

Annam Na Nindyat

- the Indian Tradition of Respecting and Celebrating Food¹

Probal Ray Choudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of Cultural Education
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Coimbatore

At the end of the great war of Kurukshetra, records *Bhavisyapurana*, Bhagavan Sri Krishna came to Yudhisthira, now king of Hastinapura, and spoke with great urgency: *dadasvannam dadasvannam dadasvannam yudhisthira* (“Give food! Give food! Give food! O Yudhisthira”). The great war of Kurukshetra had annihilated the political leadership of the country and left Indian polity in a vacuum. The polity was to be reorganized, the society resurrected, now that Dharma had been re-established with the victory of the Pandavas in the Great War. For all that to be achieved, *anna* – food – the basic sustenance for life – had to be ensured for one and all. On the advice of Sri Krishna, King Yudhisthira organizes the *asvamedhayajna* and the *Mahabharata* records an extraordinary celebration of distributing food as a part of the sacred year-long rites and rituals. Order is re-established, people are satiated and contented, and the virtuous Yudhisthira is recognized worldwide as a *chakravarti*.

It is just not the *Mahabharata* alone, the *Ramayana*, the *Dharmasastras*, the *Upanishads* – all primary texts of Indian civilizational literature – lay unusual emphasis on the primary *dharma* of growing and sharing food in plenty. Protected by defiant natural boundaries and nurtured by the bounties of Nature, India has from time immemorial maintained its civilization with great opulence under the precepts of *dharma*. Vast contiguous tracts of fertile lands unknown in world geography, a system of irrigation sustained by great rivers, abundant rainfall and sunshine all over the land all round the year, seems to have connived together to sustain this opulence and bounty of Mother Nature in India. Hence, it is not unusual that Indian literatures right from the classical times would be celebrating the great abundance that it has been endowed with.

¹ The entire material for this article is drawn from the book, *Annam Bahu Kurvita: Recollecting the Indian Discipline of Growing and Sharing Food in Plenty*, co-authored by Jitendra Bajaj and Mandayam Doddamane Srinivas, published by the Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai, in 1996, which may be consulted for original citations and references.

It is in India, that we look upon the guests, besides our mothers, fathers, and preceptors, as gods. Before laying the inviolable discipline of not letting anyone go unfed and un-cared for from one's door, the *Taittiriya Upanishad* proclaims, '*annam na nindyat. tadvratam. annam na paricaksita. tadvratam. annam bahu kurvita. tadvratam.*'² – 'Do not look down upon *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for one who knows. Do not neglect *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for one who knows. Multiply *anna* many-fold. Endeavour so that there be a great abundance of food. That is the inviolable discipline of mankind.' Having being bound by such an explicit *dharmika* discipline, it was but natural for the celebrated kings of classical Indian literature to be perpetually engaged in ensuring and organizing an abundance of food in their land and liberally sharing it amongst their people.

Of our celebrated *itihasas*, the *Mahabharata* in particular, recalls the greatness of food and the giving of food in an emphatic manner. In fact, one can say that the epic opens and ends with a great *yajna*. While it opens with the *rajasuyayajna* of Yudhisthira, king of Indraprastha, it ends with the *asvamedhayajna* – again of Yudhisthira, but now king of Hastinapura. The *asvaedhayajna* of *Mahabharata* is occasioned by Sri Krishna's advice after the long discourse that Bhisma, the Kuru grandsire, offers to Yudhisthira, who has emerged victorious in the Great War, and is now king of Hastinapura.

Bhisma, during his long discourse to Yudhisthira on *raja-dharma* which spans over a quarter of the epic, emphasises again and again the duty of the king to ensure that within his domain agriculture is well taken care of, that peasants are not oppressed by unjust taxations, and the irrigation of their fields is not left merely upon the mercy of the rain god, so that there is always an abundance of food all around and nobody anywhere has to sleep on a hungry stomach.

Similarly, the *Apastamba Dharmasutra* proclaims that it is the primary duty of the king to ensure that none within his domain suffers from hunger, want or

² Taittiriyanopanishad, 3.9

deprivation. And as Bhishma warms Yudhishthira, the hunger of even one person in a kingdom renders the life of the king forfeit. The king should be ever vigilant and ensure that in his kingdom no one should be let to suffer from hunger or from disease, or from extremes of heat and cold. He must also ensure that no one in his kingdom should suffer because of general scarcity or because of specific design against him.

Bhishma further says, “When young children eagerly watch the delicious meals of others, and are not offered the same food with all ceremony and care, what indeed can be a sin greater than that? O King! if even one learned *brahmana* in your country suffers from the pangs of hunger, then you shall suffer the fate of those who have committed the sin of killing a child in the mother’s womb, or worse. As Raja Sibi has said, if there be a king in whose kingdom a twice-born or anyone else is found suffering from hunger, then the life of such a king is indeed forfeit. A king in whose kingdom even one *snataka*, one person formally equipped in the learning of his discipline, suffers from hunger, that *rashtra* stops prospering and the kingdom is lost to others.”

