

Foods and Drinks in Ancient Kashmir*

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Abstract: *the people of Kashmir were both vegetarian and non vegetarian. Rice was the staple food. Animals like sheep, goat, fish, water and land birds like sparrow, doves and other animals were killed and allowed to be taken for food. Kashmir has been from the early times famous for its different varieties of fruits. wine was very popular, and it was enjoyed equally by members of both the sexes and of all ranks.*

Key words: Daniya, Sesame, fruits, wine, pulses, vegetables, Kacchaguccha, Upalhakh, betal- leaves.

Considerable care and attention was paid by the people of Kashmir to foods and drinks during the period under review. In fact food was supposed to be an important factor and had, from the beginning, been regarded as the governing factor of human longevity.¹

For the sake of convenience, the eating habits of the people may be dealt with in two broad group's viz., the vegetarians and non vegetarians and account for their habits regarding their foods and drinks. This division too is qualified by regional peculiarities which are mostly governed by the agricultural produce, climatic conditions and other factors involved in it. For example, the people inhabiting the mountainous terrains of the north-west, Kashmir and the Punjab differed widely in their food habits from those living in the lower delta of the Ganga or Bengal and eastern-Bihar²

The art of cooking attained a high degree of perfection in early Kashmir. It was considered to be one of the most important and appreciable art cultivated by women in

¹ R. C. Majumdar, *The age of imperial unity* , pp. 554-55

² These peculiarities are to be noted even in the *Mahabharata*. Perhaps it was with an eye on regional considerations that the later commentators particularly Vijnanesvara and Bhavadeva Bhatta made certain concessions in food habits of the people. T. N. Pandey., *journal of the U. P. Historical Society*, Vol. XIV, p. 140.

ancient times. Women used to acquire efficiency in the art and learnt how to cook innumerable variety of foods, which were eaten by chewing, licking and drinking.

From the very antique in Kashmir rice was the staple food. Damodaragupta refers to three different varieties of paddy, viz., *Sali*³, *Kalama*⁴ and *Anu*. 'Danya' (rice crop) and *Sali* have often been mentioned in the early literature of the valley. The scarcity of this commodity invariably resulted in famine.⁵ The *Nilmatpurana* and *Narmamala* (by Kshemandra) speak of the various preparations made from rice for example, boiled rice, cakes of rice or barley mixed with ghee, flattened rice, the eating of which was prohibited in the day time, and milk porridge of rice mixed with purified butter.⁶ They prepared Apupas modern Kulcha out of rice and barley mixture. Adding honey to this flour, it was given the shape of a round cake and then baked in clarified butter on slow fire.⁷

Pulses too were in use during this time. Damodaragupta in his *Kuttamitakavya* speaks of three kinds of pulses, *Kulattha*⁸ (*Dolichos uniflorus*) *Chanah* (horse gram) and *Masura* (*Ervum hirstum*).⁹ Kshemandra mentions a fourth Variety called *Mudga*.¹⁰ According to Damodaragupta beggars and ordinary travelers, who received these different sorts of rice and pulses as alms from different houses had to eat them mixed up together¹¹. *Mudga* seems to have been more popular for the convalescents as it is easily digested.¹² Gram was used for the preparation of both vegetarian and non vegetarian dishes. The literature of the period reveals that *urad* (pulse), *munga* (green grain) and Pease were used

³ It corresponds to the transplanted variety now called *jadahan*.

⁴ According to Monier Williams (*Sanskrit_ English Dictionary*), it is now sown in May or June and harvested in December or January.

⁵ P.N.K.Bamzai, *Political and cultural History of Kashmir*, Vol-I p. 261.

⁶ M.L.Kapur, *Kingdom of Kashmir*, p. 249.

⁷ Ibid, p 381

⁸ Now called *kulathi*.

⁹ A. M. Shastri, *India as seen in the kuttani-mata of damodaragupta*, p 131

¹⁰ R.C.Ray, *Early History and Culture of Kashmir.*, p. 280.

¹¹ A. M Shastri *op.cit* p131

¹² Y. B. Singh., *Social life in Ancient India*, p.104

as pulse, and in the preparation of many other dishes. *krulth*, *chana*, and *masura* were popular pulses in Kashmir in the Gangetic valley and in Gujarat¹³.

