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Of Food and Faith: Sacred Rituals and Sensory Experiences in Rajasthan's Religious Food Practices

Rajshree Gautam & Rimika Singhvi

Abstract

Religious food practices in Rajasthan transcend the realm of mere nourishment, offering a profound sensory and spiritual experience that intricately intertwines tradition, devotion, and cultural identity. This paper will delve into how the preparation, presentation, and consumption of sacred foods in rituals - such as *Goth, Jeeman, Posh Bada Mahotsav* and *Chappan Bhog* - engage all the five senses of taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound to create deeply meaningful connections between individuals, communities, and the divine. These food practices serve not only as acts of sustenance but as cultural technologies for expressing reverence, maintaining social harmony, and transmitting collective memory. From the symbolic sweetness of *choorma* and *ghewar* signifying auspiciousness, to the fragrant aromas of incense and freshly prepared offerings that evoke a connection to the divine, each sensory dimension plays a crucial role. While the tactile act of eating with hands during community feasts reflects humility and a direct communion with food, the visually elaborate arrangements of dishes at feasts such as the *Posh Bada Mahotsav* underscore the importance of aesthetic devotion. Additionally, the accompanying chants, mantras, and devotional songs elevate these rituals to a transcendental experience, amplifying their sacred atmosphere and communal significance. By integrating insights from anthropology, religious studies, and sensory ethnography, this paper proposes to examine how these food practices operate as dynamic and multi-layered cultural systems. They not only fulfill physical needs but also act as profound spiritual rituals that sustain the shared imagination of the community. Ultimately, the attempt will be to reveal how food in religious traditions - that is, *prasaad* - becomes a powerful medium for fostering spiritual connection, preserving heritage, and reinforcing the cultural fabric of the region.

Keywords: Culinary Anthropology; Rajasthani Ritual; Religious Food Practices; Sensory Ethnography; Spiritual Semiotics.

Introduction

In the arid land of scarcity, what does food mean? Does it mean mere sustenance? A struggle? Or could it be something more–something sacred? Beyond the archetypal image of Rajasthan, where women walk many miles for water, kitchens of Rajasthan–whether in a humble household or in a sprawling temple courtyard–are abundant in flavour, ritual and meaning. Food goes beyond nourishment and transforms into a divine artifact. *Prasaad* or *prashaad* is a sacred offering observed all across the world. The name for it might differ across regions and religions, yet *prasaad* remains dear to the heart and gut of Indians. Across the Indian subcontinent, *prasaad* is a medium of reciprocity between the human and the divine. Whether it is *dal-bati* offered to a deity in Rajasthan, *panchamrit* in Tamil Shaiva temples, *modak* presented to Lord Ganesha in Maharashtra, *pongal* simmering in Tamil Nadu's Vaishnava shrines, *khichuri* served during Durga Puja in Bengal, or *karah prasaad* in Sikh gurudwaras, these ritual meals transcend nourishment. They activate a sacred sensorium—engaging sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to create immersive spiritual experiences that are as embodied as they are devotional.

Across India's vast religious landscape, *prasaad* takes myriad forms—each shaped by regional ecology, local deities, and devotional customs. In Tamil Nadu, the offering of *pongal* to Vishnu during *Margazhi* festivals reflects an agrarian gratitude ritual, where food becomes a cultivated offering of both land and devotion (Fuller, 2004). In Maharashtra, the sweet *modak*, associated with Ganesha, symbolizes knowledge and spiritual reward, often handmade and offered with personal affection (Courtright, 1985). In West Bengal, during Durga Puja, *khichuri* functions as both festive food and votive ritual, where the community partakes in what McDaniel (2004) calls "ritual feeding of the goddess and the people." The *karah prasaad* served in Sikh gurudwaras across Punjab, as Jacobsen (2012) notes, reflects not only sacred sharing but also a theological ethic of equality and humility, prepared in the community kitchen (*langar*) without hierarchy. Even the *panchamrit* in Tamil Shaiva temples—an amalgam of milk, curd, ghee, honey, and jaggery—is believed to transmit divine vitality through its composition and ritual chant (Younger, 2002).

These diverse forms of *prasaad* are more than food—they are ritual objects, memory carriers, and theological texts in edible form. They enact what David Sutton (2001) terms *gustemology*—"the knowledge embedded in taste and the senses"—a culturally specific epistemology rooted in affect and embodiment. Across traditions, the act of offering and consum-

ing *prasaad* becomes a multi-sensory contract between the devotee and the divine, involving the tongue, the hand, the nose, the ear, and the eye. As Sarah Weiss (2008) observes, rituals involving food are "not understood through cognition alone, but through the full experience of sensory immersion."

