

# Food Symbolism in Hindu Nepal

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Cultural symbols that derive from food and eating pervade high caste Hindu society in Nepal. A very similar preoccupation with food has been noted for other Hindu areas as well. Dumont (1970: 139) for instance, wrote of India that "psychologically and linguistically, there is considerable accent on 'the eating'." Along with Dumont, Stevensen (1954), Mayer (1970) and Marriott (1959) (1968) have discussed Hindu distinctions in food in relation to purity, pollution and caste ranking. Beals (1962: 20-22) refers to an association between food and social control in a village of South India. Eichinger Ferro-Ldzzi (1977) has suggested that ritual food offerings in South India are complex communicative acts that can be analyzed much like language. Perhaps the most exhaustive discussion of food use and its symbolic importance in a Hindu area comes in recent works by Khare (1976<sup>a</sup>, 1976<sup>b</sup>) in North India.<sup>2</sup>

My material on Hindu food symbolism in Nepal is based on my fieldwork in the rural community of Dhungagaun<sup>3</sup> located in the hills of Central Nepal. Brahmans and Chhetris predominate in Dhungagaun, although there are a number of other groups settled there, notably Thakuri, Jaisi, Magar, and Newar, as well as untouchable groups like Kami and Damai. Settled slightly above this village but in constant contact with it are the Tamangs -- a Tibeto-Burman speaking group. All of these groups practice farming, are patrilineal-virilocal and, with the exception of the Buddhist Tamangs, follow Hindu religious practices.

In Dhungagaun, the villagers' persistent symbolic use of food is apparent to even a casual visitor. The standard verbal greeting there is "bhāt khānubhāyo?" (have you eaten boiled rice?). And any discussion with elders about the old days will immediately bring forth references to food as a criterion for "the good life." Ideas about modernization and its attendant ambiguities are also expressed in an idiom of food. For instance, one Brahman informant described himself to me as a "a modern man" because he would eat anything he liked regardless of his caste-determined food prohibitions. A few days later this same informant commented to me that certain lower caste groups lag behind others in modern advancement because "they drink liquor" and "eat dead cow."

In Dhungagaun, as in Brahman-Chhetri society generally, there are additional social, ritual and linguistic ways in which "food and eating" emerge as potent symbolic markers. With food, gods are worshipped, ancestors sustained, and malignant spirits pacified. Certain foods and the act of eating may be ritually polluting, and the denial of food (fasting) is a form of purification, necessary before virtually any religious ritual. Equally notable, it is through food that caste status and some kinship statuses are distinguished.

I offer here an interpretation of food symbolism among Brahmans and Chhetris, based on comparisons, I have made on the use of food in various realms of Brahman-Chhetri life -- notably intercaste and interpersonal relationships, kinship, and finally, illness beliefs and practices. I will attempt to show that there is a consistency in the use of food symbols throughout these different cultural realms. These patterns then suggest a broader interpretation of how food symbols become a medium through which certain basic ideological principles of Brahman-Chhetri society are expressed. Specifically, rules of food transfer appear to simultaneously mark hierarchical relationships between people and to symbolize an interdependency among them. In addition, food use and references to food become a rhetoric not only of the proper social order of hierarchical, interdependent relationships, but also of conflicts and failings in society. This latter dimension of the symbolic role of food is most clearly expressed in local beliefs about illness and curing.

My information on food symbolism in Nepalese Hindu society is admittedly incomplete, and certainly I have attempted nothing comparable to the detailed observations by Khare (1976<sup>a</sup>) in North India. The interpretations I offer, then, are tentative and subject to modification with new or more detailed information.

#### Intercaste and Interpersonal Food

Students of Hindu India have discussed numerous attributes (all involving distinctions of purity and pollution) which serve to distinguish castes. These include occupations, diet, and caste customs like widow remarriage, wearing the sacred thread, etc. In his article, "Interactional and Attributional Theories of Caste Ranking" (1959), Marriott demonstrates that these attributional criteria do not produce a logical system of ranking which correlates with real rankings of castes on the ground. In place of the attributional model of caste ranking, he proposes an interactional one, whereby the basis for a local caste ranking is the pattern of exchanges (in food and services) which occur between castes, with food transfers being "more decisive for establishing rank" (1959: 96).

Marriott has, for our purposes, drawn attention to food transference as an operational criterion by which Hindu society defines its local caste hierarchy. The place of food transfers in the ideology and practice of ranking in Dhungagaun seems to me particularly important. First, Dhungagaun villagers explicitly refer to food transfers as the principle means by which the caste hierarchy is operationalized; and secondly, in Dhungagaun, as with Nepal generally, caste-determined service relationships are far fewer than in rural India.

