Annam Bahu Kurvita

The Indian Tradition of Growing and Sharing Food

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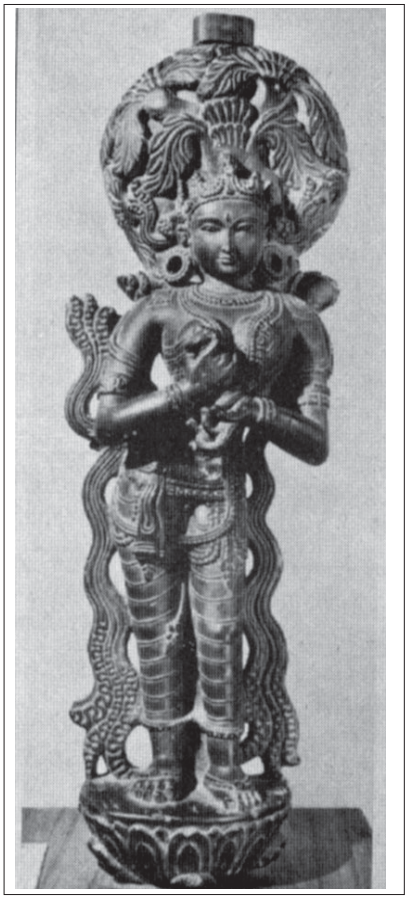
INDIA is hungry. For almost two hundred years, the average availability of foodgrains in India has remained below 200 kg per capita per year, which the British administrators considered to be the minimal requirement for staving off famines. The country, it seems, reached a state of near famine within a few decades of the coming of the British, and we have remained in that state ever since.

India today produces around 180 million tons of foodgrains for a population of around 900 million, implying an average of 200 kg per capita per year. Of the gross production of about 200 kg per capita of foodgrains, allowance has to be made for seed and wastage, even if it is assumed that little need be fed to the animals. Taking into account these deductions, it is estimated that the amount of foodgrains available for human consumption in 1990 was around 180 kg per capita per year, which is less than what the famine commission appointed by the British administration in 1880 had estimated to be the bare minimum to avoid starvation deaths, and is lower than what is consumed almost anywhere else in the world.

Foodgrains, cereals and pulses together, constitute almost the whole of the staple food of the Indians. There is little flesh or fish consumed in India, and there is also not much consumption of edible roots, which constitute a fairly large proportion of the staple food in much of Africa and parts of Europe. Average consumption of flesh and fish in India for 1990 was estimated to be 7.5 kg per capita per year, and if we also count about 20.5 kg per capita per year of potatoes, total staple consumption would amount to a little above 200 kg.



The wish-fulfilling goddess of abundance — Ganga[1]

On a rough reckoning, consumption of staple foods — cereals, pulses, edible roots, flesh and fish — adds up to around 300 kg per capita per year in most countries of the world. [See Table 1]. Of this, around 100 kg consists of flesh and fish in Europe and other parts of the world inhabited by people of European stock. In Asia and Africa, consumption of flesh and fish on the average is much less, around 30 kg per capita per year, and grains and roots therefore make up the rest. And in those parts of Africa where edible roots constitute a major part of the staple basket, the total staple consumption is in fact much higher: Nigeria, the most populous country of Africa, consumes about 420 kg per capita per year of staple foods, of which about 320 kg comprises of edible roots.

The average Indian consumption of staple foods thus falls below the ordinary standards of the world by at least one third. There are only a few countries in the world, outside the Indian sub-continent, where average staple consumption is at this level. Countries like Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia in Africa, and Guatemala, Haiti and Peru in Central and South America are perhaps the only ones — except a

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couple of others that we mention below — where staple consumption happens to be as low as ours; most of these countries are known to have been in great political stress for long periods. And in many of these countries low availability of what we have called staple foods is often alleviated by a rather large availability of other types of food, which happens to be more or less staple there. Thus, diets in Sudan and Somalia are supplemented by large quantities of milk, amounting to 116 kg per capita per year in Sudan and 226 kg in Somalia. In other countries of Africa, as also in Central and South America, large quantities of plantains, bananas and other fruit make substantially large contributions to the staple diet.