While the forms of *prasaad* across India are diverse, their common thread lies in the way they engage the senses to mediate the sacred. In Rajasthan, these dynamics are distinctly embodied in rituals such as the *Goth*, *Jeeman*, and large-scale events like the *Posh bada mahotsav*, where food becomes both a devotional medium and a performative act. Here, *prasaad* is not only tasted but beheld, handled, heard, and smelled—a full-sensory ritual that blurs the boundary between the sacred and the everyday. These practices rooted in caste-specific kitchen labor, seasonal cycles, and regional ingredients do more than satisfy hunger. They function as what David Sutton (2001) calls *gustemological acts*: forms of sensory knowledge production that transmit cultural memory and ritual order.

Through repetitive offerings of choorma, dal-bati, and ghewar, Rajasthani communities encode both devotion and identity, grounding their social belonging in edible, ephemeral forms. The act of receiving *prasaad* with one's bare hands, in shared space, often accompanied by bhajans or *manuhar* (insistent invitation to eat), transforms food into embodied theology, rehearsing reverence and reinforcing belonging. In temple rituals, these foods undergo transformation—from everyday sustenance to *prasaad*, infused with intention and imbued with sacredness. The crumbling sweetness of *choorma*, made with ghee and jaggery, signifies auspiciousness and abundance in a landscape otherwise defined by scarcity. *Dal-bati*, a dish of lentils and baked wheat balls, when offered to deities during festivals or communal feasts like *Jeeman*, carries with it the martial legacy of Rajput valor and the cultural grammar of desert survival. *Ghewar*, with its honeycomb structure soaked in sugar syrup, often marks the culmination of rituals, symbolizing celebratory closure and sensory indulgence. In these moments, food becomes more than nourishment—it becomes narrative, archive, and ritual technology. It encodes relationships: between people and gods, between memory and practice, between flavor and faith. These offerings, often crafted communally by women or temple cooks, bear the imprints of caste, labor, and devotion. They do not just satisfy hunger—they perform the sacred.

Building on this, the following section situates the study within two key theoretical frameworks—sensory ethnography and ritual theory—to un-

derstand how food in Rajasthani religious practice becomes both aesthetic experience and cultural technology.

Situating the Study

To explore how *prasaad* operates as a multi-sensory spiritual and social phenomenon in Rajasthan, this paper draws upon two intersecting theoretical frameworks: sensory ethnography and ritual theory. These approaches provide the tools to interpret sacred food not simply as material or symbolic, but as embodied performance—a lived practice that mediates devotion, memory, hierarchy, and affect.

Sensory ethnography, as articulated by scholars such as Sarah Pink (2009), offers a method of engaging with culture through the full spectrum of human sensory experience. Rather than privileging the visual or the textual, Pink argues for an anthropology of the senses—one that takes seriously the tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and auditory dimensions of everyday and ritual life. In the context of Rajasthani food rituals, this approach allows us to read *prasaad* as more than an object of consumption. It is a sensorial field, where meaning is created not just through symbols, but through textures, aromas, sounds, and embodied gestures.

Figure 1: A temple courtyard decorated with rose petals and scent of kewda for a jeeman.

The rituals examined in this study—*Goth*, *Jeeman*, *Posh Bada Mahotsav* and *Chhapan Bhog*—can be understood as total sensory events, where sacredness is not just observed, but felt. From the sizzle of ghee in iron pans, to the rhythmic chanting of bhajans, to the golden display of *choorma* and *ghewar*, these rituals engage what Weiss (2008) calls "immersive aesthetics"—a way of knowing that bypasses abstraction and enters through the senses. This aligns with David Sutton's (2001) concept of *gustemology*, the epistemology of taste, which situates memory, culture, and identity within the act of eating. Food, in this view, is not only remembered—it *remembers for us*.

The ritual dimension of food practices is framed here through Victor Turner's (1969) theory of ritual as performance and transformation. Turner's concept of liminality—the threshold state between the ordinary and the sacred—offers a compelling lens to understand how everyday ingredients become holy through ritual transformation. The community meal, especially in *jeeman* or *goth*, becomes a liminal space in which participants enact roles, receive grace (*prasāda*), and experience what Turner calls communitas: a momentary sense of shared belonging that transcends social distinctions, even as those distinctions persist beneath the surface.