An important food distinction which has bearing on the caste hierarchy is that between raw and cooked foods.<sup>4</sup> In terms of exchangeability, the line between raw and cooked parallels the distinction between touchable and untouchable castes (Kami and Damai in Dhungagaun). Untouchable groups may exchange raw foods with all touchable castes; but

they may only be receivers of cooked foods from touchable groups, who will not, in turn, accept cooked food from them. For this reason, Marriott (1959: 97) has appropriately called raw foods "the food of gifts" as they may be freely exchanged without threat to relative purity and caste rank.

A second major food distinction that underlies caste rank is that which divides dāl bhāt (boiled rice and lentils) from all other foods. Dāl bhāt, often referred to simply as bhāt, is synonymous with the concept of 'a meal'. As has been repeatedly noted for Hindu areas of both Nepal and India, bhāt is highly vulnerable to pollution. The eating of bhāt is a polluting act; and among high castes (whose male members wear the sacred thread) elaborate precautions must be made before the serving and consuming of bhāt in the home (see Dumont, 1970: 138-139). (Fig. 1)

It is this same every day food that is crucial to intercaste relations. The rule of bhāt transfer between castes is simple and clear: High castes may publically serve bhāt to lower castes and not the reverse. A person may receive bhāt from fellow caste members or from members of a caste which he recognizes as higher than his own. Any public failure to observe these restrictions results in loss of caste (the violator must assume the caste of the person whose bhāt, he ate, and his former caste mates will no longer accept his bhāt.<sup>5</sup> Thus in any public, multicaste context where food is served (for example at weddings) Brahman cooks & servers are a necessity. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 The daily bhāt meal in a high caste home.



Fig. 2  
Brahmans serving food at a wedding feast.

That caste standing is defined in terms of who takes what food from whom is made explicit as an idea by all my informants in Dhungagaun. On the other hand, there is some disagreement on the relative ranking of castes in the middle levels, between the universally accepted positions of Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Rank is further disputed within the untouchable level.

Along with Brahmins, the Chhetri, Thakuri and Jaisi groups are classed as tagadhari (those who wear the sacred thread). Some members of these castes, while not explicitly asserting that they are "higher than" another group, do claim that they will only accept bhāt from their own group or from Brahmins. By orthodox Hindu ideology, all tagadhari rank above another group of touchable Nepalese castes called matwali ("liquor-drinking" castes; groups like Tamang, Magar, Gurung, etc.). In Dhungagaun, many Tamangs and other matwali will accept the bhāt of any tagadhari caste; but some local matwali, notably the Magars, claim they will only accept bhāt from their own group and from Brahmins. Finally, the untouchable Kami and Damai accept bhāt from any touchable caste but do not accept it from each other.

Thus there is no detailed hierarchy of agreed ranks for all castes; and there is no pattern of actual boiled rice transfers by which we could plot a food chain linking all castes. Although Brahmins regularly serve rice to all other castes, and all touchable castes serve rice to untouchables, some middle groups do not link themselves to one another

through rice transfers. This does not amount to cases of overt disputed rank, but rather the relative ranking of these groups is simply not made an issue. In these cases the significance of boiled rice is in its strategic absence.

There are other "food" rules which serve to mark caste boundaries, and these mostly involve the extreme ends of the hierarchy. For example, in Dhungagaun cigarettes and hookha pipes (even if smoked by cupping the hand over the mouthpiece) are not shared between Brahmans and non-Brahmans. All other touchable castes may share them; but no person of touchable caste can share them with an untouchable. Also water may be given and received between all touchable castes, but these castes cannot receive water from untouchables.<sup>6</sup>

With careful attention to these food rules, a great deal of food sharing and exchanging between castes can and does take place. This suggests that food exchanges have social uses aside from that of articulating caste distinctions. At the same time, since all food exchanges must (and do) publically take place with careful attention to these rules, an allusion to caste divisions is continually present.

There are several contexts of intercaste food transfer which reflect the extra-caste uses of food and at the same time serve as a continual reference to the ritual hierarchy of caste. Between castes, food may be used as payment for services. In cases where the caste standing of the giver is unequivocally high and that of the receiver low, bhāt is given. Hence it is customary for high castes to provide a bhāt meal for members of the untouchable service castes who come to work for them; and Brahmans may provide bhāt for any hired labourer. In reverse, Brahman priests are "paid" in raw foodstuffs by non-Brahman clients, but regularly take bhāt in the homes of their fellow Brahmans on the day that they perform a service for them.

