

Eating and fasting to liberate the Mind.
Some remarks on the theme of food in Keśavdās's *Vijñānagītā*

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Many remarkable studies in the past decades have investigated the crucial role of food in Indian culture in its wide-ranging cultural meanings and uses (see, for example, Khare 1992; Olivelle 1992, 2011, Sen 2015). 'Food in India is never merely a material substance of ingestion, nor only a transactional commodity. It is synonymous with life and all its goals, including the subtlest and the highest' (Khare 1992, 1). According to Khare (1992, 8) three food discourses overlap within a Hindu's life – one ontological and experiential concerned with the cultural sphere and worldly life, one therapeutic connected with the sphere of healing and happiness and one transcending the first two aiming to self-control and salvation. Several theoretical dogmas are formulated around the issue of food and a number of socio-cultural institutions develop, since 'the cultural construction of food is part of the broader social construction of reality' and the 'rules regarding food transactions constitute a social code that strengthens the hierarchical organization of society and demarcates the boundaries of purity' (Olivelle 2011, 71; 77). In cosmological speculations, food is the source of life, playing a central role in several creation myths of ancient India (Olivelle 2011, 73). But it can also be a cause of attachment, fostering greed and vices. Especially in the ascetic ideology and practice, the fear of food becomes a crucial path towards detachment from the world and salvation (Olivelle 1992, 105). In the medieval period, after the organization of monastic orders ascribed to the Advaita School, many theoretical texts based on ascetic ideologies were composed, and it is precisely in this philosophical context that we can insert the observations proposed in this paper.

The theme of food offers an interesting key to the interpretation of a philosophical text such as the *Vijñānagītā* by Keśavdās (1610), since it is used as a metaphor for any worldly temptation binding the self to the *saṃsāra*, but also represents the means to restrain one's own appetites and advance spiritually and ethically towards liberation.

The *Vijñānagītā* (VG) is a Braj Bhāṣā adaptation of the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* (PC), composed by the poet Kṛṣṇamīśra at the court of

King Kīrtivarman Candela during the second half of the 11th century.¹ The drama describes the process of the gradual awakening of the transmigrating self, which is progressively released from the mirages of the illusory world and the trap of *saṃsāra*, and the ascent towards the monistic experience, passing through a symbolic interior war.² The tale is narrated in the form of an allegory describing the battle between the two armies of King Discrimination (Viveka) and King Delusion (Mahāmoha). Both Kings are the sons of Mind (Manas), who was, in turn, generated by Self (called Puruṣa in PC, Jīva in VG) and his consort, Illusion (Māyā). Mind (Manas), accompanied by Egoism (Ahaṃkāra), has usurped the throne of his father and bound Self, while Delusion (Mahāmoha) with his armed forces³ has conquered the entire world. In order to liberate Self, the troops of Discrimination (Viveka)⁴ have to defeat all the followers of Delusion (Mahāmoha) and dispel the heretical schools of the *nāstikas*. After a terrible war, Delusion's (Mahāmoha) militia is destroyed and Mind (Manas), overwhelmed with grief over the loss of his relatives, resigns himself to putting an end to his life. However, Sarasvatī helps him to find solace and yield to Dispassion (Vairāgya). In the end, Discrimination (Viveka) agrees to join his wife Sacred Lore (called Upaniṣad in PC, Vedasiddhi in VG) in order to give rise to Knowledge (Vidyā) and Spiritual Awakening (Prabodha), which will liberate Self.

This popular story had a long tradition of translations and adaptations in many different languages. At least 25 versions are known in Hindi,⁵ but many others are found in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Persian. As Keśavdās states at the very beginning of his work, he decided to tell this story in Bhāṣā, since the mythological war between Discrimination (Viveka) and Delusion (Mahāmoha) is the greatest tale (*uttama gāthā*), offering release to whomsoever listens to it. Therefore, inspired by the redemptive power of this parable, he composed VG for his patron, Vīr Siṃh of Orcha (r. 1605–1627) and recommends that he follow the same path of moral progress, for the sake of his own spiritual elevation.