Yet rituals are never neutral. Following Mary Douglas's (1966) work on purity and pollution, this paper also interrogates how food rituals encode caste, gender, and access. The preparation of *prasaad*—who is allowed in the kitchen, who distributes it, who consumes it and how—becomes a site of both sacred reproduction and social regulation. Douglas reminds us that "dirt is matter out of place," and sacred food, often framed as pure, must be understood within culturally contingent systems of order and exclusion. Thus, by combining ritual theory and sensory ethnography, this study treats *prasaad* not only as a devotional object, but as a cultural technology—a performative system through which communities make sense of themselves, their gods, and each other.

Ritual Feasts of Rajasthan: Contextualizing *Jeeman*, *Goth*, *Posh Bada Mahotsav*, and *Chappan Bhog*

Rajasthani religious life is marked by a unique blend of austerity and opulence, where ritual feasts often function as both devotional offerings and social performances. Among these, *Jeeman*, *Goth*, *Posh bada mahotsav*, and *Chappan Bhog* represent different scales and nuances of sacred hospitality. Each ritual constructs the act of eating not simply as nourishment but as a performative theology—a way of staging memory, devotion, and hier-

archy through food. Before the paper goes into analysing these feasts as a site for sacred sensorium, I would like to briefly introduce and contextualize these terms on the basis of my fieldwork.

Jeeman: Feeding as Ritual Reciprocity

The term *jeeman* or जीमण in Rajasthani refers to a structured community feast, often conducted after a religious observance, a familial samskara (rite of passage), or in memory of a departed ancestor. When I asked a Jaipur priest to define *jeeman*, he plainly referred to it as "eating together". Typically involving invited guests from within the caste or community group, *jeeman* becomes a ritual of redistribution, where cooked offerings are consecrated, served, and consumed with an ethic of humility (*sewa*) and abundance (*manuhar*). It is pertinent to mention that *jeeman* is almost always sacred in nature. It might not necessarily take place within the corridors of a temple, yet the food is consumed only after offering to the Gods as *prasad*.

These feasts are often prepared by ritually authorized cooks, and served in a prescribed sequence, usually beginning with sweets and ending with buttermilk or *meetha paan*. The spatial organization—guests sitting in linear rows (pangat), servers moving barefoot—reflects a sacral geometry of care. *Jeeman* takes place all around the year as its causes are varied and diverse. As noted by Karine Schomer in her study of Rajasthani ritualism, *jeeman* embodies "ritual generosity through structured, sensorial hospitality" (Schomer 94).

Goth: Intimacy Through Food

In the Rajasthani cultural lexicon, a *goth* or गोठ is a community meal organized in open spaces, often after religious ceremonies, local deity worship, or festival observances. It is a smaller, more intimate variation of the *jeeman* that usually occurs in outdoor settings or local shrines. It involves the gathering of friends, close kin, community elders, or any closely knit group who are served specially prepared meals—often at far away places. However, unlike *jeeman*, which is largely governed by caste-specific codes, *goth* is notably more egalitarian and inclusive, often welcoming participants across caste, religious, and regional lines. As documented in *Anjas: A Rajasthani Cultural Thesaurus*, *goth* can be described as "a collective meal served to all—sometimes irrespective of caste or creed—where food is cooked on-site and consumed in an open space, usually after a local ritual or community gathering" (*Anjas*, 2021).

A *goth* often unfolds like a sacred picnic—part feast, part fellowship. It

may be hosted by an individual family or a neighborhood collective as a votive offering or as part of temple celebrations, and the setting is typically rural courtyards, forest shrines, or groves (dev-vans), and in the modern contexts it is often held in farmhouses. In this sense, *Goth* becomes a form of ritual exchange—a feeding of both gods, men and the contemporaries. In marwari families, a similar term *sajjan goth* is immensely famous which entails feeding and serving the groom's family. It is worth noting however, that despite sharing a word between them, both signifies different rituals. The term *sajjan* also signals moral virtue, suggesting that those who partake are not just guests but bearers of spiritual merit (Joshi 157).