Table 1: Consumption of Staple Foods (kg per capita/year for 1990)

	Cereals	Edible Roots	Pulses	Total grains & roots	Meat & offals	Fish	Total
World	170.7	62.4	6.5	239.6	34.9	13.1	287.6
Europe	127.1	80.2	3.3	210.6	88.1	18.8	317.5
U.S.A.	113.4	59.8	3.4	176.6	119.0	21.6	317.2
U.S.S.R.	166.4	97.0	2.2	265.6	74.4	29.1	369.1
Australia	111.8	66.0	0.8	178.6	118.0	15.8	312.4
South America	114.3	75.4	9.1	198.8	47.0	8.2	254.0
Africa	138.0	148.5	8.9	295.4	15.6	7.7	318.7
Asia	196.7	39.0	6.5	242.2	17.5	11.6	271.3
India	166.1	20.5	13.4	200.0	4.2	3.3	207.5
Pakistan	154.5	5.3	4.8	164.6	12.3	1.8	178.7
Bangladesh	206.5	11.4	4.6	222.5	2.8	7.0	232.3
Sri Lanka	161.1	25.2	6.2	192.5	1.6	14.2	208.3
Nepal	216.3	34.6	6.6	257.5	6.5	0.7	264.7
Myanmar	235.5	4.3	4.4	244.2	7.1	15.0	266.3
China	232.5	59.1	3.4	295.0	26.7	9.7	331.4
Japan	145.2	37.6	2.4	185.2	41.0	71.8	298.0

Countries functioning with a reasonable level of stability seem to be almost always able to provide for a consumption level near the norm of 300 kg per capita per year, even if it involves undertaking large-scale imports of food. The only exceptions to this rule outside the Indian subcontinent seem to be Thailand and Kenya, both of which have a level of staple consumption as low as ours, and both of which seem to have persisted with the ways that came to govern the public life during the times of British domination.

Within the Indian subcontinent, Nepal, with an average staple consumption of around 260 kg per capita per year, seems not too badly off and Bangladesh, with an average annual staple consumption of 230 kg per capita, is at least better off than us. In Sri Lanka, staple consumption of around 200 kg per capita per year is supplemented by almost 70 kg of coconuts. Within the subcontinent only Pakistan and Afghanistan fare worse than us.

The situation of India and some of our neighbours in the subcontinent, is thus extraordinary. We are living at an average level of consumption that would be unacceptable anywhere else in the world, and which is no better than what is considered to be sufficient in situations of famine.

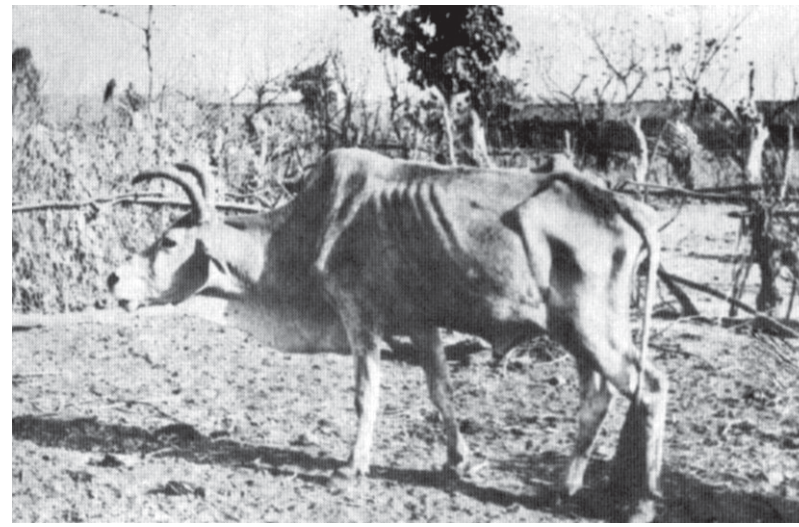
Animals Even Worse Off

This is the situation with respect to the food available for human consumption. When we take into account the total supply of foodgrains and roots, the Indian situation in

Table 2: Supply and Consumption as Human Food of Cereals, Pulses and Roots (in kg. per capita/year for 1990)

	Cereals		Pulses		Roots		Total	
	Food	Supply	Food	Supply	Food	Supply	Food	Supply
World	170.7	347.8	6.5	11.2	62.4	116.3	239.6	475.2
Europe	127.1	528.6	3.3	17.5	80.2	157.3	210.6	703.5
U.S.A.	113.4	874.0	3.4	3.8	59.8	39.7	176.6	917.4
U.S.S.R.	166.4	887.6	2.2	33.3	97.0	146.2	265.6	1067.1
Australia	111.8	463.8	0.8	33.5	66.0	44.0	178.6	541.2
South America	114.3	240.2	9.1	10.5	75.4	98.3	198.8	349.0
Africa	138.0	183.4	8.9	11.3	148.5	206.0	295.4	400.7
Asia	196.7	267.2	6.5	8.3	39.0	71.1	242.2	346.0
India	166.1	189.6	13.4	16.4	20.5	25.9	200.0	231.9
Pakistan	154.5	173.8	4.8	6.7	5.3	6.7	164.6	187.2
Bangladesh	206.5	223.3	4.6	5.0	11.4	13.8	222.5	242.0
Sri Lanka	161.1	176.4	6.2	6.6	25.2	25.3	192.5	208.2
Nepal	216.3	269.2	6.6	8.1	34.6	44.6	257.5	321.8
Myanmar	235.5	272.7	4.4	8.2	4.3	5.0	244.2	285.9
China	232.5	319.3	3.4	5.1	59.1	130.1	295.0	454.5
Japan	145.2	319.4	2.4	2.6	37.6	58.3	185.2	380.3

comparison with the rest of the world seems to be even worse. As we have seen, the supply of both foodgrains and edible roots in India amounts to only about 230 kg per capita per year, of which 200 kg constitute human food — which is almost the whole of the available supply after allowance is made for seed and waste — thus leaving nothing for the animals.



