

Food Offerings in Hindu Temples & Case Study of Tirumala Temple

Dr.ECCLESTON

IAS, Commissioner of Collegiate and Technical Education, Govt. Of Andhra Pradesh,
Vijayawada.

Abstract

Food offered to God is called “PRASADAM” and the process of offering food is called NAIVEDYAM. By offering the food and then taking it back, we are eating the food blessed by the God. Through Aarti or offering food to the God, our inner soul offer respect and devotion to the Supreme Soul (God). Anything offered to God with Love and Devotion becomes PRASADAM. Hindus believe that everything in this world belongs to God and we are just servants of the Lord. By serving food to the God, we offer our devotion and gratitude to our Master for the food created by him and that belongs to him.

Key words: 1. Prasadam, 2. Agarna, 3. Sahasranama 4. Naivedyam

Religious perspective

In Hinduism, offering food to God is the most important ritual without which the worship is considered as incomplete and fulfilled. Food offered to God is called “PRASADAM” and the process of offering food is called NAIVEDYAM. PRASADA in Sanskrit means ‘Mercy’ or the divine blessings of the lord. By offering the food and then taking it back, we are eating the food blessed by the God. When we get the offered food back is PRASADAM, its value and quality increases and this purifies our mind and soul. An Aarti is done at an auspicious time by a priest formally in a temple devoting songs and mantras are chanted while doing Aarti. Through Aarti or offering food to the God, our inner soul offer respect and devotion to the Supreme Soul (God).

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 9, Sloka 27 says “ Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, whatever you give away or whatever austerity you are in, O.. son of Kunti (Arjuna), do that as an offering towards me. Thus you will be freed from the auspicious and inauspicious consequences of being bond by KARMA and liberated in having your mind set on the renunciation of this Bhakti Yoga, you will attain to me. Bhakti Yoga is all about connecting over consciousness with the Supreme Soul. In other words, we believe ourselves to the

embodied soul (JEVA), a part and parcel of God, yet separate from him. God only desire love and devotion in our offerings. God does not need any food. He is self- sufficient, ever pervading, omini present and yet he accepts the offerings of the devotees in exchange of love and devotion. Anything offered to God with Love and Devotion becomes PRASADAM.

Hindus believe that everything in this world belongs to God and we are just servants of the Lord. By serving food to the God, we offer our devotion and gratitude to our Master for the food created by him and that belongs to him. This is just a way of saying thanks to the God and that we are not stealing this food and taking his permission to eat the food blessed by him. The saintly persons get relief from all kinds of sins by partaking the food that has first offered to God as sacrifice. Not only food, everything that is offered to God becomes PRASADAM. This includes Water, Incense sticks, Clothes, Jewels, Flowers, Fruits etc.

Food Offerings at Tirumala Temple

In a day, food is offered to God at the times prescribed by the Agarna Shastra. The quantity, the composition, and the variety of food are also dictated by the Agama Shastra. The three major food offerings are BalaBhogam, Raja Bhogam and ShayanaBhogam, as mentioned earlier. In addition to these three, other food offerings are also made on other occasions.

In the morning, offering is made during the first ritual of the day, Suprabhatam, as soon as God is awakened from the deep slumber of Ekanta Seva. The lamps are lit and the food offering is made of fresh raw milk still warm drawn from the cow (DharaUshnena Goksheeram) and fresh butter (navaneetam). Suprabhatam is followed by Tomala Seva, and Sahasranama Archana. As part of the ritual Yarthasanam, God is offered a mixture of jaggery, black sesame seeds and dried ginger, all powdered together. This is followed by Sahasranama Archana and BalaBhogam. This completes the morning rituals or the Pratah Kala Aradhana. After sarvadarshanam by devotees, the known rituals with AshtottaraShatanama Archana and Raja Bhogam are performed. After this the devotees can have sarvadarshanam of God until evening. During the evening rituals or the Saayan Kala Aradhana, the sanctum is cleaned, the idol is decorated with fresh flowers, AshtottaraShatanama Archana is performed, and ShayanaBhogam is offered. After that, the midnight food offering in the name of Thiruveesam is given, which consists of cooked white rice and jaggery rice (Sudha annam and Guda-annam). Later, the final ritual of the day, Ekanta Seva, is performed when hot milk, along with seasonal cut fruits and dry fruits deep-fried in ghee are placed before God.