Milk was also one of the principle items of diet, literature of the period reveals that peasants and herdsmen supplied milk, butter, ghee to the people, and it was consumed in various forms. Ksemendra mentions milk and milk items include milk, *ksira* i.e., *kheera* (made of milk and rice), curds, and lassi (curd and water)¹⁴. Many sweet dishes were prepared from milk like *Ksirprakara*, *Ksirvata* and *Ksirayastika*. ghee, milk, garlic, onion were considered as energy giving¹⁵. Barley was poor man's food. "Sesames (*tila*) were especially taken on certain special days, such as the festival of *Tiladevadasi*."¹⁶

Vegetables from the land were also of great source of subsistence. These were essential for preparation of one's food. The common took the leaves of *Utpalaska* (*kashmiri wopalhak*), which tasted bitter, other nutritious vegetables were *Kacchaguccha* (*modern kachdan*) and *sanda* (*kashmiri hund*) they were not so tasty but were consumed, as these had medicinal properties.¹⁷ As Kashmir falls in the cold Himalayan region, meat was generally eaten. The *Nilmatapurana* prescribed it on certain festival days, and enjoins it to be offered to gods.

Besides above, a large variety of Vegetables were widely grown, and they find mention in the literature of the period. The use of garlic and onions seem to have been favored in the western parts of the country, particularly in Kashmir¹⁸. It was supposed to be an expression of honor if onion was presented to the teachers or to the elders though this practice did not find favor elsewhere in the country¹⁹. Amongst vegetables the bottle gourd, cucumber, radish, brinjal, various types of beans, carrots, etc., were commonly

¹³ Dr. Kamala Chauhan, *Cultural History of Northern India*, p. 85

¹⁴ Sarla Khosla, *Ksemendra and his times*, p 154

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ M.L.Kapor, *Kingdom of Kashmir*, Srinagar, 2005, p. 249.

¹⁷ . S.L. Shali, *Op.Cit.* P. 317.

¹⁸ R T*, vii, 522

*R.T- KALHANA'S RAJATRANGINI, TRANSLATED BY M. A. STEIN

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 143

used. Mustered stalks were generally taken during winter. Some fruits, leaves, roots and legumes of many plants were also used as vegetables²⁰. The herb, now known as *Upalhak*, grows abundantly on the mountain slopes of Kashmir and forms one of the commonest vegetable of the Kashmir cuisine.²¹

Though, India is generally believed to have led the world in vegetarianism since very early times, the evidence of literature, epigraphs and sculptures of the period points to non-vegetarianism as well. Among the non-vegetables, mutton was freely taken by people as Kashmir falls in the cold Himalayan region; the fact that the *Nilmatapurana* found it necessary to proscribe meat eating on the days dedicated to Vishnu's worship indicates the popularity of animal food in ancient Kashmir²². In the 13th century A.D. Marco Polo found that flesh with rice and other food grains formed the principal food of the Kashmiri's²³. Animals like sheep, goat, fish, water and land birds like sparrow, doves and other animals were killed and allowed to be taken for food. Fragrant and tasteful curry of bird and goat meat was very much liked. The literature of the period mentions various kinds of preparations of meat. Meat of fowls and rams was also eaten²⁴. Various edible birds too were massacred.²⁵ According to Kalhana, domestic pigs were eaten in Kashmir without any adverse notice²⁶. People of valley besides all these diets; eat fried meat with high spices. Ksemendra in his works mentions many a times about meat eaters and meat. He writes that the meat of a lamb or a he goat was taken by the students²⁷

Consumption of meat juice (*mamsa rasa*) is said to cure bodily pain. Prostitutes consumed meat soup for removing the body ache caused by wanton sexual intercourse with men. Ksemenrda in his *Deopadesa* also states that a prostitute regains youth by

²⁰ Sarla Khosla, *op.cit.*, p 154.

²¹ S.C.Ray, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-50.

²² Ved kumara, *Nilmatapurana*, p119

²³ Henry Yule, *Travels of Marco Polo*, p 166

²⁴ M. Kaul., *Narmala of Ksemendra* p124

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 249-50.

²⁶ R. T., v, 119; vii, 1149.

²⁷ Sarla Khosla *op.cit* p155

consuming fish juice, ghee, milk and onions. Kalhana also mentions fish-broth as an aphrodisiac²⁸.

Of the animals whose flesh was consumed particular reference is made to the fish. It was largely consumed in the Kashmir valley²⁹. Damodragupta describes the manner of catching, cooking and eating the fish. A snare stained with fish was thrown into the water; when the fish was thus caught, it was cooked with spice; after eating the flesh, its internal organs, skin and bones were thrown away³⁰. Fish-juice (*Matseyayusa*) was considered to be a particularly strength giving tonic food. The Gauda student of *matha* cooks the fish himself and eats after keeping fast for the whole day. This soup was perhaps prepared with fish and onion and was a favorite in Kashmir³¹.