A famished cow in a drought affected area

In most other countries a considerable amount is often produced or imported for the cattle: the average supply of foodgrains and roots in the world is nearly twice the amount of foodgrains and roots used for human consumption; much of the other half is fed to the animals. The average supply of foodgrains and roots in Europe adds up to around 700 kg per capita per year. The figure for the USA is around 900 kg and for China is about 450 kg per capita per year.[See Table 2].

Total supply of foodgrains in India is thus less than half of what would be required if we were to feed our animal population the way animals are fed in the rest of the world. Since we produce so little food, we leave almost no foodgrains for our population of around 270 million heads of cattle and buffaloes. Europe feeds 170 million tons of foodgrains — which is near our total production of foodgrains — and 54 million tons of edible roots to its cattle population of only 124 million heads. And China feeds 65 million tons of foodgrains and 60 million tons of roots to about 100 million heads of cattle and buffaloes and 300 million heads of pigs [See Table 3].

Production of foodgrains in India is thus at a level that leaves both our people and our animals hungry.

Scarcity and Callousness

The figures for availability of food in India clearly point towards widespread hunger of people and animals in India. Every available statistical indicator confirms the prevalence of hunger. Thus, according to generally accepted statistics, 40 percent of the Indian people do not have access to the bare minimum number of calories required for survival, 63 percent of children under the age of five are malnourished and 88 percent of pregnant women suffer from anemia.

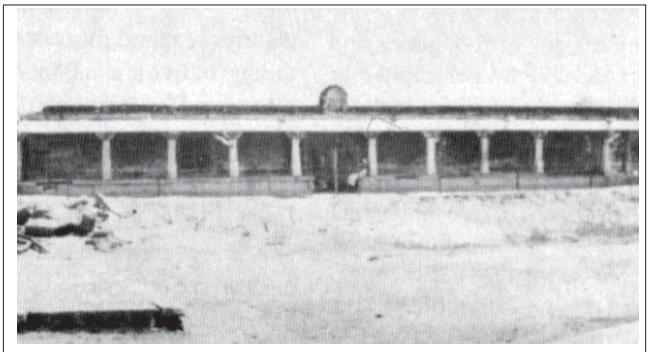
But one does not need to look at figures to see the hunger that prevails. In every city and town of India one can see cows and dogs roaming the streets searching for bits of food amongst heaps of dirt. And, in the larger cities, one can see an occasional child or even an adult competing with the cows and dogs for a share of the edible waste. But nowadays there is hardly anything edible in the waste from Indian households; and the cows are often content with filling their bellies with mere paper and plastic, the dogs howl through the night in hunger, and the human children and adults stand and lie on the streets crazed by sheer starvation.

Table 3: Quantities of food utilized as feed in different parts of the world (million tons in 1990)

	Cereals	Pulses	Roots	Oil-crops	Offals	Animal fats	Milk	Fish & seafood
World	675.1	18.1	153.8	14.0	1.1	1.6	111.0	29.2
Europe	161.2	6.5	54.3	2.7	0.0	0.4	38.9	9.0
U.S.A.	152.0	0.0	0.3	2.1	0.7	0.8	0.8	1.1
U.S.S.R.	149.6	7.9	19.9	0.7	0.0	0.1	51.4	2.7
Australia	4.2	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.1
South America	28.1	0.0	12.5	0.9	0.2	0.1	3.3	1.8
Africa	4.6	0.2	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.2	1.5
Asia	129.8	2.9	64.2	5.2	0.0	0.1	12.9	11.9
India	1.5	1.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.0	6.0	0.2
China	63.5	1.3	60.1	2.7	0.0	0.1	0.8	4.8
Japan	18.1	0.0	0.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	1.4	4.1

A journey through any part of India in the great railway trains, that crisscross the country heralding the arrival of modernity, brings one in even closer contact with hunger and starvation. Young children, their eyes glimmering with the sharp intellect of youth, sweep the floors of the trains to earn a bellyful of food and fight with the passengers, the waiters and with each other for the right to the edible leftovers. Their less adventurous and less energetic brothers wait on the platforms silently watching the passengers eat, and almost cry with gratitude for the gift of a single slice of dry bread or a stale *roti* or *idli*.