Food may also be used to honour or please another -- hence, in some contexts to influence another or put pressure on him to reciprocate the honour by performing a particular favour. In this case, the more delectible "special foods" (foods that are fried in ghee rather than oil or food cooked in milk) are most appropriate. The use of these foods to please, honour or influence another is somewhat similar to one's attempt to please, honour or solicit help from the gods through the ritual feeding of equally pure (chokho) and delectible foods. One offers these "special foods" to another as a sign that he recognizes the honourific status of the other, or, in some contexts, as a means of establishing a more intimate social link with the other. Here, if the other person accepts the offered special foods, he is agreeing to allow this linkage, and a refusal would imply that he does not wish to promote such intimacy or place himself in a position where certain later requests or favours will be asked of him.<sup>7</sup>

Another closely related category of foods that carry clear communicative value in Brahman-Chhetri society are "rich" foods (generally prepared with large quantities of milk or ghee to which substances like sugar or honey are added) or simply any particularly sweet foods (mithai). Significantly, as we shall see later, these foods are also considered nutritious and strength-giving. But most important here, as Bennett has noted (1976: 41), is that these foods serve as vehicles of affection (maya) and concern for another. Rich, sweet foods are given to help one recover from illness; they are particularly given to women who have just given birth. Sweets are the food that husbands "sneak" to their wives as a private gesture of affection and approval (Bennett, 1976: 52). Sweets are regularly given to children, often as a means of rewarding them or encouraging good behaviour; and sweets are also often presented to household members by a married daughter returning to visit her beloved parental home.

The relation between caste, interpersonal relationships and food is complex. Whereas rules of bhāt transfer mark caste separation, many foods are freely exchanged between castes and eaten together by members of different castes. And with respect to the ritually significant bhāt, Stevenson (1954: 53) made the important point that "the fact that most endogamous groups will eat food cooked by higher status groups emphasizes the unity of the caste system as a whole, while defining status gradations within it." Similar ideas on food and caste in Hindu areas have been presented by Dumont (1970: 30).

Food, then, connects as much as it distinguishes. In the realm of intercaste/interpersonal relationships we find that food emerges as a symbol of interconnection as much as of hierarchy.

### Kinship and Food

In the intercaste context of Nepalese Hindu society, it is clear that bhāt transfers are governed by one single principle: high feeds low. Here, "to feed" is to be ritually "more pure than". When we move into the intercaste realm, particularly within the endogamous group and within close circles of kinsmen, we find that bhāt transfers are also used to mark status distinctions. But in this intercaste realm, some transfers are governed by a reverse of the principle employed between castes -- i.e., low feeds high. This direction maintains in at least two contexts, both of which are evident in Dhungagaun and are known from India: 1) at a wedding, and in patterns that persist after the wedding, the bride's family (low) feeds bhāt to the groom's family (high), whereas the reverse cannot take place. In particular, a bride's father and brothers must not accept bhāt or any other food from their son-in-law's house (at least until their daughter has born a child) whereas it is important for them to feed the son-in-law whenever he visits their home. 2) A wife (low), by duty feeds her husband (high), and his family (high), although she may also be fed by them (but see p. 53).

The matter of the bride's family feeding the groom's family (and not the reverse) appears curious on first sight because studies of caste in Hindu areas have made us used to the idea of higher status groups feeding lower status groups. Dumont discusses the feeding rules established in marriage and resolves this problem (the "problem" remaining implicit in his discussion) by claiming that the transferred food is an extension of the "gift" of the bride. Food is a gift that accompanies the bride and which, like the kanyādān (gift of the virgin) must not be returned. Here Dumont is suggesting that we view the wedding food (even the bhāt) not in relation to ritual hierarchy, but as a simple, non-returnable gift. But then he goes on to refer to a ceremonial "morning collation" offered to the groom, and here ritual rank and hierarchy are suddenly back again:

... the tradition is that the bridegroom does not accept [the morning collation] until he has been entreated at length. Here the bridegroom's superior rank betrays itself: to agree to eat food with somewhat inferior people, the bridegroom claims a present (*italics mine*) (Dumont, 1970: 138).

Here the wedding food is no longer a simple gift; rather the bridegroom is "agreeing to eat with somewhat inferior people" and somehow "claiming a present" to diffuse this awkward reversal of direction. In the end it is unclear what meaning any of the wedding food transfers have.