Posh Bada Mahotsav: Abundance as Devotion

Among the most grandiose feasts in the Vaishnava tradition of Rajasthan is the *Posh Bada Mahotsav* or पौष बड़ा महोत्सव, a spectacular celebration held annually in temples dedicated to Thakurji (Krishna). The name combines *posh* (tenth month of the Hindu year) and *bada* (fried fritters), and the event typically includes many seasonal dishes prepared as a ritual *bhog* and displayed before the deity in tiers or concentric patterns.

Here, food is both spectacle and offering, aligning with the *bhakti* idea that excess can signify devotion. As Jyotindra Jain notes in his documentation of temple rituals, "the *Posh bada* serves as a visual and culinary manifestation of divine abundance… a darshan not just of the deity, but of food itself" (Jain 231). The event is accompanied by bhajans, chanting, and often theatrical *leelas* (re-enactments of Krishna's life), turning the temple into a site of total sensory and spiritual immersion.

Chappan Bhog: The Geometry of Devotional Excess

Literally meaning "fifty-six offerings", *Chappan Bhog* or छप्पन भोग refers to a specific array of food offerings made to Krishna, especially in the Pushtimarg tradition. The number 56 holds symbolic significance: it is believed that Krishna consumed eight meals a day as a child, and during the Govardhan episode, he fasted for seven days while holding up the mountain—hence $8 \times 7 = 56$. The *bhog* is not random; it follows a ritually prescribed arrangement, often laid out in a mandala-like form, with concentric circles or rectangular rows of sweets, savories, fruits, and beverages. Each item is chosen for seasonal relevance, aesthetic value, and symbolic meaning—for instance, *makhan* (butter) recalls Krishna's childhood thefts, while *misri* (crystal sugar) suggests purity and sweetness. Scholars like Guy Beck suggest that such ritual layouts represent a "spatial theology of abundance" where "the eye, the hand, and the tongue converge in acts of worship"

(Beck 118).

Introducing the Ethnographic Voice: From Formal Analysis to Embodied Experience

While the preceding sections of this paper have employed a formal, third-person academic style to establish the theoretical and cultural context of *prasaad* rituals in Rajasthan, the next section adopts a more personal, first-person ethnographic voice. This shift is both methodological and theoretical: it reflects the recognition, increasingly articulated in contemporary anthropology and sensory ethnography, that the researcher's embodied presence is not merely a tool for data collection but a vital medium for understanding and conveying lived experience.

As Sarah Pink (2009) and Paul Stoller (1997) have argued, the senses cannot be apprehended from a distance; they must be inhabited, felt, and narrated from within. The "I" of the ethnographer is not an intrusion upon objectivity but a necessary instrument for capturing the affective, sensory, and performative dimensions of ritual that often elude detached description. By situating myself within the scenes I describe—by recounting what I saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched—I aim to evoke the sacred sensorium of Rajasthani *prasaad* as it is lived and remembered by participants. This approach is supported by the broader turn in anthropology toward reflexivity and positionality, as advocated by scholars such as Clifford Geertz (1973) and Ruth Behar (1996). Reflexive ethnography acknowledges that knowledge is co-produced through the researcher's interactions, perceptions, and embodied presence. As Geertz famously noted, ethnographic writing is always "thick description"—an account that is as much about the observer's interpretive acts as about the observed.

Furthermore, in the context of food studies and ritual analysis, David Sutton (2001) and David Howes (2003) have emphasized that gustatory and sensory knowledge is inherently subjective and relational. The act of eating *prasaad*, the feel of ghee on one's fingers, the soundscape of communal feasting—these are not abstract data points but lived experiences best conveyed through the immediacy of the first-person voice. Therefore, the following section weaves together narrative vignettes from my own fieldwork with theoretical analysis, using the "I" not as a claim to authority but as an invitation to the reader: to taste, smell, see, hear, and feel the rituals alongside me. In doing so, I hope to illuminate not only the cultural meanings of *prasaad*, but also the ways in which sacred food is apprehended through the body, the senses, and the shared spaces of ritual life.

Cultural Domain Analysis: Rajasthani Feasts and the Sacred Sensorium

Jeeman: Ritual Reciprocity and the Sensorium of Sacred Commensality

Distinct from informal communal meals, *jeeman* is imbued with sacred intentionality: it is a devotional act, a transaction with the divine, and a socially choreographed offering that reflects and re-inscribes caste, gender, and ritual hierarchies. While often associated with Brahminical Hinduism, *jeeman* is also practiced across Rajput, Jat, and other caste groups, albeit with variations in form and theological emphasis. Drawing from Victor Turner's theory of ritual as liminal performance, *jeeman* can be seen as a threshold ritual—a space in which everyday food becomes sanctified through process and context (Turner 1969). Similarly, invoking David Sutton's concept of gustemology, the *jeeman* engages sensory memory and sacred knowledge through the embodied acts of cooking, serving, and consuming (Sutton 2001). Each sensory modality—taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound—functions not merely as a physical experience but as a symbolic and social technology.