Compared to the Sanskrit PC, the VG introduces several innovations in the narrative, opening the discussion to many other theoretical issues: it is a kind

1. We know from the prologue (I.ad 2-9) that the play was written to celebrate Kīrtivarman's victory over the Cedi King Kārṇa of Tripuri, and the reappropriation of some of the territories lost by his predecessors that re-established Candela suzerainty (see Pédraglio 1974, 3 ff.; Dikshit 1976, 106; Nambiar 1998, 1). The rivalry between the Candela and Cedi dynasties is reflected in the symbolic war narrated in the drama.

2. Nambiar 1998, 18; Pédraglio 1974, 22.

3. Led by the generals Egoism (Ahaṃkāra), Lust (Kāma), Cupidity (Lobha) and Anger (Krodha).

4. Conducted by Investigation-into-Reality (Vastuvicāra), Patience (Kṣamā) and Contentment (Santoṣa).

5. Agravāl (1962, 202 ff.) classifies them into four typologies: translations (*anuvāḍ*), adaptations (*rūpāntar*), autonomous allegorical dramas (*svatantr rūpak nāṭak*) and dramas which are in part inspired by the PC (*aṃśataḥ prabhāvit nāṭak*).

of philosophical compendium reflecting the historical and cultural panorama of 17th century North India. In this text every character has an allegorical meaning and, therefore, the mentions of food also assume a symbolic value. In an Advaita Vedānta perspective, which is the philosophical framework of the work, food is considered primary as the breeding-ground for the appetites binding to the world, and as a means to reinforce the illusion that the objects of senses are real. However, if converted into a means to restrain one's own impulses, it becomes an instrument to strengthen self-discipline and emancipate the Mind from the cravings of the senses.

1. *Food as the basis of rebirth*

The first hint at food is found in the third chapter, when Deceit (Dambha), one of the combatants in the army of Delusion (Mahāmoha), on his way from Delhi to Vārāṇasī, meets Egoism (Ahaṃkāra) in Mathurā. He explains the story of the imminent war between the two kings Discrimination (Viveka) and Delusion (Mahāmoha) to conquer Vārāṇasī, which is the last stronghold of morality where Enlightenment (Prabodha) can be generated. They discuss a method to convince the people to surrender to Delusion (Mahāmoha) and they come to the conclusion that the only way to persuade them is to rely on the temptations of their stomach.

दंभ

बोध उदै के लोप कों एकै पेट समर्थ ॥ २७ ॥

केसव क्योँहुँ भयौँ न परै अरु जौ रे भरै भय की अधिकाई ।

रीतत तौ रित्तयौ न घरी कहुँ रीति गएँ अति आरतताई ।

रीतो भलो न भरो भलो केसेहुँ रीते भरे बिनु कैसे रहाई ।

जानि परै परमेसुर की गति पेटन की गति जानि न जाई ॥ २८ ॥

Deceit (Dambha)

27b. To prevent the rise of Enlightenment (Prabodha), only the stomach (*pet*) will be successful.

28. It cannot be filled by any means and when filled, fear increases – Keśav says.

If it is empty, not even a second is spent unfilled, but if the way [to fill it] has already been achieved, more pain arises.

Neither it is fine to have it empty, nor it is fine to have it filled. But if it is empty, without having it filled, how can one survive?

The plays of the Lord can be comprehended, but the plays of the stomach cannot be comprehended.⁶

Food and eater are strictly interrelated, since '[c]onceptually, one cannot exist without the other [and p]hysically, one becomes transformed into the other' (Olivelle 2011, 75). Therefore one's approach to food is a key to understand his approach to the cosmos and the entire creation can be seen as a food chain.

पेटनि पेटनि हीं भटक्यौ बहु पेटनि की पदवी न नक्यौ जू ।
पेट तें पेट लयौ निकस्यौ फिरिकै पुनि पेटहि सों अटक्यौ जू ।
पेट को चरो सबै जग काहु के पेट न पेट समात तक्यौ जू ।
पेट के पंथ न पावहु केसव पेटहि पोषत पेट पक्यौ जू ॥ २९ ॥

29. [People] roam from stomach to stomach, still they do not find a way to ride out the path of the stomach.

