

‘History Of Food And Drinks In Buddhist Society’“An Over View”

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Both literary and archeological sources reveal that rice, wheat, and pulses were the main cereals which people consumed. Rice, no doubt, was known in the preceding age too, but wheat and pulses were added to the dietary system of this period. Rice was very popular. The chief varieties¹ of rice were Sali, Tandula, Hayana, Shashtika and Navara which seem to have been cultivated in the region. Rice of superior quality was taken by the rich sections of society, whereas the inferior variety was the food of the people belonging to the lower strata.²

Cooking rice was called Bhatta or Bhakta (modern Bhata).³ Panini calls it also Odana.⁴ It was ordinarily eaten with Supa (pulses) and vegetables⁵ Panini tells us that meat, supa, vegetables, guda, ghees, etc. were added to Bhata.⁶ Rice-milk was highly praised by the Buddha, and he recommended it for the Bhikshus as a morning breakfast.⁷ Honey was also mixed to it. Yavagu (rice or barley gruel) was a common liquid food.

There were a few special preparations known to us. Satu,⁸ so common in Bihar of today, was also eaten during our period. Kummasa or Kulmasha was a coarse food of the poor.⁹ Sweet cake, modern Puva, was a favourite dish. According to the illisa Jataka, it was prepared from rice, milk, sugar, ghee, and honey. Patthakhajjaka (modern Khaja) was another sweetmeat liked by all. Sariputta was fond of it, but took a vow not to eat it, for it tended to make him greedy.¹⁰ Palala was a delicious sweetmeat mentioned by Panini.¹¹ It was made of powdered Tila and sugar or Guda. Pishtaka, now known as Pitha, as prepared from the ground paste of rice.¹²

Milk and milk-products, like curd, butter and ghee were largely eaten.¹³ Vegetables like Pumpkins, gourds, cucumbers, etc. and fruits like mango and jambu (Jambu) were included in the diet of people.¹⁴

That during this period a large number of people were non-vegetarian is proved by the discovery of bones at different archaeological sites. They seem to have been very fond of meat and fish. There were butchers¹⁵ who earned their livelihood by killing various animals in the slaughter-houses and by supplying their meat to the people. The flesh of goat, pig, sheep, and deer was much used. In certain sections of society and on special occasions, cows and oxen were also slaughtered, but the tendency to spare the cow and to spare the useful bull was gaining ground. The Jataka stories mention Pigeons,¹⁶ geese,¹⁷ herons,¹⁸ peacocks,¹⁹ crows²⁰ and cocks²¹ as eatables. A large number of people cherished fish diet. Meat and fish were carried in carts to the towns and cities where they sold in the open markets.²²

Meat and fish were important items of diet in the royal kitchen.²³ On the festival days and on occasions like marriages meat was lavishly consumed. Even from Jatakas the Brahmanas also are described as relishing meat and fish with great delight. They are non-vegetarian diet on the occasions.²⁴ and on the occasion of the Sraddha ceremony²⁵ A guest was also served with meat so that the fruits of the merit of honouring him could be reaped.²⁶ It seems that the custom of meat-eating was so common that the Buddha did not prohibit it, except for the Bhikshus, who could accept it only in alms and could not procure it otherwise. In the Mahaparinnibbana-suttanta, the Buddha himself is described as eating pig-meat (Sukasa-maddakva),²⁷ and in a Jataka story, he is found cherishing cooked meat at the house of a householder.²⁸

Drinking was fairly common during this period. There are references to Sura and Meraya (Mairkkeya) as intoxicating drinks.²⁹ The kings, princes, nobles, warriors, and rich people called SETHIS drank liquor. The religious people and the Brahmanas of all castes were to abstain from drinking. The Jaina sutras prohibit the Jaina monks from visiting festive gatherings in which people drank. According to the rules of the Vinaya, the novices were not to drink strong drinks and intoxicating liquors,³⁰ and the same rule applied to the elders. We learn from the Bharmasutras of Apastambak³¹ Gautama,³² and Vishnu³³ that the Brahmanas were not allowed to indulge in drinking.

The Jaina and Buddhist sources further inform us that the festive occasions were marked by feasting, drinking, and merry-making.³⁴ There used to be a festival known as the Sura-Nakkhata (drinking-festival)

which was marked by unrestricted drinking, feasting and dancing,³⁵ leading finally prawns in which people broke their heads, feet and hands.³⁶

Liquor was manufactured or consumed on a lkgare scale. Taverns (Panagara : Kappasala) where various kinds wine were sold were common. The Jatakas inform us that there were crowded taverns, where liquor was kept filled in Jars and sold.³⁷ The owners of the taverns kept apprentices, who helped them in their business.³⁸ Generally these taverns were managed by the Setthis, who were the aristocratic vaisyas bisyasyas owing considerable property. Some people used to go to these taverns for drinking with their wives.³⁹

Meat was eaten during the vedic period. In the Rigvedka, Indra and Agni are described as eating the meat of oxen and cows.⁴⁰ Horse, bulks, oxen, cows, and rams were sacrificed for Agni.⁴¹ In the Satapatha Brahmana, meat is discribed as the best kind of food⁴². The Saga the Saga Yajnavalkya is represented as eating the meat of cows and oxen.⁴³ All these show that during the Vedic and the later period meat was quite common.

It is beyond any doubt that Buddhist period in Indian history marked the beginning of Urban life which continued up to mid Gupta Period. The city life made a number of material available in the society. A number of factories and mills were there to manufacture a large number of eatable objects.

References:

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5. kJa.VI.372.
6. kPa.VI.I.128.
7. M.V. VI.24-25.
8. Sattubhastha Jak. (No. 402).
9. Kummasapinda J, (No. 415).
10. Ja I. 31.
11. Pa, VI. 2, 128.
12. Ibid., IV, 3.147.

13. Angu, II. 95.
14. Ja, V. 37.
15. Majjh. I. 364.
16. Romaka Ja, (No. 277).
17. Punnandi Ja, (No. 214).
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19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ja, II. 412.
22. Mamsa Ja, (No. 315).
23. Ibid. I. 242.
24. Mamsa, Ja. III. 429.
25. Ibid., I. 166 (No. 18).
26. Ap. Dh. S. 11. 3.7.4.
27. Digha, 11.127.
28. Ja., II. 262.
29. Chu.XII, 1.3.
30. SBE, XIII. 211, 215.
31. Ap. Dh.S. 1, 5, 17.21.
32. Gau.Dh.S.II.26.
33. Vas, Dh.SD.XXII.84.
34. SBE, XXII, pp. 94-95.
35. Ja., I. 362, 489.
36. Ibid. IV. 115-16.
37. Ibid. I. 251-252.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Rig.X.86. 14, Indra Says, "They cook for me 15 plus 20 oxen". Rig.VIII, 43.II.
41. Rig. X.91.14.
42. Sat. Br. XI. k7.1.3.
43. Sat. Br. III. 1.2.21.