I would suggest that the food transfers established at marriage can be consistently interpreted within the framework of "food marks hierarchy" but that there may be an important difference in the meaning of food, especially bhāt, when we move from the intercaste to the intercaste realm of affinal kinsmen. In my view, the bride's family, rather than saying, as it were, "take this food along with the bride and give us nothing in return" may be saying "as our daughter shall stand to your son as feeder within the household (low), so shall we stand to you as feeder within the endogamous group." Here "to feed" is to be subservient to. And the hierarchy that is marked by these rules of intercaste bhāt transfer appears to be based not on relative purity, as in the intercaste realm, but on relations of prescribed respect-giving and respect-receiving.

Within the Brahman-Chhetri kinship hierarchy, the feeding of bhāt would seem to be associated with the duty to nourish. There is a stress on the feeder "being pure enough" (for example a man cannot publically accept bhāt cooked by a lower caste wife and a menstruating woman cannot cook or serve bhāt to anyone) but clearly it is not important for the feeder to be "more pure than" the person fed, as is the rule of intercaste feeding.<sup>8</sup> In fact, bhāt feeding among kin of one caste is at least in some contexts more comparable to the giving of a service in the intercaste realm.

This link between kinship and sustenance or duty to nourish also extends beyond this life and into the afterworld; for it is a profound religious duty for a son to ritually feed his parents, as in the annual srāddha ceremony.<sup>9</sup> And here again a substance somewhat comparable to bhāt is used. In srāddha, descendants offer a pinda (rice ball) to their deceased kinsmen. Although the pinda is certainly not the same as the bhāt served in everyday meals, it is made with boiled rice (to which, albeit, "pure" substances like milk and yoghurt are added). More important than the boiled rice component, however, is that informants say the pinda is "like bhāt" or that it is their (the ancestors') bhāt. As one Dhungagaun priest explained to me, one earth-year is equivalent to one day in the pitrilok (abode of the dead). Thus as the living feed their ancestors once every earth-year, the srāddha constitutes a daily bhāt meal to the deceased.

Significantly, this extension into death of the duty to nourish close kinsmen reverses the actors: in life, parents sustain children; in death, children (more accurately, sons) sustain parents. Actually, this parent-son reversal in "duty to feed" is more often a gradual process that begins before the death of the parents. It may start with the partition of an older man's estate, when his sons divide their inheritance and separate their households. Here the elderly parents will be maintained in the household of one of the sons, whose duty it will be to care for them. Villagers consistently express this eventual reliance on sons as a nutritive dependency: "Who shall feed us when we are old if not our sons?"

Thus, in some contexts, the feeding of bhāt shows contrasts in both direction and in meaning when we compare the intercaste with the intracaste realm. There is, however, one food transfer among close kin which is directly comparable to the transfer of bhāt between castes: the transfer of jutho food (polluted food, i.e., food that has been partially eaten and so contaminated by one's saliva, the pollution extending to any plates, cups, etc., used by the eater). To receive another's jutho food is a very clear mark of one's inferiority. Perhaps the clearest expression of this is in man's worshipping of the gods, where the offered foods become the jutho of the gods and are then consumed (as prasād) by the devotees.

Among close agnatic male kinsmen, jutho food can only be transferred from high to low, following the agnatic hierarchy which is based on age. For instance a son can take the jutho food of his father, and not the reverse; and a younger brother can take the jutho food of the elder brother, and not the reverse. In fact, jutho exchanges only take place among very close kinsmen, and this does not necessarily persist far into adulthood. But in the case of husband and wife, the jutho transfers are persistent and more revealing. A woman may eat the jutho food of her husband, and not the reverse. And not only may a woman partake of her husband's jutho food, she must do so. After her husband has eaten, a Brahman or Chhetri woman does not take a clean plate for herself but must eat off her husband's jutho plate.



The inferiority of a woman to her husband, as expressed in jutho transference, is first established in the wedding ceremony. After the main wedding rituals have been performed, the bride and groom carry out a special rite called jutho khāne (eating the jutho). Here the groom eats a bit of kasar (a sweetmeat) and gives the remains to his bride. This is a ritual acknowledgement of the bride's inferior status and marks the beginning of her duty to eat only from her husband's jutho plate in the home.

Taking some of these food rules together, a set of equivalences emerges: man is to god as wife is to husband as low caste is to high. In terms of the foods used, prasād between men and gods is like jutho food between husband and wife is like bhāt between castes.