After a [previous] stomach, they obtained a stomach again; still they stick on-ly to their stomach.

The entire world is a slave of the stomach, I would just say, I [never] saw anyone able to restrain his own hunger.⁷

The path of the stomach is never accomplished – Keśava says – and [trying to] satisfy one's own stomach, one eats away his stomach [with concerns].

तृष्णा बड़ी बड़वानली क्षुधा तिमिगिल क्षुद्र ।
ऐसो को निकसै जु परि उत्तर उदर समुद्र ॥ ३० ॥

30. Thirst (*tṛṣṇā*) is a great lake of flames, hunger is like a leviathan.

Who would be able to come up again, once fallen into that sea that is the belly (*udar*)?

This figurative image of a huge stomach destined to devour the entire world with its unappeasable cravings is very significant in this context. In the Sanskrit text (PC II.ad 33) this mission is carried out by Avidity (*Tṛṣṇā*), asked by her husband Cupidity (*Lobha*) to condemn the people to insatiable desires depriving them of their tranquility. She replies that she has always been devoted to that purpose, but now thousands of worlds will not fill her belly (*udar*). Therefore, in the VG, the original image of the insatiable belly of *Tṛṣṇā* is transposed into a giant stomach devouring everything and binding the self to transmigrate from one birth to another.⁸

6. Unless indicated differently, all translations are mine. For the Hindi text, cf. Miśra 1959, to which some minor corrections have been applied in accordance with the metres (*dohā* in 27cd and 30, *indav savaiyā* in stanzas 28-29).

7. Explained by Lāl (1993, 51) as an idiom meaning *peṭ meṃ peṭ kī bhūkha ko samā nahīṃ pānā* 'not to be able to contain the stomach's hunger in the stomach'.

8. Cf. Nambiar 1998, 53.

The importation of *tr̥ṣṇā* is a point of interest for our discussion, since it seems to be diachronically adjusted to different theoretical frameworks. The term occurs several times in the *R̥gveda* in its literal meaning and without any metaphorical implication.⁹ On the contrary, the concept becomes crucial in the Buddhist etiology of pain (*duḥkhasamudaya*) and the binding to the conditioned reality which brings to rebirth.¹⁰ As regards Vedānta texts, it is interesting to highlight that few occurrences of the term appear in Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* to gloss some other words for 'craving' or 'thirst' occurring in the *mūla* text, such as *kāma*,¹¹ *pipāsā*¹² or *jighatsā*.¹³ On tracing some connections in the imagery connected with *Tr̥ṣṇā*, we can say that if the concept seems to assume a crucial symbolic value quite late in Indian philosophical speculation, maybe due to Buddhist influence, its figurative representation in these *Advaita* texts was possibly inspired by the allegorical characters that first occurred in some Buddhist dramas.¹⁴

9. Cf., for example, *R̥gveda* 1.38.6c, 1.85.11a, 1.105.7c, 5.57.1c, 7.33.5a, 7.89.4a, 9.79.3c, 10.94.11c.

10. Concerning the central role of *tr̥ṣṇā* in the exposition of the four noble truths as the cause of the arising of pain and its varieties, as described in the *Theravāda* Buddhist canon, see, for example, Anderson 2013, 68, 82-83. Buddhist texts speculate further on this theme, identifying *tr̥ṣṇā* as the eight *nidāna* of the *pratītyasamutpāda*. Moreover, in the Mahāyāna tradition, it is associated with the topic of the realms of existence represented in the *bhāvācakra*, especially with the *pretas*, namely the 'hungry ghosts' afflicted with an insatiable hunger, who are represented with huge bellies but long, thin necks and tiny mouths through which they cannot swallow enough food to placate their cravings.