The scenes of hunger and starvation become even grimmer as one heads towards the great pilgrimage centres of India, the roads to which used to be dotted with *chatrams*, the Indian institutions of hospitality, where bells were rung at midnight to invite the laggard seeker to come and receive his food, and where orphaned children of the passers-by were provided shelter, food, education, and care till they were ready to face the world on their own. The persisting image that the pilgrim centres and the trains leading to them now leave on the mind is that of immense hunger and starvation. One of the most unfortunate images that comes to mind is that of a child of five soothing a younger child of two with a rubber nipple at the end of an empty bottle of milk on the main road of the great city of Tirupati, where a vast stream of pilgrims converges every day.



Perumalayyan Chatram — once a great institution of hospitality[2]

The statistical figures and the day-to-day images on the streets all speak of a great hunger stalking the lands of India. But, we as a people insist that we have sufficient food for ourselves. The economists and the policy planners have been claiming such sufficiency of food in India at least since the late sixties. They have now begun to claim that the food available in India is not only sufficient, it is a little too much for our needs.

The claim of sufficiency is based on the fact that the food that we produce cannot all be sold within the country at economic prices. There is no dearth of food, it is said, for those who can afford to buy; and those who cannot buy probably do not deserve to be fed. Lack of foodgrains for the animals is explained through a similar argument. Those who feed good food to the animals, it is said, also eat their flesh; we do not rear animals for economic exploitation, so we do not need to allocate foodgrains for them. Thus we condone both the scarcity and the hunger.

Food sharing

India, however, was not always like this. Indians in the past have laid extraordinary emphasis on growing food in abundance and sharing it in abundance. In fact, Indians, up to the present times, seem to have always looked upon an abundance of food as the primary condition of civilisation, and sharing of food was for us the primary discipline of civilised living. And indeed it is the discipline of civilised living that we call *dharma*.

This attitude towards food and the sharing of food is enshrined in the most basic texts of Indian antiquity. A text like the Taittiriyopanisad, a venerable *sruti* which even today continues to be compulsory reading for anyone with some regard for the *vaidika* corpus, gives expression to this Indian attitude towards food with unsurpassable intensity.

The Taittiriyopanisad is a text of *brahmavidya;* its objective is to prepare the seeker for and lead him towards a *darsana*, immediate and direct vision, of Brahman, the creator who at the beginning manifests himself as the universe and retracts the whole of creation back into himself at the end, only to begin the process again, at the beginning of another cycle of creation and dissolution. And in this text of *brahmavidya*, *anna*, the food, and manifestations of *anna* keep appearing at every step. *Anna,* in fact, forms the entrance to the edifice of *brahmavidya,* and what is enshrined at the centre of that edifice is also *anna*. The seeker, therefore, after going through the long path patiently shown almost step by step by the seer and achieving the *darsana*, bursts into a joyous celebration of having become one with *anna*, singing thus: *ahamannam ahamannam ahamannam,* I am *anna*, I am *anna*, I indeed am *anna.*

Just before this final unravelling of the ultimate reality for a seeker who has been intensely educated and rigorously prepared for the *darsana,* the Upanisad prescribes a number

of *vratas*, inviolable rules of living, for such a seeker to follow. And these are:

annam na nindyat. tadvratam.
(Do not look down upon *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for the one who knows.)

annam na paricaksita. tadvratam.
(Do not neglect *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for the one who knows.)

annam bahu kurvita. tadvratam.
(Multiply *anna* many-fold. Ensure an abundance of food all around. That is the inviolable discipline of life for the one who knows.)

Brahma, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay

na kamcana vasatau pratyacaksita. tadvratam. tasmadyaya kaya ca vidhaya bahvannam prapnuyat. aradhyasma annamityacaksate.
(Do not turn away anyone who comes seeking your hospitality. This is the inviolable discipline of the one who knows. Therefore, obtain a great abundance of *anna*, exert all your efforts to ensure such abundance; and welcome all seekers with the announcement that the food is ready, partake of it.)

Such is the discipline of abundance and sharing that the Taittiriyopanisad teaches. And the Rgveda emphasizes the discipline in even stronger terms, saying:

moghamannam vindate apracetah. satyam bravimi vadha itsa tasya. naryamanam pusyati no sakhayam. kevalagho bhavati kevaladi.
(Food that comes to the one who does not give is indeed a waste. This is the truth. I, the *rsi*, say it. The food that such a one obtains is not only wasted, in fact it comes as his very death. He feeds neither the *devas*, the upholders of various aspects of creation, nor the men who arrive at his door as friends, seekers and guests. Eating for himself alone, he becomes the partaker of sin alone.)

The discipline of growing an abundance of food and sharing it in abundance that is taught in the *sruti*, like the Rgveda and the Taittiriyopanisad, is of course emphasized again and again in the *smrti* texts like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the various *puranas* and the *dharmasastras* of different times and communities.

