

SOME RICE COOKING RITUALS AS GLEANED FROM ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Rice is one of the natural Foods used by mankind from ancient times. Traditionally rice has been revered and has several rituals associated with its sowing, transplanting, harvesting, cleaning, cooking and other procedures. Some of these have been described in ancient Indian literature while other rituals and customs have been handed down through generations by the people working in the fields and also by Folklore. Although there exist several customs with regard to transplanting, harvesting and so on, the present paper focuses especially on rice cooking rituals as gleaned from literature beginning from Vedic times and upto tribal beliefs. These rituals are based on various rice preparations made for various religious ceremonies

Introduction

Rice is the most widely consumed foods in many parts of the world especially in part of Asia. The ancient people of India evolved a system of identification, classification of the traditional varieties of rice based on color, shape, size, appearance, aroma, taste, duration, season, place. The Varieties of rice were named based on customs, plant height, mode of tillering, season, period of flowering, grain shape, size, duration, medicinal use, grain quality, smell, morphological appearance, physiology, taste and so on¹. Since Vedic times, there have been several rituals and folklore customs that have been discussed in the present paper.

Rice Customs in Vedic and Epic Periods

Rice has been used since Vedic times. The *Yajurveda Samhita*² mentions 5 varieties of rice like *Krishnavrihi*, *Shuklavrihi*, *Ashudhanya*, *Haayana*, *Mahavrihi*. Several rice preparations and rituals were in vogue in the Vedic period. One of them is *Sthalipaka*, (cooking in a pot). It is a form of sacrifice in which rice or barley was cooked in a dish and used as food. It is sacred to Agni and called *Paarvana* for its first performance on the first Full Moon day after marriage by married couples. The *Bharadwaja Srauta Sutra*³ [VIII.13.1.13 – 14] mentions about *Odana* which is rice cooked and served to relatives of sacrificer and also consumed by all priests. *Charu* was a porridge prepared from unpounded rice or barley grains, cooked in water with butter or milk mixed with it and served in a plate [*Baudhayana Srauta Sutra*⁴ II.19]. The *Apastamba Srauta Sutra*⁵ speaks of *Brahmaudana* – a mess of rice cooked for Brahmins, 4 plates of rice cooked in 4 measures of water [5.5.4.6].

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The *Katyayana Srauta Sutra*⁶ [20.14] adds that it is cooked also for the priests, king and his 4 wives and their 400 maidens. The *Apastambha Grihya Sutra*⁷ [22.9] mentions about *Anvashtaka* ceremony [the 9th day of the *Ashtaka* rites] in which boiled rice, payasa, boiled rice with sesamum (*krisara*), *Dadhimantha* are offered to the manes and to the female ancestors liquor (*sura*) and scum of boiled rice are given. The *Gobhila Grihya sutra*⁸ states that *krisara* (a mess of boiled rice mixed with sesamum seeds covered with ghee, cooked on a dish) to be cooked and eaten by wife. [2.7.9 – 11]. The *Griha Medhiya* is a rite mentioned by the *Apastambha Srauta Sutra*⁹ [8.9.8 – 9] wherein a charu is boiled in milk and offered to the *Marut* Gods in evening at *Shakamedha* Sacrifices. The *Purodasha* was a large rice cake. *Apupa* was a round cake of barley or rice flour baked in clarified butter on slow fire, honey added to sweeten it. There were also rice cakes made of rice flour called *Pishtaka* used in Vedic times.

Payasa (sweet rice preparation with milk) is mentioned in the Epics of *Valmiki Ramayana*¹⁰ and *Vyasa's Mahabharatha*. Rice balls with curds, Sesamum were also offered as *pindas* as part of the rice rituals to pacify the deceased ancestors. The *Mahabharatha*¹¹ mentions about king *Nala* [*Vana Parva*, *Nala Damayanti* episode] who was an expert in culinary arts. The text '*Pakadarpana*'¹² attributed to King *Nala* speaks of 8 *Doshas* in rice and also mentions qualities of rice and various rice preparations like *payasanna* [*Prakarana* IV], ghee rice preparations [*Prakarana* VII].

Rice Rituals in Post-Vedic Texts

Several Post-Vedic texts also mention various types of rice and associated customs. *Panini* in the *Ashtadhyayi*¹³ mentions *Sali and Vrihi*, In (VII.3.1), he mentions about *Shashtika* rice that ripens in 60 days. *Kautilya's Arthashastra*¹⁴ [II.24.16] mentions two new varieties of rice. The *Sushruta Samhita*¹⁵ mentions about 60 varieties of rice [Chp. 46] named after their grain morphological features. The *Charaka Samhita*¹⁶ also adds to several such rice Varieties [*Sutra Sthana*.27]. The *Ashtanga Sangraha of Vagbhata*¹⁷ [VII.3 – 12] also mentions several varieties of rice. *Dandi's Dashakumaracharita*¹⁸ [Chp. VI] mentions about the story of *Shaktikumara* who gave 1 *prastha* (a measure) of rice to a lady *Gomini* and asked her to cook it. The text describes how well she managed the 1 *prastha* rice given to her and cooked a sumptuous meal for him. Similarly the Kannada text '*Battisa Puttalika Kathe*'¹⁹ based on narration of 32 puppets to King *Bhoja* narrates the episode of a person who was served rice and other foods in a remote land by a maiden. After the cooking was by her was over, he was served the food and by just tasting the rice, he could identify that it had been cooked using some logs of the cremation ground. Nearly 400 traditional varieties of rice had been in vogue during olden days in Tamil Nadu²⁰.