It was the second week of Phalgun, and the city of Jodhpur shimmered with the promise of spring. I arrived at the Joshi family's ancestral haveli, invited to witness and participate in a *jeeman* organized to mark the conclusion of a family puja. The courtyard, swept clean and decorated with marigold petals, was transformed into a sacred space. Stepping into the kitchen, the air was thick with the aroma of roasting wheat and bubbling ghee. Women in leheriya sarees moved with practiced grace—shaping balls of bati, stirring cauldrons of dal. The rhythmic clatter of ladles, bursts of laughter, and the occasional devotional song from a tinny speaker created a soundscape that was both festive and reverent.

Figure 2: Lalaji, a ritual cook stirring a large pot of dal.

Before the meal began, the eldest woman of the house carried a thali of *prasaad*—choorma, dal, and bati—into the small shrine room. She circled the thali three times before the household deity, whispering a mantra. The *prasaad* was then placed at the head of the pangat, signaling that the sacred and the social were now intertwined. We sat cross-legged in rows, men and women together but with elders at the front. A young boy, no older than ten, moved barefoot along the line, serving each guest with a practiced "manuhar"—an insistent, almost affectionate invitation to eat more. As he placed a steaming bati in my palm, I felt the rough texture of the wheat crust, still warm from the fire. The choorma, sticky with ghee and jaggery, clung to my fingers as I broke off a piece.

In *jeeman*, taste is hierarchized and symbolic. Meals begin with sweets—choorma, laddoos, halwa—signaling auspiciousness and divine favor. These are followed by hearty preparations like dal-bati, gatte ki sabzi, and boondi raita, closing with palate-cleansing chaach (buttermilk). The ritual order of consumption is not accidental but follows an established protocol—sweetness first, then salt, then balance. As Sutton (2001) emphasizes, taste in ritual does not simply reflect cul-

ture; it produces knowledge, mapping emotion, hierarchy, and etiquette onto the tongue. The olfactory landscape of *jeeman* begins long before the food is served. The aroma of roasting wheat, clarified butter, fried fritters, and freshly ground spices transforms domestic courtyards and temple kitchens into ritual spaces. As Classen (1993) notes, smell is deeply tied to memory and ritual mood, making it a primary vector for sacralizing the everyday. Touch in *jeeman* is both sensory and socially coded. Food is traditionally eaten with the right hand, served on leaf plates (pattals), while participants sit cross-legged—an embodied expression of humility and surrender. Yet touch also encodes power: who is allowed to cook, serve, or partake reflects entrenched ritual boundaries based on caste and gender (Douglas 1966). The feel of the pattal, the temperature of food, the act of eating with one's fingers all contribute to what Pink (2009) calls "tactile knowing"—meaning understood through physical interaction.

Figure 3: Bhajan mandali during a ritual feast.

Visual aesthetics in *jeeman* operate at both micro and macro levels: the presentation of food—choorma pyramids, ghewar layered with silver leaf, curries arranged by color and texture—and the spatial organization of *pangat*, with guests seated in precise rows and servers moving in synchrony. This visual discipline reflects what Kalpana Ram (2011) calls a sacred geometry, where devotion is made visible through order and symmetry.

I was surprised to realise the ubiquitousness of sound in Rajasthan—No

occasion whether social or sacred is incomplete without music. Sound in *jeeman* is thus layered: mantras recited before the meal, bhajans sung during cooking and serving, and the constant, gentle hum of manuhar—hosts insisting that guests take more, eat more, receive more. As Weiss (2008) asserts, sacred sound "saturates the body," amplifying the sacred atmosphere and signaling belonging.