The Mahabharata recalls the greatness of food and the giving of food in a particularly imposing manner. As is well known, in the Mahabharata, Bhisma Pitamaha, the grand wise old man of Kuruvamsa, gives a long discourse instructing Yudhisthira in great detail about all aspects of *dharma*. This discourse runs to about 25,000 verses and forms nearly a quarter of the epic. Bhisma dies almost immediately after the end of this discourse, and Yudhisthira after much persuasion undertakes to perform an *asvamedhayajna*. After accomplishing the *yajna* and being relieved of the great effort and activity that such an observance involves, Yudhisthira requests Srikrsna to let him know the essence of the entire teaching of Bhisma. Srikrsna, in response, utters just 15 verses, the first ten of which lay down the centrality of *annadana*, the giving of food, in the life of a disciplined householder and the next five celebrate the greatness of food, its emergence out of the vital essences of the earth and its intimate connection with all life.

The first verse Srikrsna utters while summarizing the teachings of Bhisma for Yudhisthira is:

annena dharyate sarvam jagadetaccaracaram
annat prabhavati pranah pratyaksam nasti samsayah
(The world, both animate and inanimate, is sustained by food. Life arises from food: this is observed all around, there can be no doubt about it.)

And he ends his discourse on *annadana* with:

annadah pranado loke pranadah sarvado bhavet
tasmadannam visesena datavyam bhutimicchata
(The giver of food is the giver of life, and indeed of everything else. Therefore, one who is desirous of well-being in this world and beyond should specially endeavour to give food.)

The Bhavisyapurana in its chapter on *annadanamahatmya*, the greatness of the giving of food,

while probably recounting this incident from the Mahabharata, renders the teachings of Srikrsna in the cryptic commanding phrase:

dadasvannam dadasvannam dadasvannam yudhisthira

(O Yudhisthira! Give food! Give food! And, keep giving!)

Bhisma himself during his long discourse, and also elsewhere in the Mahabharata, reminds Yudhisthira again and again of the importance of feeding others in general, but especially of the duty of the king to ensure that within his domain agriculture is well tended for, that peasants are not oppressed by unjust exactions, and that the irrigation of their fields is not left merely upon the mercy of gods, so that there is always an abundance of food around and nobody anywhere has to sleep on a hungry stomach. This is also the advice that Srirama offers Bharata while enquiring after the welfare of Kosala when the latter visits him at Citrakuta during the early phase of Srirama's long sojourn in the forests.

Incidentally, all descriptions of *Ramarajya*, the ideal times that the Indians always dream of, seem to essentially portray an abundance of crops and a complete absence of hunger and thirst, as also of disease and error over the whole earth. Thus describing the *Ramarajya* that comes to prevail over the earth during the reign of Yudhisthira, the Mahabharata says:

vavarsa bhagvan devah kale dese yathepsitam
niramayam jagadabhut ksutpipase na kimcana
adhirnasti manusyanam vyasane nabhavanmatih

(*Devas* granted rains, at the right place and the right time, to fulfill all wants. The world became free of all disease. There was no hunger or thirst anywhere. There was no mental suffering, and nobody was led astray by temptation.)

And,

mahi sasyaprabahula sarvaratnagunodaya
kamadhugdhenuvad bhogan phalati sma sahasradha

(Earth yielded abundant crops, and all precious things. She had become the provider of all goodness. Like *kamadhenu*, the celestial cow, the earth offered thousands of luxuries in a continuous stream.)

The opposite of *Ramarajya* is *yugaksaya*, the end of times, and according to the Indian understanding the times begin to come to an end when food becomes so scarce that the people of the country are reduced to the selling of food; and even those who seek are refused food, water and shelter and are thus forced to lie around hungry and thirsty on the roads. There perhaps cannot be a sin greater than that of the king during whose reign the times reach such a nether end. Bhisma, in fact, in a particularly intense yet short chapter in the *anusasanaparvan* of Mahabharata, warns Yudhisthira that the hunger of even one person in a kingdom renders the life of the king forfeit; and if there be a king in whose kingdom young children eagerly watch the delicious meals of others and are not offered the same food with all ceremony and care, what indeed would be the fate of such a king?

But though the responsibility to ensure an abundance of food and an absence of hunger and want lies most heavily upon the king, it in fact has to be shared by all *grhasthas*, all the disciplined householders.

