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Dr. Krishna Panda

Assistant Professor,
BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit-
Mahavidyalay, Sarangpur

Food: Savouring Words beyond the Feast

Dr. Krishna Panda

Preface

Food is more than mere sustenance; it is an experience, an indulgence, and, at times, a poetic muse. The poem "Food" captures the sensory delight that a well-prepared meal offers, painting a vivid tapestry of colors, flavors, and textures. The verses express the joy, allure, and even the guilty pleasure that comes with the act of eating.

However, beyond its gastronomic appeal, food holds profound philosophical and spiritual significance. In Vedantic and Upanishadic thought, food is seen not only as nourishment for the body but also as a force that influences the mind and soul. The Bhagavad Gita categorizes food into sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic, each impacting one's consciousness differently. The Vachanamrut and the Upanishads emphasize moderation and purity in diet, teaching that food, when consumed mindfully, can aid in spiritual elevation rather than indulgence.

This poem serves as both a celebration and an exploration—a tribute to the irresistible charm of food while subtly prompting reflections on our relationship with it. Is food merely a pleasure, or does it hold deeper implications in our lives? Through this poetic journey, we are invited to savor each moment while contemplating the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our choices.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

The poem *Food* employs a variety of literary devices to enhance its sensory appeal and thematic depth:

- **Metaphor:** The poet implicitly compares food to an object of love and desire (e.g., "Here my new guilty pleasure stood").
- **Personification:** The lobster "looks me in my eye," giving it human-like qualities, which adds playfulness to the imagery.
- **Imagery:** Vivid descriptions like "Vivid rainbow colours dancing in a row" create strong sensory impressions.
- **Alliteration:** "Lucious fruits and quaint desserts" uses alliteration to create a rhythmic flow.
- **Assonance & Consonance:** Repetition of vowel and consonant sounds throughout the poem enhances its musicality.
- **Oxymoron:** "Guilty pleasure" and "soporific, saporous" juxtapose contrasting ideas.
- **Irony:** The joy in indulgence contrasts with the notion of "guilt" in overindulgence.
- **Symbolism:** Food is used as a metaphor for indulgence, temptation, and satisfaction.

2. Structure and Form

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The poem follows a structured rhyme scheme that enhances its rhythmic appeal.
- **Meter and Rhythm:** The poem maintains a consistent beat, which adds to its lyrical quality.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** The poem is divided into structured stanzas, each focusing on different aspects of food.
- **Enjambment:** The continuation of thoughts across lines (e.g., "Cheers to the night, my mocktails flow, / In crystal glasses they bubble and flow!") enhances fluidity.

Correspondence:**Dr. Krishna Panda**

Assistant Professor,
BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit-
Mahavidyalay, Sarangpur

3. Theme and Subject Matter

• The central theme revolves around **pleasure, indulgence, and admiration for food** Beyond surface-level appreciation, the poem explores the emotional connection with food and its role in human satisfaction.

• The deeper message hints at **temptation, indulgence, and the interplay of guilt and pleasure.**

4. Tone and Mood

• **Tone:** Playful, indulgent, and celebratory, yet subtly reflective of human tendencies toward excess.

• **Mood:** The poem evokes joy, excitement, and satisfaction in the reader.

5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

The poem "Food" beautifully expresses the sensory delight and emotional attachment humans have toward food. However, when analyzed from the lens of Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, it presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between food (āhāra), sensory indulgence, and spiritual evolution. Below is an interpretation of how the poem aligns with Vedic scriptures:

1. The Role of Food in Spiritual Growth – The Chandogya Upanishad

The Chandogya Upanishad (7.26.2) states: "Āhāra śuddhau sattva śuddhiḥ, sattva śuddhau dhruvā smṛtiḥ"ⁱ Translation: When food is pure, the mind becomes pure; when the mind is pure, one attains steady remembrance (smṛti), which leads to liberation.