Goth: Sensory Democracy and the Ritual Commons

While *jeeman* is defined by its ritual hierarchy and sacred choreography, *goth* in Rajasthan represents a contrasting ethos: a communal, open-air feast that enacts inclusion and sensory fellowship. One humid morning in late August, I found myself in the village of Khandela, on the edge of the Sikar region, invited to a *goth* organized after the annual *Bhomiya ji puja*. The setting was a shaded grove of neem and banyan trees, where friends, villagers and children had gathered in anticipation. Cooking was already underway: large iron kadhais perched over open flames, filled with bubbling dal and kadhi. Men and women, young and old, worked side by side—some chopping vegetables, others rolling out bajra rotis, and a few tending to the fire. There was no clear hierarchy; tasks shifted fluidly, and the only constant was the spirit of collaboration. The aroma of roasting grains, clarified butter, and asafoetida drifted through the grove, drawing even monkeys to the site. Everyone sat together—farmers, artisans, children, elders, and even a few Muslim neighbors—breaking bread and sharing stories.

Figure 4: Acts of manuhar in action.

Taste in *goth* is communal and abundant, not refined or hierarchized. The most commonly served items—dal-bati-churma, kadhi, bajra roti, and seasonal vegetables—reflect vernacular cuisine, often cooked in bulk and served equally to all. As Sutton (2001) notes, taste in such contexts becomes "a medium of shared memory," where even minor variations evoke previous gatherings and past vows fulfilled. The non-selective nature of distribution—everyone eating the same food from the same batch—performs a sensory equality rarely found in more formal rituals. The act of preparing food on-site over wood fires creates an olfactory commons that blurs private and public space. The mingling aromas of roasting grains, ghee, and spiced legumes saturate the air, acting as a sensory summons to the ritual site. Classen (1993) reminds us that "smell is a marker of moral geography"—and in *goth*, the air itself becomes ritually infused, drawing people toward the sacred through their noses.

Unlike *jeeman*, *goth* often erodes ritual restrictions on who may touch food or serve. Volunteers of various caste backgrounds cook and serve, and everyone eats with their hands, seated on the ground. The feel of warm bati, the act of breaking roti, and the passing of food hand-to-hand become tactile gestures of belonging. Pink (2009) calls this "tactile knowing"—a way of learning community through shared manual acts. Though less formal than *jeeman*, *goth* still engages visual logics of sacred space. The temporary layout of hearths, circles of seated participants, and leaf plates set in repeating patterns evoke a vernacular orderliness. The absence of strict symmetry fosters visual improvisation, echoing Ram's (2011) argument that sacred aesthetics can emerge from "ordinary arrangements made momentarily luminous by shared intention." The soundscape of *goth* is vibrant and multilayered: folk songs, devotional chants, laughter, gossip, and the steady rhythm of serving and eating. Bhajans dedicated to local deities often accompany the cooking, and the clinking of ladles and banter of children add to the acoustic environment. Weiss (2008) observes that "ritual sound is not heard; it is absorbed"—and in *goth*, the sonic field fuses the sacred and social, creating an acoustic mode of belonging. In this particular *goth* which was characterized by modernity, friends, family and their children indulged in playing games like housie, dumb-charades, etc. and sang bollywood songs. It is important to note that community feasts, however, old are susceptible to change with time, with few elements going obsolete and new elements emerging.

Posh Bada mahotsav: Sensory Abundance and Devotional Warmth in the Heart of Winter

The *Posh bada mahotsav* stands as one of Rajasthan's most elaborate ritual food events, celebrated during the lunar month of Posh (mid-December to mid-January) in Vaishnava temples, especially those of the Pushtimarg tradition in Nathdwara, Udaipur, and Jaipur. The very term "*Posh*" (from Sanskrit *pushti*–nourishment) signals the season's devotional focus on warmth, abundance, and the intimate care of the Gods. Furthermore it is interesting to note that Posh Bade, as it was revealed to me in the field-work of this study, is not associated with any single deity. It was widely held all across Rajasthan, and is in veneration to all Gods from Hanumanji to Ganeshji to even folk deities like Bhomiyaji.

On a frigid January morning in Jaipur, I joined hundreds of devotees streaming towards a Ganeshji temple. The temple courtyard was already alive with activity: priests and volunteers moving with careful precision, arranging platters heaped with sweets, savories, fruits, and delicacies in concentric circles before the richly adorned idol of Ganeshji. The kitchen, or *rasoi*, was a world unto itself. The aroma of browning moong, roasted nuts, and saffron rose above the smoky tang of firewood. The air was thick with the layered scents of ghee, cardamom, and incense—an olfactory tapestry that blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the domestic. As Classen (1993) reminds us that smell is culturally charged, marking sacred space through atmospheric saturation. In *Posh bada*, the kitchen itself becomes a ritual sanctum, where scent is both memory and invocation.As the doors opened for public viewing, the soundscape shifted: bells, conch shells, and the low, melodic chanting of bhajans filled the hall. When the *prasaad* was finally distributed, I received a morsel of moong dal halwa and peda on a *dona*– a leaf bowl. The dense, ghee-rich sweetness lingered on my tongue, a sensory echo of the visual and spiritual feast I had just witnessed.