During *Sankranti* festivals (January – February) known as the harvesting season, *Pongal* rice is prepared in several parts of Tamil Nadu and offered with

dhal and turmeric to the Sun God. Large quantities of boiled rice colored red and yellow by mixing *kumkum* and saffron are also offered to Crows²¹.

Rice Rituals and Customs in Tribal Folklore

Several such customs are preserved by various Indian tribal societies. In several tribal communities, rice mixture was prepared with milk or water. Boiled rice was generally eaten with curds, sesamum, butter, mudga beans, meat, tubers and fruits. In parts of Kashmir, rice is eaten boiled with meat and vegetable curry along with salt and other pulses²². There exists various rice harvesting rituals all over the country that not much have been documented. When paddy ripens, on an auspicious day the corn is reaped. In Western Orissa, a festive day is observed known as *Nuakhia* (day of taking new rice). Five handfuls of corn sheaves are venerated as Goddess *Lakshmi* and kept separately in barn till reaping year is over²³. In parts of Kerala, paddy is brought from the temple or from paddy fields. The new paddy, with its leaves taken out is carried into the house in procession and placed on a plantain leaf with a lamp lit to its right. Offer of coconuts and sweets are made to *Ganapati* and leaves and ears of paddy are attached to various parts of the house with a piece of cowdung, agricultural implements and even to trees followed by a sumptuous feast. *Puthari* (meal of new rice) is also given²⁴. At a *Rona* (Oriya Cultivator) wedding, the priest who officiates ties to the ends of the cloths of bridal couple a new cloth to which betel leaves, areca nuts, 7 grains of rice are placed. At end of marriage rites on third day, rice is examined to see if it is in a good state of preservation and its condition is regarded as Omen for good and evil. During funeral rites, Some tribal Communities have the practice of throwing coloured rice grains and also white rice over the Corpse. The *Pulayam* (agrestic slaves) of Cochin go in procession to temple of Goddess during *Kathiru* festival and Scatter packets of palmleaves containing handfuls of paddy (unhusked rice) rolled up in straw among the Crowds. The Spectators Scramble to obtain them and carry them home to hang it in front of houses for it is believed that their presence will promote prosperity of family²⁵. Several aged persons in various parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala attest to various rice cooking customs. In ancient days, Fire was believed to be a living person invoked in sacrificial attars and regarded as a messenger of Gods. Special types of wood was used to kindle the fire used to cook foods. In this regard, one may mention about the various properties of waters heated by different kinds of wood such as those of trees like *Dhatri*, *Madhuka*, *Karkandu*, *Sallaki*, *Khadira Vata*, *Arjuna Palasha*, *Jambuka*, *Kapittha* as stated by *Sushena* in his *Ayurveda Mahodadhi*²⁶ [*Annapana Vidhi*].

Traditionally one had to smear the earthen pot with *chunam* or ashes and place it on the fire with water. Rice was washed thoroughly and then few grains of rice were waved thrice around the fire chanting ‘*Om Agnaye Svaha*’ and then put into the pot for cooking. It is believed by aged women in parts of Kerala that one

must stir the rice with a ladle after it is put in the pot else one begets dumb children²⁷. However such beliefs have not yet been fully recorded or ascertained to its truth, one must trace the relation of such beliefs with rice cooking. These may have to do something with such ritualistic rice cooking rituals practiced since Vedic times. Similarly, the rice after being cooked, the porridge gruel is collected and offered to cows and then a portion of it may be partaken by humans. The cooked rice is then offered to household deity and then with a spoon of ghee, Curry, curds and dhal to the Crows as an offering to the *Pitrs* (departed ancestor) as an offering to the *Pitrs* (departed ancestor) and then eaten by the household after this process. These rituals bring prosperity to the house.

Conclusions

Rice cooking rituals have been practiced from time immemorial and have continued to this day. Although many of the ancient rituals associated with cooking, harvesting, transplanting rice have died down, still literature and folklore abounds in their descriptions. With modern cooking done with pressure cookers, microwave ovens and other devices, these ancient traditions of cooking are dying out as people cease to believe these rituals and customs associated with cooking. These are giving rise to unknown unhygienic practices and a whole range of lifestyle Food consuming habits giving rise to diseases that medical practitioners are unable to hand. It would be fruitful if one could document such rice cooking rituals from other ancient Indian literature, tribal folklore and local traditions so that they are preserved and handed down to as a knowledge base to future generations.

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