### Circles of Food: Interdependency Amid Hierarchy

These observations bring us closer to understanding the ways in which foods serve to define various human interactions and to specify what kinds of relationships individuals and groups bear to one another. Amid the variety of foods used and the different meanings of particular food transfers, there is one theme discernible throughout most food exchanges in Dhungagaun: in marking hierarchical distinctions, the rules of food transfer simultaneously reflect interdependency. 'A' depends on 'B' for food, and by tracing through the connection, we find that 'B' is linked back again to 'A'. In effect there are "circles" by which people are linked together and the linkage is symbolically expressed in an idiom of food.

Three such "circles" are evident from the material presented here. First, in a real and obvious sense, a son depends on his parents for food. But "food" in this link assumes a new significance when in old age and in death it is reversed and the parents become dependent on their sons for food. A circle is formed; parents feed sons who then feed parents. Secondly, a mutual dependence is evident in the inter-caste realm where bhāt is used as payment for services. For services, high castes depend on low castes who then depend on high castes for their food. Finally, with the rule of jutho food transfer between husband and wife, it follows that if 'A' can take the jutho food of 'B' and not the reverse, then 'B' can determine how much of a certain food 'A' receives (or even if 'A' receives any). As Bennett (personal communication) reports, husbands may consume the better quality foods at meals, leaving little for their wives; or, as a special token of affection, the husband may thoughtfully leave some better quality food on his plate for his wife to eat. Thus the husband and wife are locked into a kind of circle similar to that between high castes and low castes and to that between parents and children. The husband depends on the wife to cook and serve his bhāt. And the wife depends on the husband for the quantity and quality of her portion of the food she has just served to him.

In these realms of caste and kinship, food symbolically separates statuses and then links people back together again. Hierarchy and interdependency are expressed at once and this is consistent with the equally hierarchical and interdependent socio-economic links between people in Dhungagaun. Sons, for instance, depend on their parents not just for their food but for their portion of the family land. In turn, older people depend on their sons to care for them in their old age; and this exchange between land and care-taking is made quite explicit by Brahman-Chhetri informants. In innumerable other ways, members of various kinship groups are socially locked together so that the behaviour of one reflects on all. And economically the pariwar (household group of relatives) is a unit within which the members must both cooperate to survive, and compete with one another for access to the limited family resources. In rural Brahman-Chhetri villages, similar interlinkages and interdependencies are formed that cut across caste and kinship lines. It is clear that in communities like Dhungagaun, one must rely not only on individual achievement and effort but must also work through his multiple links with others for access to the social and economic "goods" available.

But just as food transfers are symbols of linkage and interdependency, so the denial of food can symbolize social conflict. A sudden refusal to offer or receive food can serve as an immediate expression of anger. With the cessation of food exchanges, social relations can be effectively broken off. In Dhungagaun, intrahousehold quarrels surface and become public when members of a joint family separate their kitchens and are said to be "refusing to eat together." In turn, resumption of normal eating patterns signals that the household members have patched up their differences.

### Food in Illness Ideology

So far I have largely emphasized the "proper" order of society that a cultural emphasis on food reveals: people should feed one another by the rules of caste and kinship transfers. The "circles" linking people should be maintained, as backed by both social and religious prescriptions. To feed and be fed, up and down hierarchies and across lines of life and death, are positive processes and suggestive of the integration of society and of individuals' prescribed place within a social order. What I have been maintaining is that Brahman-Chhetri society is founded on the idea of a hierarchical interdependency among its members, within which innumerable "goods" are distributed and exchanged, and that this ordered interlocking is symbolized by prescribed food transfers.

At the same time, I suggest that the workability of human exchanges is seen as imperfect by Brahmans and Chhetris of Dhungagaun and that one basis for this notion of "imperfection" in the system is the real and sharply perceived scarcity of material goods among them. Obviously all societies must cope with a scarcity of certain commodities. But what concerns me here is not so much the facts of scarcity, but the ideology of

scarcity. The villagers of Dhungagaun are poor by world standards and, in particular, they face a severe and increasing land shortage. But regardless of how one might evaluate their poverty, what remains significant is that many of them perceive themselves as poor, as getting poorer, and as constrained to struggle within a world of uncertain and unstable material welfare. In many ways Foster's (1967) notion of "the image of the limited good" in peasant societies applies to rural Nepalese communities like Dhungagaun, or as one informant expressed it (in reference to conflict in his own extended family): "The problem is that we all want the same things and there isn't enough for everyone." In other words, along with the culturally pervasive notions of hierarchy and interdependence is the notion that the integrated "whole" (the caste, the community, the lineage, the family etc.) can never perfectly satisfy the needs of all the parts. Someone or some group will be left out, left in need, and this constitutes a source of danger.