Householders' Responsibility

In the Indian understanding every householder is indeed a king within his domain, and it is equally incumbent upon him to ensure that none within his care suffers from hunger and want. In fact, the Indian insistence is that a householder may partake of food only after the ancestors and the *devas* representing different aspects of nature have been propitiated, the *bhutas* representing all created beings have been offered their share, the seekers at the door and the guests have been satisfied, and the servants and dependents have been fed. The Manusmrti, the authentically conservative *dharmasastra* of Indian tradition, lays down this daily discipline of feeding and taking care of others before eating for oneself in more than two hundred verses; summarizing the discipline the text says:

In the Indian understanding every householder is indeed a king within his domain, and it is equally incumbent upon him to ensure that none within his care suffers from hunger and want.

devanrsinmanusyamsca pitrngrhyasca devatah
pujayitva tatah pascadgrhasthah sesabhugbhavet
agham sa kevalam bhunkte yah pacatyatmakaranat
yajnasistasanam hyetatsatamannam vidhiyate

(The householder ought to eat only what is left after making reverential offerings to the *devas*, *rsis*, ancestors, the *bhutas* and the men under his care and those who come seeking at his door. A householder who cooks for himself alone does not partake of food, but partakes merely of sin. For the wise one the leftover of what has been shared with all of the above alone is proper food.)

According to Manu, after all have been taken care of, after all have been fed, it is indeed time for the *grhastha-dampati*, the husband and the wife, to sit down to eat for themselves; for their greatness is in eating what is left after feeding others:

bhuktavatsvatha vipresu svesu bhrtyesu caiva hi
bhunjiyatam tatah pascadavasistam tu dampati

(The husband and wife of the household ought to eat only what is left after all others — from the *brahmana* guests to the dependents of the household and all the members of the family — have been fed.)

Medhatithi, whose commentary on Manusmrti, Manubhasya, is known to be one of the most authoritative, refers to the use of the phrase '*avasistam tu dampati*' above, and explains that the time of eating prescribed for the husband and the wife is the same, there are no two separate mealtimes for them: *yo bharturbhojanakalah sa eva bharyaya api, prthaktasya bhojanakalasyabhavat.*

Medhatithi, however, recalls that Draupadi, while speaking to Satyabhama about her daily routine, in the *vanaparvan* of the Mahabharata, tells her that she, Draupadi, eats only after feeding everyone else, including her husbands. Draupadi, in that context, says:

nabhuktavati nasnate nasamviste ca bhartari
na samvisami nasnami sada karmakaresvapi

(Never do I bathe, eat or sleep, until my husbands, and even their servants, have bathed, eaten and slept.)

But Draupadi also tells Satyabhama much else about her daily routine in Indraprastha. This dialogue between Draupadi and Satyabhama is probably one of the most powerful descriptions of the extraordinary character of Draupadi. She, as she herself tells Satyabhama, seems to have taken the burden of running the Pandava household upon her shoulders, and she almost single-handedly runs it, leaving Yudhisthira free to pursue his interests. She accounts for the income and expense of the Pandava household, she looks after and supervises the work of the various dependents, she performs the daily *yajnas* prescribed for a householder, and while doing all this she takes care that she does not go beyond the wishes and desires of the Pandava brothers in any of her actions. As she says:

ye ca dharmah kutumbesu svasrva me kathitah pura
bhiksabalisraddhamiti sthalipakasca parvasu
manyanam manasatkara ye canye vidita mama
tan sarvananuvarte'ham divaratramatandrita
vinayan niyamamscaiva sada sarvatmana srita

A passer-by receiving hospitality from a householder

(I perform *bhiksa, bali* and *sraddha*, the daily giving of food for different aspects of the universe; I undertake *sthalipakayajna*, the cooking of special foods at the appropriate occasions; I offer proper hospitality to the venerable ones. I perform all these *dharmas* that are followed in the families and were earlier taught to me by my mother-in-law, and also others that I know. I observe all these day and night, untiringly. And, I follow *yama-niyama*, rules of self-control and personal hygiene of both body and mind, to the best of my abilities.)

aham patin natisaye natyasne natibhusaye
napi svasrum parivade sarvada pariyantrita

(I do not sleep while my husbands are awake; I do not eat while they have not eaten; and I do not adorn myself beyond what they find proper. I do not speak ill of my mother-in-law. I keep myself always under control.)

satam dasisahasrani kuntiputrasya dhimatah
patrihasta divaratramatithin bhojayantyuta
satamasvasahasrani dasanagayutani ca
yudhisthirasyanuyatramindraprasthanivasinah
etadasit tada rajno yanmahim paryapalayat
yesam samkhyavidhim caiva pradisami srnomi ca

antahpuranam sarvesam bhrtyanam caiva sarvasah
agopalavipalebhyah sarvam veda krtakrtam
sarvam rajnah samudayamayam ca vyayameva ca
ekaham vedmi kalyani pandavanam yasasvini
mayi sarvam samasajya kutumbam bharatarsabhah
upasanaratah sarve ghatayanti varanane

(Carrying pots of food in their hands, a hundred thousand women attendants of Yudhisthira, the wise son of Kunti, used to be engaged in feeding the guests day and night. When Yudhisthira travelled out of Indraprastha, he was followed by a hundred thousand horses and a hundred thousand elephants. This is how things were when Yudhisthira, residing in Indraprastha, looked after the world.