11. See, for example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.7: *yadā sarve pramucyante kāmā ye 'sya hr̥di śrītāḥ* commented as *yadā yasminkāle sarve samastāḥ kāmāstr̥ṣṇāprabhedāḥ pramucyante*. Or else, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.33: *yaś ca śrottriyo 'vijino kāmahataḥ* commented as *sa eṣa parama ānando vit̥r̥ṣṇasrottriyaḥ* followed by a quotation from *Mahābhārata* 12.168.36: *tathā ca vedavyāsaḥ – 'yacca kāmasukhaṃ loke yacca divyaṃ mahatsukhaṃ / tr̥ṣṇāksayasukhasyaite nār̥hataḥ ṣoḍaśīm kalām' // iti* in which it is said that no worldly pleasure is comparable to the supreme bliss which is experienced when the self has destructed all desires. Incidentally, this quotation occurs also in several later texts on aesthetics, to explain the *sānta rasa*. See, for example, *Dhvanyāloka* 3.ad 26 and *Sāhityadarpaṇa* 3.ad 250.

12. Cf. for example, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.5.1: *aśānāvāpipāse* 'He is the one who is beyond hunger and thirst' (Olivelle 1998, 83).

13. Cf. for example, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.5: *vijighatso 'pipāsah satyakāmah satyasarikalpaḥ* 'That is the self free from evils – free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions become real' (Olivelle 1998, 275).

14. The origin of the allegorical drama in Sanskrit literature is quite obscure. However, it seems that some forerunners of this genre, which was to become more popular after the PC in the 11th century, can be found in some fragments attributed to Aśvaghōṣa (reported in Lüders 1911, 66 ff.), in which we witness a dialogue between the allegorical figures of Wisdom (Buddhī), Fame (Kīrti) and Firmness (Dhṛti). Cf. Keith 1924, 83-84; Johnston 1936, xx-xxi. This seems to be connected with Olivelle's attempt to trace the development of the theology of renunciation in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads. Even arising in a broad 'literary tradition concerning renunciation and related topics both within the Brahmanical mainstream and in non-Brahmanical traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism', it is unclear whether it was produced within 'ascetic institutions and later

This association between the stomach and thirst/hunger has an immediate philosophical implication. *Peṭ* is represented in this stanza as the cause of re-birth, intersecting the concept of *udar*, as the cavity in which the fetus is conceived; it is close to the womb and the matrix of birth. Therefore the circle of rebirths from womb to womb (or from matrix to matrix) is transformed into the cycle from stomach to stomach. Coming from the original idea of the bag-shaped inner cavity that is involved, *peṭ* is, on the one hand, the belly, the womb, while, on the other, it is the stomach as the breeding-ground for hunger, thirst, and desire. This polysemy of the word is also perceivable in its modern usage, since it is idiomatically employed both to express the meaning linked to appetite (e.g. *peṭbhar khānā* to eat one's fill, *peṭ kātnā* to eat frugally, *peṭ kī āg* the pangs of hunger) and pregnancy (e.g. *peṭ ānā* to become pregnant, *peṭ girnā* to miscarry).¹⁵

Interestingly, a similar image is also used by Brahmā Kavi (1528–1586), the *nom de plume* of Maheś Dās Bhaṭṭ, advisor at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, best known as Rāja Bīrbal. In one of his Hindi compositions, he writes:

पेट ते आयो तु पेट को धावत हार्यो न हेरत घामरु छाही ।
 पेट दियो जिहि पेट भरे सोई ब्रह्म भनै तिहिं ओरु न जाहीं ।
 पेट पर्यो सिख देतहि देत रे पापिउ पेटही पेट समाहीं ।
 पेट के काज फिरै दिन राति सु पेटहु से परमेसुर नाही ॥¹⁶

Coming from one stomach and running into a[nother] stomach, you have been overcome and cannot see any sunshine or shadow [anymore].

If he to whom a stomach was given just fills his stomach, he cannot progress in the direction of the Brahman.

Until the stomach goes on, it keeps giving this exhortation: 'O sinner, nothing is like the stomach!'

If such activity of the stomach works day and night, through the stomach the supreme Lord cannot be achieved.

This idea of the entire existence being drenched with delusion due to the pines of desires had already been proposed by the *sant* poet Kabīr (1440–1518), who asserts that all the forms of existence are enmeshed in Māyā, even the gods, the *ṛṣīs*, and the *siddhas*, just because they have been endowed with a stomach.