Besides the above food offerings made in the sanctum, there are additional offerings made to processional idols (UtsavaBeram- Malayappa Swami with Goddess Sri Devi and Goddess Bhudevi) during several daily and weekly Arjitha sevas or the rituals in which devotees can take part by paying a sum. These sevas include KalyanaUtsavam, DolaUtsavam, Brahma Utsavam, VasantaUtsavam, and SahasraDeepalankara Seva on a daily basis. Weekly sevas include Ashtadala Padma Aradhana on Tuesdays, Sahasra Kalasha Abhishekam on Wednesdays, Thiruppavada on Thursdays, and Vishesha Puja on Mondays. As a special offering during DolaUtsavam and SahasraDeepalankara Seva, a mixture of cashewnuts, sugar, cardamom, khus-khus and grated dry coconut (PanchaKajjayam) is offered.

During special annual rituals like Brahma Utsavam, VasartaUtsavam, Pavitra Utsavam, Pushpa Yagam, JyeshthaAbhishekam, and annual festivals like Ugadi (Telugu New Year day), Deepawali or Diwali (AniveraAshthanam), Sri Rama Navami, Sri Jayanti, Vaikuntha Ekadashi, the food offerings are doubled and the measures of ingredients are also doubled (dittam) as per the Vaikhanasa Agama. All these offerings are prescribed by the Agamas to please God, is Creator of the entire universe, for the welfare of the human beings and the preservation of the planet, and to provide protection from natural and man-made disasters.

Schedules of Food Offering

Daily Schedule

Daily food is offered to God at three bells, which form the main offerings to the deity inside the Temple. These foods are also offered on special days.

First bell: Breakfast or BalaBhogam

- Anna prasadam varieties
- Maatra-annam
- Mudga-annam (ghee pongal)
- Tintrini rasa-annam (tamarind rice, pulihore)
- Dadhyodha-annam (curd rice).
- Guda-annam (jaggery rice, chakra pongal)
- Saka-annam (kadambam)
- Shakkara-annam (ravakesari)

Besides these, four other kinds of snacks are also offered daily, known as Panyaramulu (savouries):

- Laadukam (laddu)
- Masha-apupam (vada).
- Guda-apupam (appam)
- Chakra-apupam (dosa)

Second bell: Lunch or Raja Bhogam

- Sudha-annam (plain white rice)
- Pulihore
- Guda-annam
- Dadhyodhanam
- Seera or Shakkara-annam

Third or night bell: Dinner or Shayana Bhogam

- Main offering is Marichya-annam (malahora or pepper rice)
- Chakra apupam
- Dosa
- Laadukam Masha-apupam
- Shaka-annam (rice cooked with vegetables, also known as 'kadambam')

Midnight offering

Tiruveesam is jaggery rice or Guda-annam. This is followed by the Ekanta Seva of God at night. This seva or service is performed after midnight.

It is performed just before God is put to bed and the food offering made is the final Naivedyam offered for the day, consisting of warm milk and dry fruits fried in ghee. This is accompanied by seasonal fruits cut into small pieces.

Weekly Schedule

This is along with the food that is offered every day, which has been described in the daily schedules. Weekly sevas and foods offered on specific days:

Monday: *No special offering, besides the daily offerings.*

Tuesday: *No special offering, besides the daily offerings.*

Wednesday: This is the day for Sahasra Kalasha Abhishekam ceremony. Special offering of this day is anna-payasam, also known as kheer, made with milk and dry fruits; vadapappu, made of green dal that has been soaked in water, then filtered and mixed with salt and coconut scrapings; and panakam or water with jaggery dissolved in it, scented with cardamom and tulsi.

Thursday: This is the day of the Tiruppavada festival, an important addition every week to the list of offerings to God that takes place during the second bell or lunch. At this time, a huge heap of tamarind rice is made and elaborately decorated. This festival is for 'anna shanti', or the pacification by food. The heap is extraordinary in size and is also extensively decorated. It is placed on a silver platter in Bangaru Vakili or the golden courtyard that is located just in front the sanctum of God. This is the place from where the offering is made to God. Along with this are offered jalebi (sweet) of an extra-large size and a tentolla/muruku (which is like a salty jalebi). As in the case of laddu and vada, fifty-one of each kind of jalebi are offered.

Along with this, other foods like laddu, vada and payasam of milk are also offered to God at the time of this festival.

Thursday evening: Once again vadapappu and panakam are offered.

Thursday in the week is marked for the important ritual of 'anna shanti' or the pacification by food performed every week.

Need for anna shanti: This is done to compensate for and seek forgiveness for any shortcomings in the food offerings that have been made through the week. It is done to atone any deficiencies in the observation of rituals of Naivedyam, as given in the Agama. The Agama procedures for Naivedyam are elaborate and require numerous ingredients, which may be difficult to procure, expensive or dependent on seasonal availability. Besides this, there may be human failings involved in observation of the procedures. There may also be unavoidable problems like rains, because of which the kitchen may be flooded and cooking rendered difficult or even impossible. The supply of fuel may also be affected due to weather conditions. There may be heavy work pressure due to shortfall of staff in the Temple or heavy traffic of devotees and hurried making of food. There may be a number of reasons why the offering of food has to compensate for shortcomings through the week, like unavoidable haste, unavailability of materials and rains that affected the kitchen. In other temples this

happens once a year, to take care of 'apacharams', or wrong-doing without knowledge or without choice.