The author of *Mahabharata* describes with great passion the background preparations and the celebrations of these two great sacrifices which were attended not only by the great kings from far and wide, but also by the common people from distant and sundry places. But what catches the imagination of the readers in the description of the great *yajnas* offered by Sage Vyasa, is the magnanimous scale of *annadana* that is organized and ensured for one and all in the *yajna bhumi*. Bhimasena, the second Pandava, and the most accomplished cook of his times, whose reputation rivalled that of the legendary cook Nala, was directly responsible for this great *annadana* and he personally supervised everything. It was the explicit instruction of King Yudhishthira that Bhima should personally and continuously supervise the feeding of all who graced the sacrificial ground. The epic describes how Bhima accomplished his task, while no one was left hungry or in sorrow, none was to be found in a state of destitution or misery; everyone was happy, satiated and contented. “Give, keep giving! Serve, keep serving!” were the sounds, apart from that of the drums and conches, that were heard unceasingly through day and night from the *yajna bhumi*. Those, who had come from different countries and distant lands to that great *yajna* of Yudhishthira, kept talking for long about the great festivity and celebration of food they had witnessed.

Much like Veda Vyasa in the *Mahabharata*, Maharshi Valmiki in *Ramayana* also describes the *yajnas* of the great kings Dasaratha and Sri Rama; and like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* also opens and closes with the description of a *yajna*. One of the greatest *yajnas* described in Indian literature is the *asvamedha* of Sri Ramachandra that marks the culmination of his reign. Valmiki describes in his *magnum opus* the large and complex preparations that were undertaken under the orders of Sri Rama to ensure the successful completion of his *yajna*. However, what catches the imagination of readers again is the great feeding that is organized in the Naimisaranya even before the commencement of the *yajna* proper. The feeding is so abundant and sumptuous that amongst the multitude gathered in Naimisaranya there is not one who looks emaciated, downcast or distressed. Everyone present in that great *yajna* seems to exude well-being; everyone is well-fed, well-nourished and in high cheer. The ultimate tribute Sage Valmiki pays this *yajna* is that, throughout the period of a year and more that the *yajna* lasts, nothing is ever found wanting there. Such is the greatness of Sri Rama, and such is the greatness of the *annadana* that takes place in his *yajna*.

Thus we see that the primary texts of Indian civilizational literature lay unusual emphasis on the primary *dharma* of growing and sharing food in plenty. The texts insist that a *grihastha*, a householder, before sitting down to partake food, must first ensure that all living beings around have been properly fed and all aspects of creation have been propitiated. In the Indian society, the king is the supreme *grihastha* and sits at the apex of the polity, thereby organizing and governing it. Therefore it is but natural for the celebrated kings of classical Indian literature, to follow the discipline as laid down in the texts. The texts also present the act of eating for oneself without first feeding others, of enjoying food while others remain hungry, as an existential sin which cannot be expiated by any means.

The texts enjoin upon the householders the primary duty of serving anyone who comes seeking their hospitality. This, they say, is the inviolable discipline for the one who knows. Therefore, the *Shastras* direct everyone to exert great efforts to ensure an abundance of food; and always welcome the guests with the announcement that food is ready.

The *Shastras* further declare that the one who prepares and gives food in abundance, with high care and veneration, obtains food in abundance with the same high care and veneration; the one who prepares food and gives food in a moderate measure, with moderate care and veneration, obtains food in the same moderate measure with similarly moderate care and veneration; and one who prepares and gives food in a small measure, with low care and veneration, obtains food in same small measure and with similar indifference.

The *smritis* enjoin upon the householders to propitiate the *devas*, the *rishis*, the ancestors (*pitris*), the *bhutas*, and the guests, first with reverential offering of food, and only then partake for themselves of what is left over. A householder who cooks for himself alone does not partake of food, but partakes merely of sin. For the wise one, the left-over of the *pancha-maha-yajna* – of what has been shared with all – alone is proper food.

The spirit of the classical Indian civilization guided all actions in India till recent times. The great kings of India in the historical period tried to organize and ensure abundance much in the lines of their ancient counterparts. History tells how the great Gupta Emperor, Samudragupta, organized his *asvamedhayajna* allowing great sharing of food and other gifts amidst tumultuous celebrations to people all over his great empire. From the records left by the Chinese scholar-traveller Huen Tsang we get to hear the large *yajna* conducted by Harshavardhana, one of the most revered kings of India, every few years at Prayag during the occasion of the Kumbha Mela. The king just emptied his treasury and distributed all the accumulated riches of the empire amongst the people. He even gave away his royal jewels and garments, and after having done so, he would beg from his sister a piece of second-hand garment. This account of Harshavardhana's great *yajna* reads much like the *yajnas* of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Thus we see that the discipline of sharing was not merely enshrined in the literary epics of the ancient age and the period that followed it, it was also at the core of the Indian polity and guided the practice of the kings.