The poem celebrates the sensory experience of food, reflecting the worldly joy derived from eating. However, in Vedantic thought, food is not just a source of pleasure but a means to refine the mind. Sattvic food (pure, plant-based, fresh, and wholesome) is recommended to elevate spiritual consciousness, whereas rajasic and tamasic food (overly spicy, intoxicating, stale) lead to sensory disturbances.

2. Bhagavad Gita on Types of Food – Chapter 17, Verses 7-10

The Bhagavad Gita (17.7-10)ⁱⁱ categorizes food into Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic:

- Sattvic food (pure, fresh, wholesome) – leads to longevity and strength.
- Rajasic food (spicy, overly stimulating) – leads to restlessness and suffering.
- Tamasic food (stale, impure, intoxicating) – leads to ignorance and disease.

The poem mentions mocktails, steak, lobster, desserts, and a sensory feast. From a Vedantic perspective, indulgence in rajasic and tamasic food leads to attachment and karmic bondage. Krishna advises Arjuna to choose sattvic food to maintain a pure consciousness.

- If food becomes an obsession or "guilty pleasure" (as the poem suggests), it may lead to attachment and a never-ending cycle of desires (Bhagavad Gita 3.37)ⁱⁱⁱ .

- However, if food is seen as a divine gift (prasadam) and consumed with gratitude, it becomes a means to spiritual nourishment.

3. Vachanamrut (Gadhada I-18) – Control Over the Senses

In Vachanamrut Gadhada I-18, Bhagwan Swaminarayan explains that food and sensory pleasures are temporary and should not become obstacles to spiritual progress: "One who eats only to sustain the body and not for pleasure overcomes desires and progresses toward Akshardham."

The poem portrays food as a source of joy, almost like a new love. In Vedantic teachings, such attachment to food can lead to sensual bondage. Swaminarayan Vedanta suggests seeing food as a necessity, not an indulgence.

4. Shrimad Bhagavatam (11.8.10) – The Role of Moderation

The Shrimad Bhagavatam (11.8.10)^{iv} presents the analogy of a fish caught by bait: "Just as a fish is trapped by bait, so too is a man bound by his uncontrolled tongue." The poem reflects the seductive power of food, which can become a weakness if not controlled. The Bhagavatam warns that attachment to taste can be an obstacle in spiritual progress.

- Saints and sages practice mitahara (moderation in eating) to avoid distraction from their spiritual path.
- Eating mindfully and with detachment is encouraged over indulgence.

5. The Concept of Prasadam – Taittiriya Upanishad (3.10.5)

The Taittiriya Upanishad (3.10.5) teaches: "Annam Brahmeti vyajānāt"^v – "Food itself is Brahman."

This verse elevates food to a divine status. Rather than indulging in it as a pleasure, the Upanishads teach that food should be offered as prasadam (sacred offering) before consumption.

- If the poem is seen as a celebration of divine gratitude for food, then it aligns with Vedantic wisdom.
- If it represents hedonistic indulgence, then it contradicts the teachings of renunciation and self-control.

The poem reflects the joy and sensory pleasure derived from food, which aligns with worldly experiences but contrasts with Vedantic teachings of detachment and moderation.

However, the spiritual path does not deny joy—it simply redefines it.

- If food is enjoyed mindfully and offered to God (prasadam), it aligns with Upanishadic wisdom.
- If food becomes an indulgence that binds one to sensory desires, it becomes an obstacle in spiritual growth.

Thus, from a Vedantic perspective, the ideal approach is "Yuktāhāra" (Bhagavad Gita 6.16-17)^{vi}—a balanced, moderate approach to food that nourishes both body and soul.

6. Historical and Cultural Context

- The poem reflects modern-day culinary indulgence and appreciation for gastronomy as an art form.
- It resonates with contemporary food culture, where food is not just sustenance but also entertainment and a form of social bonding.
- Historically, various civilizations have celebrated food, from Vedic sacrificial feasts to Renaissance banquet culture.