कहि कबीर जिसय उदर तिसु माया । तब छूटै जब साधु पाया ॥

incorporated into the Upanisads or merely reflect the influence of ascetic ideologies on some segments of the ancient Vedic schools' (Olivelle 1992, 11-13).

15. Cf. Dāsa 1965–1975.

16. Cf. Agravāl 1950, 353. Interestingly, this stanza is in *indav savaiyā* metre, just like the one composed by Keśavdās on the topic of the stomach.

Says Kabīr, whoever has a belly to fill, is under the spell of Māyā.
He is emancipated only when he meets a saint.¹⁷

It is also said in VG that the only way to placate the craving of desire is to dwell on holy places and enjoy the company of saints which will help the mind to liberate itself from its lowest impulses.

In this regard, the third chapter of VG closes with a quotation from *Mahābhārata* 3.80.30 concerning the meritorious effects of *tīrthas* for salvation, while at the end of the story, having overwhelmed Tṛṣṇā and the craving of its stomach, the Self prepares to give rise to Prabodha and interrupt the cycle of rebirths. In fact, in PC 6.8, Puruṣa claims to have ‘torn asunder the spreading creepers of desire’ (*vighatītās tṛṣṇālatāvistarāḥ*),¹⁸ while in VG 16.104 Tṛṣṇā is compared to a large black bee shadowing the intellect until it rises up abandoning the lotus of the heart.¹⁹

2. Food in a materialistic perspective

A different interpretation of food is given in the seventh chapter of the VG, in the description of the heresies that spread everywhere during Delusion’s (Mahāmoha) rule. In the narrative, Faith (Śraddhā) has been kidnapped by Delusion (Mahāmoha), and now her daughter, Peace (Śānti), sets out to look for her with her friend Compassion (Karuṇā). While searching for her mother, she finds some heretics who try to cheat her. Here we find the Materialists (Cārvāka), who, as suggested by the very etymology of their name,²⁰ chew on the enjoyment of worldly pleasures coming from food, etc. as the ultimate purpose of human life. They do not accept any other religious or moral responsibility and savour food as the only reality in the world, since it enters the sphere of the object of knowledge, directly perceived through the organs of sense (*pratyakṣa*), which, in their opinion, is the only reliable means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*).

The context is a dialogue between a teacher and his pupil who discuss the inutility of abstaining from mundane pleasures like food and drinking to obtain

17. Dās 1970, 219. Curiously enough, the idea of being subject to one’s stomach is also present in another line from *pada* 156.1 by Kabīr (cf. Dās 1970, 240) where it is said *bhūkhe bhagatī na kijāi*, ‘I am so hungry, I cannot perform devotional worship’. This is probably also the source of a popular proverb sometimes attributed to some saint poet, *bhūkhe bhajan na hohi Gopālā*, ‘O lord! I can’t sing your praise on an empty stomach’ (Tivārī 1960, 879).

18. Cf. Nambiar 1998, 150-51.

19. *tṛṣṇā kṛṣṇā ṣaṭpadī bhaya bhramarāni matī maṇḍī. ko jāne kit uḍī gāi ḥṛday kamal ko choḍī*. Cf. Lāl 1993, 234.

20. In some etymological reconstructions the term is connected with the verb *carv*, which means ‘to chew, to grind with the teeth, to taste’. Cf. Chattopadhyaya 1992, 51-52; Dasgupta 1922, 79 and *Id.*, 1940, 512-50; Chattopadhyaya–Gangopadhyaya 1990.

an imaginary reward beyond this world, since what is not perceivable does not exist.

सिष्य

साँचो जो है जग खैबो रु पीबो । तौ यह झूठ तपोबल पैबो ।

चार्वाक

मूढ दुरास के मोदक खाहीं । सा²¹ मिस देखत नर्कहि जाहीं ॥ ६ ॥

6. Pupil (Śiṣya)

If only eating and drinking are real in the world, obtaining any strength by virtue of asceticism is nothing but a lie.

Materialist (Cārvāka)

These stupid men enjoy [literally: eat] the delicacies of vain hopes, but by such reason they will go [straight] to hell.