It is here that ideas about illness become significant and revealing, for illness is a negative physical and social state, perhaps even more so when it is surrounded by speculations of witchcraft or diagnoses of malignant spirits, as is common in Dhungagaun and other areas of Nepal. In illness ideology we can see a negative extension of some of the cultural themes already discussed; and again, it is the use of food and food transfers that serve as a symbolic rhetoric through which these ideas are expressed.

There are innumerable ways in which food symbols penetrate the realm of illness and curing.<sup>10</sup> Most obvious, perhaps, is that moto (fatness or plumpness) is considered the very epitome of good health, while thinness (dublo) is associated with a weak and vulnerable state. Already this suggests a connection: to be moto is to be fed, and what is more, it suggests that one is being regularly fed. By extension, the ideas about moto and good health are suggestive of the positive aspects of social feeding, of maintaining interdependency in a proper way. In the abstract, a person's attribute of moto is a clue that he or she is an integrated member of the community and assumes proper, food-receiving positions vis a vis others. What is more, a moto person is likely a frequent recipient of rich or sweet foods that serve as vehicles for affection. As Bennett has noted of Brahman-Chhetri children: "A fat child -- like a plump woman -- is not only considered healthy and attractive, but beloved." (1976: 41).

A thin (dublo) person is considered unattractive as well as vulnerable to illness, and I would suggest that this might be because, in direct opposition to moto, dublo possibly carries cultural associations of detachment and severance from others. To be thin is to be unfed or irregularly fed, to lack proper linkages with others.

Obviously, there are plenty of cases of real people in Brahman-Chhetri villages who are thin but nevertheless well fed, who are surrounded by food-giving kinsmen, and who enjoy a host of proper food-receiving positions. All I am suggesting is that one underlying reason why moto is so highly praised and dublo seen as unattractive is



Hence, as with the lagu, one can have troubled relationships with them and suffer misfortune (even illness) as a result.

But a more significant contrast between these spiritual forces concerns their state of food-dependency on man and hence their motives for influencing human life. Here the lagu represent an extreme. They attack man because they are constantly and desperately hungry; and their attack is directly designed to elicit a food offering from their victims. Man feeds the lagu to temporarily pacify them. With the other spiritual forces, hunger and a dependency on man for food become less significant as we move from left to right on the chart. The pitri (ancestors who died properly), the bāyu (a transformed ancestral ghost, discussed below) and the kuldevata (lineage gods) are also dependent on man for their food. But in contrast to the lagu, who are only fed when they have caused illness, these other spiritual entities are regularly fed in special worship ceremonies. Man feeds them in order to sustain them, and by so doing to fulfill a religious obligation. People may fear that they have failed to feed these spirits properly, and hence these spirits are considered potentially dangerous. Nevertheless, there is the idea that these spiritual forces can be kept safe as long as they are properly and regularly sustained with food. If these spirits harm an individual, it is not with malicious intent but out of anger that someone has failed in his obligations to them. They are in any case in a much better position than the lagu, who are forced to wander in painful hunger from the moment of their inauspicious creation. Whatever food the lagu wrangle from man is only a temporary relief, and hence the lagu are perpetually dangerous.

On the far right of the chart are the high Hindu gods (e.g. Shiva) and the planet gods (graha). These gods are not only regularly worshipped, and hence regularly fed, but they are not so desperate for food. Food is given more as a means to please them than to either sustain or pacify them.

With the lagu then, we find the most direct link between human illness and the danger of an unfed force, as well as a link between the concepts of feeding and therapy. But there are two other local ideas that reinforce and extend the connection between illness and the importance of food and feeding. One is the notion that not only can these spirits strike on their own but any of them might also be sent by a female witch (bokshi). Thus when villagers fear these spirits they also are expressing a fear of one another. Interestingly, the way that a witch induces a lowly spirit to do her bidding is to feed the spirit herself, especially if she agrees to do so on a more or less regular basis. Her control rests on her agreement to feed.

A second local notion is that in a state of illness caused by a malignant spirit one is being fed upon.<sup>12</sup> The spirit, in effect, is "eating" the victims' body and must be pacified with some substitute food, such as pieces of hair and fingernail from the victim. This notion that food given to pacify spirits is considered a substitute for the victim's own body has also been reported elsewhere in Nepal (see Blustain, 1974: 93).

