirst is far more uncontrolled, diverse and instinctive compared to the primitive man who had very limited wants and out of his little life offered much in time and energy as offering to the Giver of food. In the eyes of the primitive man, God gave food to man, but it is not so with the modern man. Like the modern man, the primitive man too labored intensively and extensively in his context, but he never lost the sight of the divine source of food. He planted and waited for God to enable and bless the growth. A genuinely creative individual sow the seed of idea and wait, incubate, in the light of the unconscious that nurtures and matures the idea. A mystic prays and wait for the will of God to allow the Heaven use him as a divine instrument. The primitive, the creative and the mystic labor as if everything depends on man and pray/meditate as if everything depends on God/creative unconscious. To consume fruits of the earth is common sense but to eat in sufficient amount with right consciousness, in right spirit, to consume Holy Communion as necessity and/or to sublimate eating by filling up oneself with things that are considered higher or from above is the beginning of wisdom. “Verily, they who worship the Eternal as food, attain the mastery of food to the uttermost” (Taittiriya Upanishad, II.2).

Spirituality of food is basically to realize the difference between food that perish in spite of contribution to the body and food which remains even after consumption for further and higher psychological growth. “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). God never turned stone into bread, as incorrectly mentioned that He did in the lyrics of the award winning song—“We are the World.” The temptation of Devil to turn stone into bread (Matthew 4:3) is the temptation of the flesh, and to use the world and life to feed one’s own base instincts. It should be pointed out that in hunger and temptation to turn stone into bread we use God for instinctive purposes. For the most part, our prayers to Heaven is for lower needs like passing in the exam, getting a job, for promotion, finding a mate, for the birth of a child, for good physical health, for a new house, *etc.* As earthlings that is fair enough, but how often do we pray for spiritual light? We faithfully pray for blessings to become a good friend, a lover, a spouse, a parent, and a professional. Prayers for such motives naturally ejaculate from our hearts. It sounds less natural to us to pray for blessings to be genuinely creative and, on the other extreme, to pray for holiness, to become saintly. When five thousand followed Jesus and were fed by him, Jesus remarked, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled” (John 6:26). It is unfortunate that God is approached for all kinds of need except for the higher need to self-actualize. Buried under the practical demands to pursue earthly food, we seek God in accordance with our lower needs and comforts. Whereas it is evident from every scripture that God is only for the things purely divine, creative and eternal. “Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life” (John 6:27).

“Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?” (Matthew 6:25)

Since the divine food is masculine, creative and conscious—spirit—and the worldly food is feminine, instinctive and unconscious—flesh—therefore, each parable in the gospel has the principle message to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33). The Kingdom of God, besides other symbols used by Christ, is like the seed fallen “into good ground”



(Matthew 13:8). It is like “a grain of mustard seed” (Matthew 13:31). It is like “leaven, which a woman hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened” (Matthew 13:33). “He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; and good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one” (Matthew 13: 37-38).

For mass man with no profound vision, it is very hard for him to go beyond the immediate concerns symbolized by physical food. Slave to the taste of the spice of life rather than the spice of sleep—*lamed chakna*—he remains an alchemical undigested food which cannot be transformed into something which is Gold or Elixir of Life. Food that is consecrated is transubstantiated and so is the eater of food. How plain and simple it is to see the effect of ‘the visible sign of the invisible grace’—sacrament—when we realize that food is also psycho-spiritual. “Great is this figure of the Spirit that is food” (Maitri Upanishad, VI.11).

### **Universal Food**

In the world of food there are autotrophic and heterotrophic organisms on the basis of different synthetic capacity. Autotrophes (*auto* means self and *trophe* means food) are self-nourishing organisms like plants. Heterotrophes (*hetero* means others) are organisms that depend on outside sources for nourishments, like animals and human beings. Though man is apparently heterotrophic, psychologically he is autotrophic, being fed by and feeding on the food within—*lamed chakna*. The whole of nature is food—food is universal—and the whole of *psyche* is food for all—universal food.

The food within, the universal food—“*annabhutamidam jagat*” (Maitri Upanishad, VI.10)—is the objective *psyche* in man. Symbolic of soul, the universal food is *anilamamrtam* (universal and immortal Life-Principle), *avibhaktamvibhaktesu* (one in divided things) and *martyesuumrtah* (imperishable in things perishable).

In man, the eater, it is a matter of personal reflection what food is doing to him or making him. Food manifest in man according to the psychological modality: flesh and spirit. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Consuming and consumed by *lamed chakna*, the unconscious and universal food, the individual is either becoming predominantly instinctive (still hungry and thirsty or more hungry and thirsty), and making every effort to constantly feed on the outside sources to find satisfaction and enjoyment, or he is depending on the externals of life to the minimum and basic degree, and relishing the taste of self-nourishment.

“*Vyaktamannamavyaktamannam*” (Maitri Upanishad, VI.10): The manifest is food and the unmanifest is food. Thus, the Upanishadic notion of the food is *Prima Materia*, and it is an ancient ‘theory of everything.’ Verily it is elementary to our existence and essence.

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