It should, however, be noted that regional considerations were also responsible for non-vegetarianism to a great extent among the masses dwelling in different parts of the country. People inhabiting the regions watered by the lower Ganga were in the habit of eating fish; those in the north-west and Kashmir had to depend on meat in the absence of pulses and lack of other staple cereals³².

For the preparation of good food, spices and condiments were used. The literature of our period supply information about the various spices that were used in the diet. The merchants trading in salt, pepper, ginger and vegetables, which were collectively *Kirana*. Thus it is clear that spices were mixed, up to make food more tasteful and they were used along with ghee and oil for preparation of vegetables, fish and meat.³³ Black pepper, ginger, salt, *jayaphala* and *catika* (*cataru*) were used³⁴. Oil formed a staple article for food.

²⁸ R. T., vii. 522

²⁹ R. T., . v 119.

³⁰ A. M. Shastri *op.cit* p132

³¹ Sarla Kosha *op.cit* p155

³² R. C. Majumdar, *History of Bengal*, pp. 611-12

³³ Sarla Kosha *op.cit* p154

³⁴ *Ibid.*

As in rest of India, so in Kashmir has been from the early times famous for its different varieties of fruits. Kalhan even goes to the extent of saying that the grapes, which are scarce even in heaven, were common in Kashmir.³⁵ The *Nilmatapurana* also refers to it.³⁶ In the primeval times grapes were found in plenty in *Martand* but was later restricted to areas around the Dal shores. Besides, grapes, pomegranate was another fruit which was common in the valley. Fruits which are famous nowadays like apple, Pears, walnuts, strawberries may have been an ancient history because in the texts names of the different fruits are rarely mentioned, and was lavishly consumed by the people of the valley. There are several references in *Rajatarangini* to people men and women, who were addicted to drink.³⁷ The popularity of wine in Kashmir is evident from the fact that on certain religious festivals like the new snowfall day, the second Mahimana and the Iramanjari-pujana the drinking of wine is recommended in the *Nilmatapurana*.³⁸ Though drinking wine has been condemned by our ancient law givers, we have innumerable examples, which prove that wine was very popular, and it was enjoyed equally by members of both the sexes and of all ranks. In spite of sastric injunctions forbidding the Brahmans from taking wine, we notice that the Brahmans had been taking to drinking during the period under review. In the *Kuttanimatam* we read of Brahmana youth wasting their time in drinking (in the company of dancing girls)³⁹. In *Kalavilasa* Ksemendra narrates many types of intoxications, passions, betel, wine, women, gambling, hunting and drinking⁴⁰. In *Narmamala* in the yajna performed by kayastha, guru takes food and wine with his followers, he drinks so much that losing self-control, dances along with all intoxicated men and women⁴¹. 'Juices from grape and sugarcane, both of which grew in the valley, were distilled into spirituous

³⁵ *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh* (compiled under the direction of quarter master general in India in Intelligence branch, Vivek Publication, Delhi, 1974), p. 8.

³⁶ R. T., VOL-I P. 42.

³⁷ P.N.K.Bamzai, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

³⁸ Ved kumara *Nilmatapurana* p.83

³⁹ Dr. kamala chauhan, *op.cit.*, p.88.

⁴⁰ Sarla kosha *op.cit* p156

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

liquors',⁴² A cold, sweet drink (Tuhina Sarkaran), mentioned by Kalhana, which was taken with great delight in hot summer days.

Prostitutes were particularly addicted to drinking which imparted fragrance and a coppery complexion to the face. Men were very anxious to share of the wine offered by their beloved after she had tasted it⁴³.

Ksemendra mentions wine and meat and pitchers full of wine from which wine could be taken again and again. Taking wine to the point of losing self-control is also alluded to divara intoxicated danced naked, and the broken wine pitchers lay by his side. Wine mixed with *kasturi* (more intoxicating) was also taken. Wine was prepared from grapes⁴⁴.

It may be noted that people were generally in the habit of taking betel-leaves along with the customary ingredients of lime, catechu and areca-nuts. This was supposed to help in digesting food and at the same time strengthening the gums and the teeth. Alberuni noted that the teeth of the people were generally colored because of their habit of chewing betel-leaves⁴⁵. The *Rajatrangini* refers to a betel-leaf dealer who became an intimate of a king of Kashmir because of his supplying these to his court from far-off regions⁴⁶. It seems to be imported from outside, as betel-leaves were supplied to king Ananta by a merchant who imported them⁴⁷.

⁴² S.C.Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁴³ A. M. Shastri, *op.cit.*, p132.

⁴⁴ Sarla kosha *op.cit.* , p. 156

⁴⁵ E. C. Sachau., *Alberuni's india*, p 180

⁴⁶ R. T., VII, 190-93

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*