We can see in these ideas about the afterworld a reflection of cultural notions about the world of the living as well. The ghosts are unfed or irregularly fed. They are as helpless people would be and as beggars are (whether religious mendicants or simply poor): they are outside the proper order of this-worldly society, which entails a proper system of feeding and being fed.

In a milieu of perceived material scarcity, the insufficiency of material goods and the demands made on one by those in need become a specific problem of everyday life in Dhungagaun. But it is in conceptions of spirit-caused illnesses that recognition and fear of this is expressed as a general cultural theme. Thus the harm-giving spirits represent the ultimate failure of the existing social order. They are a symbolic realization of the potential for disharmony in human exchanges. These spirits are the ultimate losers, as marked in the first place by their inauspicious creation, or by the fact that they died without dependants, and as expressed symbolically in their attributes of hunger and being but irregularly fed. Yet by virtue of having died improperly they acquire power (the ability to cause illness) by which to press their claims for food back on to the human community.

These ways in which the world of the spirits mirrors that of man can be most clearly seen in beliefs about one very particular spirit, the bāyu.<sup>13</sup> The bāyu begins as an ordinary ghost -- a bhut, pret, masan or picās -- and as one of these it wanders in hunger. But this ghost, rather than attacking just anyone, may elect, as it were, to attack its own surviving agnatic kinsmen, members of its former kul (lineage). Thus a male ghost attacks the house of its agnatic kul; an unmarried female ghost attacks her fathers' kul and a female ghost who married before dying should attack members of her husband's kul (C.F. Hoffer and Shrestha, 1973). A medical specialist (dhami-jhankri) might diagnose that illnesses in a family or kul are being caused by such an ancestral ghost. The cure, then, is to ritually transform this spirit into a bāyu. This occurs in a special ceremony where the bāyu is invoked and the gathered kul members agree to feed the spirit on a regular basis from now on (at a minimum this is a once-a-year feeding). Most significant is that the creation of a bāyu raises the bāyu's spiritual status. The bāyu literally moves up in the spiritual hierarchy as represented in the chart above. A bāyu is no longer a lowly, illness-inflicting lagu. It is no ordinary wandering ghost but a ghost that has come home to eat.

Once a bāyu is created, it not only ceases its harm, but may become positively helpful. The bāyu may be invoked at any time to give advice to kul members on their problems, and generally this invocation is carried out at least once a year during the ritual bāyu-feeding ceremony. Thus the bāyu represents a regular and institutionalized means whereby a spirit of the lower realm is moved upward; and the elevation of the bāyu's rank parallels the movement from illness to health, from harm to help, for the kinsmen involved.

## Conclusion

This study of food symbolism in Brahman-Chhetri culture has attempted to reveal a consistency in the symbolic uses of food in various realms of Brahman-Chhetri life. Notions about food in illness beliefs, particularly beliefs about evil spirits, reflect the same concern with hierarchy, interdependence and scarcity that maintain in Brahman-Chhetri kinship, intercaste and interpersonal relationships. For one thing, the very existence of the harmful spirits rests on the idea of an interdependency among men that persists after death. The community, in effect, cannot ignore its spiritual "losers"; where it fails to feed, it faces being fed upon.

The bāyu more specifically represents the persistence of patrilineal responsibilities after death. The kul cannot ignore a departed member who is suffering the plight of a miserable ghost. For this spirit has the power to strike its own kul and press its claim to a permanent readmittance into the more harmonious realm of regular feeding. In the beliefs about the bāyu, we can also see the notions of social ordering and hierarchy. The bāyu begins as a hungry, wandering ghost, but once its agnatic survivors agree to feed it on a regular basis, the bāyu's status is elevated and fixed so that it will become safe and helpful.

In my view, the concern with and fear of malignant spirits in Dhungagaun is an extension of a culturally recognized imperfection in the social order. What villagers appear to recognize is that since all desired things in life are scarce, all the ordered interdependency, all the ordered give-and-take in the world, cannot possibly ensure sufficiency to all. Someone, some force, will always be in need. However well one succeeds in the earthly game of give and take, he cannot, by the principle of interdependency itself, entirely separate himself from the fact that there are losers. At all times those in need may make demands on him; at any point they may acquire the power to force their claims. The only recourse is to recognize this inevitable problem in life and to keep up the system of giving and taking (feeding and being fed) is an ordered way.