The discipline of having a plenty of food and sharing it in plenty before partaking of it oneself, that was taught by the *rishis* and practised by the kings, the *tapasvins* and the ordinary *grihasthas* of classical India, became an indelible part of our lore and polity. India, for long ages, from the ancient times up to almost the present, and in all her multifarious regions and cultures, continued to follow the discipline of sharing before eating, both in thought and practice. Literatures from different regions continued to tell the stories of great sacrifices and great *yajnas* undertaken to assuage the hunger of all, and the kings throughout history continued to organize the polity around the central theme of producing and sharing in abundance.

However, with the Indian civilisation getting eclipsed from about the twelfth century of the Common Era in many parts of North India, Indians had to forego much of their classical and ancient disciplines. As the Indian kings lost the status of sovereigns in medieval times, they forfeited their right to organize *yajnas* as laid down in our sacred classical literature. Instead, many of them, especially in the Mithila-Vanga region, started worshipping the Great Goddess in autumn, during the *Navaratri*, when the rich harvest of the great plains blessed by the mighty River Ganga were brought home. The Durga Pujas of these kings, which were organized in the spirit of the classical *yajnas*, would see great *annadana* as a sacred ritual forming the core of the festivities. People from far and wide would travel to the royal households to take part in the fortnight long festivities and return home satiated and contented.

A special mention may be made here of the efforts sustained for centuries by the Maratha kings of Thanjavur. A large part of the coastal lands and port-duties in Thanjavur, it seems, was assigned to *chatrams* and *mathams* – the traditional institutions of hospitality and learning prevalent in the Tamil lands, which were managed by the queens of the royal households.

Things took a drastic turn with the onset of the British rule as scarcity replaced opulence. Within a decade of the British becoming the administrators of Bengal, the opulent land of Bengal faced scarcity unknown in the history of India. The great famine of Bengal which lasted from 1769 to 1773, was such a catastrophic event that saw one in every three persons in Bengal perishing in the famine. To help the people in his

zamindari during this great distress, Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray of Nadia is said to have organized a legendary festival of Goddess Durga hitherto unseen or unheard in later times in Bengal. He opened the doors of his granary to assuage the hunger of his people. He commissioned the construction of new royal buildings and erection of fortifications and digging of ditches around existing ones to provide work for the people in order to help them sustain their lives at a time when agriculture and harvest had both failed. Many great landlords of Bengal of the time emulated this great Raja's example, and many a people in Bengal was thus saved. However, during the entire period of British rule in India, the per capita level of food grains in India were either pegged at the near-famine or famine levels.

The British administrators went a step further. The Governor General of East India Company ordered stopping of largesse that were organized as part of Hindu festivals. Indians were made to forget the traditions of their ancestors. The memory subsided gradually, and the society strayed from the discipline.

The people of India, however, seem to have continued to follow the discipline of sharing up to recent times. The accounts of the early British administrators mention of the flourishing institutions of hospitality and sharing that they say all throughout India, not merely in the centres of pilgrimage, but even in ordinary villages and in the midst of important roads.

After all, the Indian tradition had proclaimed *anna* as the first manifestation of the Brahman – *annam brahmeti vyajanat*. It is the primacy of *anna* and *annadana* – of food and sharing of food – that sustains the *dharmachakra* – the circle of *dharma* – in the Indian civilization. The insistence of the Indian classical texts on the inviolable discipline of feeding before eating for oneself follows from the basic Indian understanding of the Universe as a great cycle of give and take between different aspects of creation. Whatever is earned or produced by man is in fact taken from other aspects of creation and it may rightfully be consumed only after returning the shares of all, only after propitiating and fulfilling all other aspects of creation. The *Bhagavad Gita* puts it as stealing who consumes for oneself without having thus propitiated the others. The *Gita* further explains that Brahman, the creator, while initiating this great cycle of

the universe, enjoins upon human beings to keep it moving through *yajna*, disciplined action that propitiates and fulfils all aspects of creation. The one who does not keep this cycle of give and take – the *dharmachakra* – moving, is a sinner immersed merely in the pleasures of the senses. The living of such a one is a waste.

Unfortunately, modern India has been deeply negligent in following the basic discipline that classical India has taught us with such great importance. Today's India is perhaps no more a land of such acute scarcity as it was under the British rule. However, hunger of the poor and the un-cared for in our country is a reality that cannot be ignored. The negligence has become much worse during the last couple of decades, when Indian economy has tried to align itself with the international market places. In this period, the per capita production of food-grains in India, which has always remained near starvation levels since the early period of British administration, has precipitously declined in several states; and large areas that were producing food in abundance till recently have gone out of cultivation. A resurgence of India is possible only when we again excel in agriculture and ensure an abundance of food-grains, as well as restoring the classical discipline of sharing in plenty.