Figure 5: Posh Bada prasaadi offered to Lord Ganesh.

The taste of *Posh Bada* is unmistakably Rajasthani—rooted in seasonal ingredients and winter foods designed to nourish and generate warmth. Dishes like moong dal halwa, gond ke laddoo, til-patti, badam katli, and urad dal vadas dominate the offering, each selected for their capacity to comfort and sustain. As Gold and Gujar (2002) note, taste here is both a symbol and a medium of remembering divine needs, enacting an intimacy between devotee and deity. Likwise, Texture is central to the ritual: ghee-drenched laddoos, soft dhoklas, and melt-in-the-mouth churma are all designed for warmth and comfort. Preparation is tactile—kneading, shaping, layering—what Pink (2009) calls "tactile knowing." The visual display is where temple aesthetics shine: the deity is surrounded by a tiered, mandala-like arrangement of dishes, each chosen for color and form. As Jyotindra Jain (1997) observes, this abundance is "not merely aesthetic but metaphysical: each dish becomes a sewa, a form of service through sight." The act of darshan—seeing the food as offering—is as important as tasting it. Sound in the temple is muted and slow, matching the winter stillness. Bhajans by old saints like Vallabhacharya or modern bhajans are sung with dholak and manjira, creating an affective climate of cozy reverence. Weiss (2008) notes that sacred sound "creates an affective climate," and in *Posh bada*, this climate is one of warmth and devotional intimacy.

Chappan Bhog: Culinary Geometry and the Ritual Aesthetics of Abundance

Chappan Bhog—literally "56 offerings"—is among the most iconic and visually spectacular ritual food arrangements in the Pushtimarg tradition of Vaishnavism, and it holds a special place in the Rajasthani religious landscape. On the morning of Govardhan Puja, a day after diwali, I joined the throng of devotees at a family temple, the air charged with anticipation and the faint scent of marigold and incense. The kitchen was a hive of activity: cooks in white dhotis stirring vast pots of kheer and dal, women shaping laddoos and malpua, and priests overseeing the precise placement of each dish. The food was arranged in concentric tiers on a marble platform, each dish—makhan-mishri, rabdi, kadhi, gatte, khandvi, moong dal halwa, besan laddoo, mirchi vada, dahi vada—placed according to tradition and color harmony. The sight was breathtaking: a living mandala of abundance, with the deity at its center.

Figure 6: Chappan Bhog Mandala: Fifty-six ritual offerings placed in geometric tiers around the idol.

When the doors opened, the crowd pressed forward for a glimpse during the *aarti*. The act of seeing—darshan—was as important as the eventual tasting of *prasaad*. The *Chappan Bhog* array reflects the fullness of Krishna's legendary appetite—sweet, sour, salty, pungent, and bitter are all represented. The ritual is not about palate harmony but divine completeness: every taste is present, every craving anticipated. As Ann Grodzins Gold (1988) observes, food offerings in Rajasthan are "expressions of story-based theology"—myths acted out through the language of taste. The devotee tastes not to satisfy hunger, but to participate in the intimacy of myth.

The ritual is suffused with the smells of seasonal opulence: ghee-laden sweets, kewra, rosewater, cardamom, and incense. These aromas saturate the sanctum, turning the material offerings into affective memory. As Classen (1993) notes, "smell can saturate sacred space," and in the close, vaulted sanctums of Rajasthan, the olfactory experience is intimate and enveloping. *Chappan Bhog* is prepared and arranged by cooks or *halwai* and priests under strict protocols. The touch of the devotee is restricted during the offering—food is consecrated and only then redistributed. Yet the manual devotion of preparation—shaping sweets, stacking rotis, layering confections—is a form of tactile piety. Pink (2009) calls this "tactile knowing"—a devotion transmitted through the hands, even if not every devotee touches the offering directly. Visually, *Chappan Bhog* is dramatic and meticulously structured. The food is arranged in concentric tiers or mandalas, all pointing toward the deity as the visual center. This is a "sacred architecture in miniature," as Jyotindra Jain (1997) describes it—a staging of abundance in which the divine is both host and guest. The act of darshan—seeing the offering—is as ritually charged as consuming it.