I have attempted to show that food in Brahman-Chhetri culture is a code through which this principle is established and expressed. In brief, the notions of "fed" "unfed" and "fed upon" serve as a kind of progressive cultural metaphors through which man's physical, social and spiritual relationships are articulated. My conclusion on how Brahman-Chhetri food symbols can be interpreted to reveal a broader cultural ideology is summarized below:

	The Fed	The Unfed	The fed upon
relations between spirits and man	lineage gods, high gods, ancestors, <u>bāyu</u>	ghosts, dissatisfied ancestors, etc.	man
	Safe	Harmful	Harmed
social state of man	proper place in the human community (receiver of affection)	precarious place in the human community	a receiver of socio-economic demands or claims
Physical state of man	plump, healthy ( <u>moto</u> )	Thin, vulnerable to illness (dublo)	ill

Here "the fed" marks positive categories of things "made safe." On the spiritual plane are the higher dieties (pleased at being fed by man) the disarmed bāyu and the sustained lineage gods and ancestors. On the social plane, "to be fed" marks integrated membership in the human community. The "unfed" by contrast, are dangerous categories: in life and in death the "unfed" are left outside the proper order of society, are in need, and so become a source of danger. Finally, the "fed upon" mark the negative results of the inevitable failings in a social order based on hierarchy and interdependence amid scarcity.

#### Footnotes

1. I would like to thank Lynn Bennett, Gabriel Campbell and Prayag Raj Sharma for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. For Nepal, Sherry Ortner (1970) has analyzed food symbols among the Buddhist Sherpa. Unfortunately, I have not yet had an opportunity to compare this work with my material on food symbols among Hindu groups.
3. Dhungagaun is a pseudonym for the community in which I conducted field-work from 1973-1975 under a fellowship from the Social Science Research Council. However, the conclusions drawn are those of the author alone.



4. My use of food distinctions in Dhungagaun (especially raw vs, cooked) obviously draws from the fundamental inspiration provided by Levi - Strauss (1965, 1969). More recently, Khare (1976b: 1-3) has suggested that for Hindu India a distinction between "cooked" and "uncooked" is more precise since foods assume a new importance once they have been "prepared" by means other than cooking with heat, e.g. by being washed or peeled. I would suspect that Khare's distinction is more precise for Hindu Nepal as well.
5. In some private contexts a person may consume bhat cooked by a lower-caste person without risk to caste standing. For example villagers say that a man who has eloped with a lower caste woman will likely eat bhat cooked by her in the privacy of their home.
6. I do not know to what extent water and cigarettes are actually classed as "food" by Dhungagaun villagers. However, an act of drinking water or smoking cigarettes is normally expressed with the verb khānu (to eat) that is used with all other foods. It is also interesting to note that the names of certain caste categories refer to liquids -- for example, the untouchable groups are sometimes called pani na chalne (people from whom water is not acceptable) and a number of castes are called matwali (liquor-drinking).
7. Ortner (1978): 61-90) has discussed similar social uses of food in the context of Sherpa "hospitality."
8. Here, individual orthodoxy varies. Some Brahmans, for example, will refuse some foods or even all food from other members of their own caste on the grounds that this would undermine their own individual purity.
9. In srāddha, parental ancestors up to three generations must be fed -- i.e. a man's F, M, FF, FFW, FFF, and FFFW.
10. Space does not permit an examination here of all of the links between illness and food. Among the more important ones not discussed here are ideas about maintaining a "hot" and "cold" balance in food intake along with other dietary rules that are related to health & illness. In addition, one of the most common ways that witches (boksi) cause illness is through "poisoning" their victims food.
11. This chart does not list all the malignant forces in Dhungagaun but only those that are formed from human souls. In addition to these are the bir (demons) that "simply exist."

12. Although the notion of one's literally being eaten is restricted to illnesses caused by malignant spirits, the imagery of illness as being "fed upon" carries over into general concepts of illness, regardless of cause. For example, one word for heart attack, heart trouble or sharp chest pain is mutu khāne ("heart devouring"). Similarly, a food-eating image surrounds the word dhamki (asthma). In times of quarrel, one may insult another person by calling him dhamki ko ahar, "the [mere] food (prey) of the asthma disease." Villagers say that because of the association between the word dhamki and this insulting expression, the word dhamki should be avoided when one is speaking to or about a real asthma sufferer whom one does not wish to insult. In these contexts, expressions meaning "breathlessness" are used instead. An insult phrase parallel to dhamki ko ahar can also be formed with the illness term bhiringi (syphilis).
13. For an excellent discussion of the creation and ritual treatment of the bāyu in Central Nepal, see Sharma (1970).

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