I organized for all these great numbers, listened to their requirements, and provided for them. I looked after the inmates of the inner household and all the dependents of the king, including even the cowherds and the shepherds. I kept myself informed of all that they did or did not do.

O Satyabhama of great auspiciousness and renown, I alone knew of the entire incomes and expenses of the king and the Pandava brothers. O Satyabhama of the auspicious visage, they, the bulls of *bharatavamsa*, left the entire responsibility of the household on me, and engaged themselves in *upasana*, worship and veneration, and actions proper to that.)

Such are the responsibilities that Draupadi bears in the Pandava household. She obviously is performing the functions of the head of the household. It is she who performs *bali*, *bhiksa* and *sraddha*, the observances proper to the head of a household; and it is she who keeps account of the income and expense of the household and looks after the work and welfare of the dependents. In fact, Draupadi's insistence that she does not eat till her husbands and the servants have been fed, that she does not sleep when they are awake and that in general she does nothing that may transcend their pleasure is also a statement of her leading role in the household. Because, in the Indian perception the one who leads is the one who is expected to subjugate his or her comfort and pleasure to the comfort and pleasure of the led. And, the classical Indian literature is surfeit with repeated advice to the kings to always do what pleases the people, and never go beyond their wishes. The king, in the Indian perception, is in fact expected to merge his interest, his happiness, and probably his very self, with that of the people. As Kautalya puts it:

prajasukhe sukham rajnah prajanam ca hite hitam
natmapriyam hitam rajnah prajanam tu priyam hitam

(Happiness of the people is the happiness of the king, their welfare is his welfare; what is good for the king is not what pleases him, but what pleases the people.)

Draupadi, while performing the duties of the head of the Pandava household is indeed like the queen who subjugates her pleasure to the pleasure of her dependents. And, of course, she eats the last. Because, the essence of the discipline of eating, according to the Indian texts, is that those who are responsible for others must eat after feeding all the others. Usually, the *grhastha-dampati*, the husband and wife both, jointly undertake this responsibility. And, therefore, as Medhatithi says, their time of eating is the same, at the end of the *grhastha*'s daily *annadana*, after all aspects of creation and all those who happen to be within their reach have been properly fed and propitiated.

Such is the Indian insistence on the discipline of obtaining plenty of food and sharing it in plenty.

A Lost Tradition

India it seems continued to follow this discipline till almost the present times. Texts of all ages from different parts of India emphasize the importance of ensuring an abundance of food and sharing it widely before eating for oneself. Even a Buddhist Tamil text like the Manimekalai, which pointedly disparages the *vaidika* tradition in many ways, tells the touching story of Aputran who, being left alone on an uninhabited island with an inexhaustible pot of food in his hands, prefers to die of hunger rather than eat for himself from that pot, without sharing it with anyone else. And the older people in at least the state of Tamilnadu still remember how their parents used to wait outside the house before every mealtime for some seeker to come and accept food from their hands, and on the days that no seeker appeared the parents went hungry too.

The story of Harsavardhana, the renowned seventh century Indian king, who used to empty his treasury every few years and share his riches with his people, is well known. And when Hiuen-Tsiang, the revered Chinese scholar who visited India during the reign of Harsavardhana, describes the festivals of sharing that Harsavardhana organized, it reads almost like the descriptions of grand giving and sharing that happened unceasingly during the great *yajnas* of Srirama and Yudhisthira and other celebrated kings of classical antiquity.

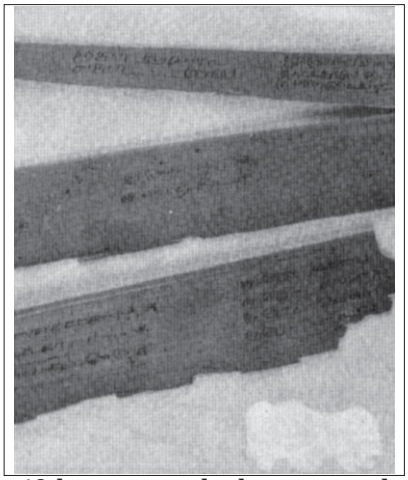
Even as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the kings of Thanjavur seem to have cared as deeply about assuaging the hunger of all within their kingdom as the kings of Indian antiquity. In a fascinating letter written by Raja Sarfoji, the king of Thanjavur, in 1801 to the British

who had by then set themselves up as the colonial overlords, the Raja describes the *chatrams* that abounded in his state, especially along the road to the great pilgrim centre of Rameswaram, which had been running since the times of his ancestors. In these *chatrams* all comers received food throughout the day, and at midnight bells were rung to call upon those who may have been left behind to rush and receive their share. The Raja goes on to describe in detail how the *chatrams* took care of those who fell sick during their stay, and of the dependents of those who happened to die there. The running of the *chatrams*, the Raja felt, was what gave Thanjavur the title of *dharmarajya*, and this was the title, the Raja told the British, he valued above all other dignities of his office. And he implored the British to ensure that whatever else might happen to his state, this tradition of providing for the hungry was not abridged or eliminated.