Instead of enjoying the pleasure of real food, the ascetics eat their vain hopes of liberation, which are ironically described as immaterial delicacies, and in so doing they act irresponsibly, wasting the most exquisite things in the world.²²

वै सिगरे मतिमूढ हैं अमल जलज मनि डारि ।

सीपिन के संग्रह करत केसवराय निहारी ॥ ९ ॥

9. They are completely foul since they throw away the most precious pearls, And they try – says Keśava – to gather shells.

3. Food and immorality

Among the innovations of the VG, we find a strange couple of heretics formed by a Śūdra and a Ṛṣi Nārīveṣa (dressed in the guise of a woman), who are missing in the Sanskrit PC. In his explanation of why the Ṛṣi is dressed like a woman, Keśavdās hints at his own cultural and historical period, and especially at the Rādhāvallabha *saṃpradāya* founded by Hita Harivaṃśa in the 16th century, which came to expand the group of unorthodox doctrines described in the text.²³ Under the pretext of taking part in the divine *līlā*, these heretics indulge in all kinds of mundane pleasures and consume even impure or prohibited

21. In accordance with the *dodhaka* metre (भ भ भ ग ग), I have emended the word *tapasā* occurring in Miśra's edition, which would be translated instead as 'by reason of asceticism'.

22. PC 2.23cd keeps a more appropriate alimentary metaphor: 'What man seeking his true interest would fling away the berries of paddy, rich with finest white grains, because they are covered with husks and dust' (Nambiar 1998, 43).

23. The devotees of the *Rādhāvallabha saṃpradāya* were supposed to dress as women to imitate the devotional approach (*mādhurya bhāva*) of the *gopīs* toward Kṛṣṇa. Cf. Snell 1991, 3.

food. These ingenuous and submissive devotees assume that any substance belonging to their pretended gurus will wash their sins away.

In VG chapter eight, the two friends Karuṇā and Śānti describe a fake preacher among his eager devotees as a *cakor* among the moons. These women are completely dedicated to him and are disposed to do anything to go to his dwelling and enjoy the pleasures of his *lilā*, as though they were his *gopīs*. They would even drink the water of his feet and eat his spit, and in the end, as a fee for his teachings, they would offer him a sip of the nectar of flowers from their lips.²⁴

करुणा

चंद्रमुखीन में चारु चकोर कि चंद्र चकोरन में रुचि रोहै ।
लोचन लोल कपोलनि मध्य बिलोकत यौं उपमा कहँ टोहै ।
सुंदरता सरसीन में मानहु मीन मनोजन के मन मोहै ।
मानिक सों मनिमंडल में कहि को यह बालबधून में सोहै ॥ ४२ ॥

Compassion (Karuṇā)

42. Is this a charming *cakor* bird among these moonfaced women or a moon shining among the *cakor* birds?

Looking at their trembling eyes and cheeks what similes could be found?

It is as though in the pond of beauty, the fishes of love obfuscate the mind.

Tell me who is he who shines among his friends as a ruby in a heap of jewels?

शांति

नित्यबिहारनि की मढी, त्रियगन देखि सिहाति ।
एक पियति चरनोदकनि, एक उगारनि खाति ॥ ४३ ॥
पुत्री दक्षिनराज की, आई तजि कुलतंत्र ।
देउ कृपा करि याहि प्रभु, नित्य बिहारी मंत्र ॥ ४४ ॥
सेवैगी तुमकों सदन, छोड़ि जु सबै बिकल्प ।
तन धन मन को प्रथम ही, करवाए संकल्प ॥ ४५ ॥
सिखए मंदिर माँझ लै, मोहन मंत्रबिधान ।
उन दीनी गुरुदक्षिना, सधर अधर मधुपान ॥ ४६ ॥

Peace (Śānti)

43. Looking at that cell of [this false preacher fond of] perpetual recreation these women are happy.

One drinks the water of [his] feet, one eats [his] vomit.