Friday: After Abhishekam and decoration of God with jewellery, the image of Goddess Lakshmi that resides close to the heart of God is worshipped. Then a mixture of butter sprinkled with sugar is offered after bath and dressing. This offering takes place after the first bell and before the second bell. At the second bell, besides the daily offerings an additional offering is made of payasam, made with rice, jaggery, dry fruits and ghee. Also offered is poli (sweet pancake/bobatlu). Once again fifty-one pieces of this food are offered at this time.

Sunday: At the first bell, an important offering is made called Amruta Kalasham. This food offering is made of rice flour, jaggery, ghee and pepper. This is part of the Bala Rhogam and takes place only in the morning.

Daily Processional Food

There are daily processions of the idols that are taken out of the sanctum for public viewing. These idols are offered sacred food both inside the Temple during the usual schedule, and outside while on the procession. The Utsava murtis or processional idols come out of the Temple, generally, after the second bell or after the lunch hour, to participate in Arjitha sevas.

12 noon to 2 p.m.: When the processional murtis come out for the benefit of the devotees, they participate in KalyanaUtsavam from 12 noon to 2 p.m. At this time, four varieties of rice offerings, which are Mudga-annam, Guda-annam, Dadhyodhan, Tintrini or Pulihore, and four varieties of Paniyarams (of the Laadukam group) are offered to the idols.

In the sacred fire, offerings of all kinds, like homam during KalyanaUtsvam, are offered as havis in the fire for the gods. The types of offerings in fire are mainly Gudaapupam and Suddha-annam fire offerings are a way of taking food to the gods and the kind of offering depends on the god for whom the offering is meant.

3 p.m. to 4 p.m.: At the VasantaUtsavam, same four varieties of rice and four varieties of Paniyarams mentioned above are offered after the Abhiskhekam.

5.30 p.m. to 6 p.m.: Besides the two festivals daily, the lamp ceremony called SahasraDeepalankara Seva is held in the evening. During this puja, the food offering made is called 'PanchaKajjayam' or a preparation made of five ingredients. This dry and sweet

offering is made of sugar, dry coconut scrapings, cashew nuts, khus-khus and cardamom. After this seva, the processional deities return to the Temple. Once the gods are back in Bangaru Vakili, an offering is made of the sweet ravakesari.

Daily menu after lunch includes betel nuts, cardamom, camphor also known as Ghanasaram and pearl powder or Mukta-churnam.

Special Occasions

The daily menu increases in quantity for special occasions, like annual festivals, asthanams and processions, Asthanams are formal sabhas of all the members of the Temple community, who meet for celebrations like Deepawali.

During the three days of Pavitra Utsavam, nine days of Brahmotsavam and three days of JyestaAbhishekam, special food is offered when the Utsava murtis are kept in Yagashala. On this occasion, the deities are also offered ksheera-annam, made of rice boiled with milk, sugar, ghee, saffron and dry fruits.

Popular Prasadam: Srivari Laddu

Over two lakh laddus are made every day in the four or five daily sevas along with every darshan and distributed as prasadam to all the devotees. While it is not known when laddus were introduced as Naivedyam, they may have become popular for two reasons. First, the devotees, after visiting the Temple, want to take back home the divine prasadam. Laddus, the well-known prasadam from Tirupati, are usually distributed among friends and family after a visit to the pilgrimage. Second, laddus can be preserved for a few days; this allows them a longer shelf life and their size helps in transportation. However, all food preparations are perishable. Although it is a popular belief that laddus remain intact for a longer period of time due to the blessings of God, in reality, laddus do not undergo any physical change after being offered as Naivedyam. However, after being offered to God, the laddus attain great importance and are equivalent to divine nectar or Amrutam.

The laddu has many distinctive features like its size, weight and also the small crystals of sugar formed naturally within it. These crystals have a simple explanation. During the preparation, the boondi or the little drops of flour paste are drenched in hot sugar syrup, which crystalizes when the food cools down. The nature of laddus is satvik that has the

quality to calm the mind and induce peaceful thoughts, especially because of the use of jaggery, milk and rice.

Popularly known as 'Tirupati Laddus', these are one of the most widely distributed prasadam of any temple in the country and are even taken foreign countries by pilgrims. This prasadam is made in large quantities at the Tirumala Temple to address the enormous demand of devotees. Even then, in comparison to the total amount of prasadam made, the quantity each person gets is still very small.