7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

- The poet expresses joy and fascination, celebrating food as a source of pleasure and comfort.
- There is an underlying theme of discovering a new passion, reflecting personal experiences of indulgence.
- The poem might stem from an autobiographical moment of experiencing fine dining or newfound appreciation for food.

8. Target Audience and Purpose

- The poem appeals to food lovers, poets, and those who appreciate sensory experiences.
- It aims to inspire appreciation for the simple joys of food while subtly questioning indulgence and desire.

9. Conclusion and Personal Interpretation

- The poem leaves the reader with a sense of fulfilment and reflection on their relationship with food.
- It offers both a literal appreciation for culinary experiences and a deeper contemplation on indulgence and restraint.
- Ultimately, Food is a celebration of sensory delight, human desire, and the eternal charm of life's simplest yet most profound pleasures.

Conclusion

At its core, "Food" is a tribute to the beauty and allure of culinary delights. Through rhythmic verses and rich imagery, the poem evokes a sense of indulgence, painting food as both a necessity and a source of deep pleasure. Yet, as we step beyond its sensory appeal, the poem invites a more profound contemplation—is food simply about taste, or does it carry deeper philosophical and spiritual meaning?

In the lens of Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, food is seen as a double-edged sword—it can either liberate the soul through purity and moderation or bind it through excessive indulgence and attachment. The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that what we consume affects not just our physical well-being but also our thoughts and spiritual progress. The Vachanamrut warns against overindulgence, urging one to see food as a means of sustenance rather than an end in itself. Thus, this poem serves as both an appreciation and a gentle reminder—to enjoy the delights of food, but with awareness, gratitude, and balance. Just as life itself is a delicate interplay of desires and discipline, food, too, is an experience best savored with mindfulness and restraint.

Reference

- i तदेष श्लोको न पश्यो मृत्युं पश्यति न रोगं नोत दुःखतां सर्वं ह पश्यः पश्यति सर्वमाप्नोति सर्वश इति स एकधा भवति त्रिधा भवति पञ्चधा सप्तधा नवधा चैव पुनश्चैकादशः स्मृतः शतं च दश चैकश्च सहस्राणि च विंशतिराहारशुद्धौ सत्त्वशुद्धौ ध्रुवा स्मृतिः स्मृतिलम्भे सर्वग्रन्थीनां विप्रमोक्षस्तस्मै मृदितकषायाय तमसस्पां दर्शयति भगवान्स-नत्कुमारस्तं स्कन्द इत्याचक्षते तं स्कन्द इत्याचक्षते ॥ ७.२६.२ ॥
- ii आहारस्त्वपि सर्वस्य त्रिविधो भवति प्रियः |
यज्ञस्तपस्तथा दानं तेषां भेदमिमं शृणु ॥ 7॥
आयुःसत्त्वबलारोग्यसुखप्रीतिविवर्धनाः |
रस्याः स्निग्धाः स्थिरा हृद्या आहाराः सात्त्विकप्रियाः ॥ 8॥
कट्वम्ललवणात्युष्णतीक्ष्णरूक्षविदाहिनः |
आहारा राजसस्येष्टा दुःखशोकामयप्रदाः ॥ 9॥
यातयामं गतरसं पूति पर्युषितं च यत् |
उच्छिष्टमपि चामेध्यं भोजनं तामसप्रियम् ॥ 10॥
- iii श्रीभगवानुवाच |
काम एष क्रोध एष रजोगुणसमुद्भवः ॥
महाशनो महापाप्मा विद्ध्येनमिह वैरिणम् ॥ 37॥
- iv अणुभ्यश्च महद्भ्यश्च शास्त्रेभ्यः कुशलो नरः |
सर्वतः सारमादद्यात् पुष्पेभ्य इव षट्पदः ॥ १० ॥
- v अन्नं ब्रह्मेति व्यजानात्
- vi नात्यश्रतस्तु योगोऽस्ति न चैकान्तमनश्चतः |
न चाति स्वप्नशीलस्य जाग्रतो नैव चार्जुन ॥ 16॥
युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु |
युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥ 17॥