The soundscape is meditative and musical, orchestrated to match the visual rhythm of the offering. Bhajans dedicated to Krishna are sung slowly, interspersed with mantras, bell chimes, and conch sounds. Weiss (2008) notes that ritual sound "creates space where devotion is practiced through collective mood." Even the ritual silence at the moment of offering is deeply sonic—a shared acoustic suspension that heightens the emotional resonance.

Conclusionary Comments: *Prasaad* as Cultural Technology

Food as Material Culture and Memory Device

At this point it is clearly established that in Rajasthan, *prasaad* is more than

nourishment—it is material culture, a mnemonic technology, and a ritual archive. Its preparation and presentation encode historical narratives, cosmological metaphors, and localized moral systems. As David Sutton (2001) suggests, food in ritual contexts functions as a form of *"embodied memory"*—a conduit through which communities remember past events, reaffirm mythic lineages, and rehearse cultural values.

Take, for instance, the offering of dal-bati-churma in temple settings. A staple of Rajasthani cuisine, its symbolic role in *prasaad* settings transcends sustenance. It is intimately linked with Rajput martial ethos, desert resilience, and feudal hospitality. Oral traditions narrate how Rajput soldiers would bury *bati* under sand embers while riding through arid terrain, and how devotion was folded into endurance. When this dish is offered to deities like Hanuman, Bhairav, or Kuldevis, it re-enacts a history of survival—ritualizing valor, *viraha* (longing), and loyalty through food. In this context, food operates as saga, symbol, and social glue—a carrier of cultural memory that unites myth and materiality. As Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar argue, food in Rajasthani ritual life "becomes the language of the inexpressible... where memory is not spoken, but served" (Gold and Gujar 172).

Caste and Gender: Ritual Labor and Access

While *prasaad* often appears to unify, it also reifies existing social structures. The preparation, distribution, and consumption of sacred food are rarely neutral. Mary Douglas's theory of purity and pollution is especially instructive here: what is deemed *ritually pure* is often a product of caste-based exclusions and gendered labor hierarchies. In *jeeman* and *savamani* rituals, for example, the cook's caste, server's caste, and even the recipient's ritual eligibility determine access to sacred consumption. Dalits, Muslims, or lower-caste Hindus are often excluded from cooking or serving, even when the event is held in their localities. In some settings, cooked food cannot be touched or distributed by menstruating women, revealing the intersection of gendered taboo and ritual purity politics. Meanwhile, women bear the burden of ritual labor—kneading, stirring, cleaning, plating—yet remain invisible in the act of public offering or temple administration, which is usually male-dominated. This echoes Veena Das's argument that "ritual domains are often gendered spaces where exclusion masquerades as tradition" (Das 189). Thus, *prasaad* becomes a regulated system of ritual labor, marked by caste hierarchy and gendered access—a sacred economy in which power is distributed symbolically and bodily.

Social Structure and Moral Economy: Unity Through Hierarchy

On the surface, the act of eating together in rituals like *goth*, *jeeman*, or *vrat feasts* appears to generate communal harmony. But this unity is not flat; it is structured. What looks like inclusivity is often carefully calibrated hierarchy. People may sit together—but the sequence of being served, the direction of service, the posture of receiving, and the speech acts of *manuhar* all encode ritual status. Drawing from Victor Turner's idea of communitas, one could argue that ritual meals do foster momentary belonging. However, these acts often function as ritualized rehearsals of social order, not its suspension. As Parry (1985) notes in his work on Hindu death rituals, "feeding the Brahmin is not merely giving food, but reinstalling cosmic hierarchy through nourishment." This holds true in Rajasthan too. A *savamani* organized by a Jat or Rajput family may publicly invite all castes, but the placement of leaf plates, serving sequence, and hand contact become micro-choreographies of caste affirmation. The act of "unity" is performed through hierarchical grace—a moral economy where generosity flows downward, and ritual prestige is affirmed through feeding the right person in the right way.

In Rajasthan, where ritual is lived across caste, kinship, and ecology, food becomes a primary site for negotiating identity, divinity, and order. Whether offered in haveli temples, grove shrines, or domestic kitchens, *prasaad* is always more than food. It is a record of the past, a rehearsal of power, and a ritual for the future.

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