24. This passage echoes a similar description occurring in PC II.1, where Deceit (Dambha) proudly describes the swindlers of Vārāṇasī who, under his command, corrupt the other people: '[They] spend the moonlit nights in the house of courtesans and rejoice with intoxication the mouths of women which smell of liquor and delight in the sexual pleasures and in the day times pose that they know everything as performers of sacrifice, as those who perform Agnihotra Sacrifice for a long time, as knowers of Brahman, as austere people' (Nambiar 1998, 27).

44. [Even] the daughter of a [reputable] crafty king came to him, spoiling the decorum of her family.

‘Be graceful, o Lord, advise her to live in perpetual recreation.

45. This slave will serve you, abandoning any restraint,
Having committed previously her body, wealth and soul [to you].’

46. Having taught the prayers for Mohan and taken them to his dwelling,
They gave him as a reward to their guru a sip of the nectar of flowers with their lips.

These passages can be analysed in the light of the new emphases for food produced by the Bhakti movement locating ‘the otherworldly (the divine) within this world’ (Khare 1992, 210). In such a situation, food assumes new sensual, aesthetic, and culinary implications, since its salvific powers are bestowed as the blessings of a guru upon his disciples.

4. *Food as a way to asceticism*

Finally, in chapter nine of VG, after the fratricidal war, during which King Mind (Manas) has lost his son Delusion (Mahāmoha) and all his allies, he resolves to put an end to his life. Still, he is prevented from committing suicide, since he must accomplish his kingly duties and restore morality to his reign. It is recommended that he live with Contentment (Santoṣa) and be satisfied with simple and little food to purify himself.

In this case, eating with moderation – or even starving – is the way to enjoy the supreme bliss. The following statement is a piece of advice offered to King Mind (Manas) in order to attain liberation on a psychological and meta-physical plane. But it is also a practical recommendation for the king to enjoy his kingship and pursue a *dharmik rājya*. As Olivelle (1992, 37-38) has observed, the theology of renunciation arose from the 6th century BC as a radical challenge to the Vedic world and aligned to a new social system associated with the nobility and the kings. ‘In every case the value system of the Vedic world is inverted: wilderness over village, celibacy over marriage, economic inactivity over economic productivity, ritual inactivity over ritual performance, instability over stable residence’ (Olivelle 1992, 46). The Vedic ritual is internalized and sublimated in the renouncer’s body and ‘his eating becomes a sacrificial offering’ (Olivelle 1992, 68), because only through renunciation he can focus all his energies on achieving his supreme goals. The following stanzas are constructed with words from the semantic field of tasting and drinking, associated with self-restraint. This is an essential standard for the king in order to achieve spiritual

elevation and come to epitomize high moral principles with his own body and his conduct.²⁵

राजधर्म

भूलत जीव चिदानंद ब्रह्म समुद्र के स्वादहि सूंघत नाही ।
पीवै न वेद पुरान पुकारि पुकारि पिवावत हे बहुधाहीं ।
झूठे बिषै बिषसागर तुंग तरंगनि पीवतहीं न अघाहीं ।
मज्जत है उनमज्जत केसवदास बिलास बिनोद वृथाहीं ॥ ४६ ॥

King's duty (Rājadharma)

46. Once the Self (Jīva) forgets the *brahman* made of consciousness and joy, he cannot perceive the flavour of that sea [of bliss], He does not drink the water of *Vedas* and *Purāṇas*, even though they made him satiate by chanting and praying. He can even drink the highest waves of the sea of venom made of the deceitful object of senses, but his thirst is not [placated], He sinks in this vain pastime of pleasure – Keśav says – and never comes out.

राजा

को करिहै संग्राम में, लोभ मोह सारोष ।
उद्यम
ताकों राज प्रयोगियै, अब एकै संतोष ॥ ५६ ॥

King (Rājā)

56a. Who could engage in battle with Cupidity (Lobha), who has the fierceness to bewilder [his enemies]?
Udyama
56b. O king, only Contentment (Santoṣa) can be appointed.

संतोष

निर्मल नीर नदीन के पानि बनी फल मूल भखे तन पोख्यौ ।
सेज सिलान पलास के डासन डासि कै केसव काज संतोष्यौ ।
यौं मिलि बुद्धि बिलासन सों निसिबासर राम के नाम निघोख्यौ ।
राज तुम्हारे प्रताप कृसानु दहूँ दिसि लोभ समुद्रनि सोख्यौ ॥ ५७ ॥

25. In the original Sanskrit text (PC IV 19-23), Contentment (Santoṣa) comes to the royal court to describe to the king how he destroyed Cupidity (Lobha). He declares that since in the forest every fruit is available to one's own desire, 'only people who are void of judgment suffer distress at the door of rich people' (Nambiar 1998, 109). He then proclaims the futility of greed for wealth which quickly disappears, stressing on the need for people to be content with or maybe resign themselves to the meagre resources they have, not seeking something they cannot afford. In a radically different perspective, probably influenced by the ideal of the ascetic sovereign which became so popular in medieval *sūfī* literature, Keśavdās transforms this passage into a kind of moral and political advice for the king.

Contentment (Santoṣa)

57. Drinking the pure water of the rivers and eating the fruits of creepers and some roots, I nourished my body,

Laying a sheet of *palāśa* leaves on a bed of stones, I fulfilled my duty.

Joining people satisfied in their mind, I remembered the name of Rāma in night and morning prayers.

O King, with the flame of your vigour, I soaked up everywhere the sea of Cupidity (Lobha).

उद्यम

अपने दल बल समुद्भिष्यै, रे भट आलस छोडि ।

प्रभु की तुम पाषंड पुर, फेरौ प्रतिदिन डोंडि ॥ ५९ ॥

Effort (Udyama)

59. Oh soldiers, abandon any indolence in fighting and demonstrate your own strength!

Conquer the city of the heretics and make the fanfare of your lord resound every day.

Conclusion

As we have tried to highlight in this paper, the themes of eating and fasting assume an emblematic function in Keśavdās's VG, since food, which is symbolically considered as the cause of binding to the *saṃsāra*, becomes the instrument to train one's own moral strength. If the appeasement of one's own appetites, and metaphorically the fulfillment of one's own desires, is ruled only through the stomach it becomes deleterious. On the contrary, if it is filtered through judgment, it is sublimated into a practice (*sādhana*) that releases the self from its own desires and achieves the highest bliss.

As already observed by Olivelle (2011, 89), this ambivalence towards food is a hallmark of Hindu ascetic attitude, since '[i]t values and devalues food. Food is life and death, happiness and suffering. Food is to be worshipped as a god and to be shunned like a demon. It nourishes and it entraps'. Incidentally, the association between the supreme joy belonging to the *brahman* and some terms pertaining to the ambit of eating is well-established in Indian philosophical speculation. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, for example, the *brahman* is described as *rasa* (*raso vai saḥ*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.7, p. 82). Later on, in the aesthetic speculation of Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka and Abhinavagupta,²⁶ the realization of the

26. As universally agreed upon from Bharata onwards, the aesthetic experience is based on the enjoyment of the *rasa*, which is a kind of emotional flavour. Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka (935–985) introduces a dimension of universality theorizing a process of idealization or generalization (*bhāvakatva*), which dispels the delusion of the spectator's mind. This allows him to relish the

brahman is described as *brahmāsvāda*, and compared to the aesthetic experience (*rasāsvāda*), since it is a particular form of tasting of mental order. The difference with the material act of eating resides in the fact that, while in eating, he who eats may be *anyacitta* and think of other things – especially other desires to satisfy –, in this spiritual tasting, the mind of he who tastes is *ekāgra*, i.e. absorbed in the object of tasting without any other sensory perception, and in this condition, the subject is immersed in a supreme bliss (*camatkāra*), apart from any distinction of ‘self’ and ‘others’.²⁷

rasa through a process of delectation (*bhogakatva*), which is characterized by a state of mental peacefulness having the same nature of the joy of illumination (Walimbe 1980, 38-40). This opens the way to Abhinavagupta’s (975–1025) concept of *camatkāra*, comparing the enjoyment of the *rasa* to the bliss of the highest spiritual experience (Gnoli 1985²).

27. Gnoli 1985², 54-55.

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