Rameswaram: one of the great pilgrimage centres

This king of Thanjavur, it seems, was amongst the last representatives of not only the tradition of feeding the hungry, but also the Indian tradition of growing a plenty. Historical evidence from different parts of India from around the tenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century indicates that lands throughout India used to yield an abundance. Inscriptions from the Thanjavur region from 900 to 1200 A.D. record yields of between 12-18 tons of paddy per hectare. An 1100 A.D. inscription from South Arcot, neighbouring Thanjavur, mentions yields of 14.5 tons per hectare, and another inscription of 1325 A.D. from the relatively dry Ramanathapuram records production of 20 tons of paddy on a hectare of land. Similarly high levels of productivity were reported by the European observers from many parts of the country. Thus, for productivity of foodgrains in the region around Allahabad, one such observer in 1803 reported a value of 7.5 tons per hectare, and another reported a yield of 13.0 tons of paddy from Coimbatore in 1807.

We have fairly detailed information about production and productivity that prevailed in about two thousand localities in the Chengalpattu region that surrounds the city of Madras in the 1760s. The best lands in the region, according to this information, produced as much as nine tons per hectare at a period when the British and French armies were crisscrossing the region and subjecting it to much devastation. The average of the region was a modest 2.5 tons of paddy per hectare, nevertheless it amounted to the availability of as much as 5.5 tons of foodgrains a year for an average household of between four to five members, which represents a very high level of prosperity, not merely by the Indian standards of today — which happen to be abysmally low — but also by the standards of the most prosperous in the world.



18th century palm leaves record abundant paddy yields[3]

A 'Wasteful' Habit

With the coming of the British the abundance of the lands disappeared almost overnight as it were. In the Chengalpattu region, which was one of the earliest in India to come under the British rule, the relatively modest average yields of 2.5 tons per hectare observed in the 1760s had come down to a mere 650 kg per hectare already by 1788. The yield of lands seems to have persisted around this low level throughout most of India during the whole of the British period. Average productivity of paddy in India in 1947 at the end of the British rule was less than a ton per hectare, that of wheat around 700 kg, and of the coarse

grains much below that figure.

Availability of food per capita also declined precipitously, leading to the unending series of famines that kept visiting India throughout the British period. In 1880, when the British had their first serious look at the problem of famine, they estimated the available food to be around 280 kg per capita per year, which is to be compared with the availability of around 5.5 tons per household in the Chengalpattu of 1760s. Estimates of actual production in the 1890s, when the first systematic data were collected, turned out to be nearer 200 kg per capita per year. And our production remains near this figure even today.

Thus did the British convert the traditional plenty into a scorching scarcity that persists with us till now. And they institutionalized the scarcity by forcibly deflecting the Indian polity away from its traditions of sharing. The institutional arrangements that the Indian kings had made for providing for the seekers, like the *chatrams* that the Raja of Thanjavur mentions in his letter of 1801, were unacceptable to the British from the very beginning. They insisted on withdrawing with a heavy hand the resources that used to flow to these institutions. Their insistence on such withdrawal of resources was so great that Richard Wellesely, the governor-general of the East India Company at the time of the conquest of Mysore in 1799, found it necessary to warn Diwan Purniah of dire consequences in case he indulged in the alienation of state revenues to such institutions. Purniah, who had been re-appointed the Diwan by the British to administer Mysore on their behalf but in the name of the hereditary ruler of Mysore, promptly reduced the resources assigned to such institutions from 2,33,954 to 56,993 *controy pagodas* in the very first year of the new administration.

In addition to scorching the lands and stunting the polity, the British polluted the minds of the Indians by turning them away from their discipline of giving before eating and towards a callous indifference to the hunger and want of others. The sharing that the Indians practised as a matter of the inherent discipline of being human, was disdained by the British as a wasteful habit. And their disdain had such impact on the newly emerging elite of India that already in 1829, William Bentinck, the then governor-general of the Company could write that, "...much of what used, in old times, to be distributed among beggars and Brahmins, is now, in many instances, devoted to the ostentatious entertainment of Europeans; and generally, the amount expended in useless alms is stated to have been much curtailed..."

The Indians who came under the sway of the British soon internalised the British judgments on the Indian discipline of sharing; the very first issue of Keshub Chandra Sen's *Sulabh Samachar*, dated November 15, 1870, carried an article against the evil of giving alms. "Giving of alms to beggars is not an act of kindness," the article proclaimed, "because it is wrong to live on another's charity." And the article went on to suggest that incapacitated beggars should instead be trained to do "useful things for society." This attitude of demanding work of those who do not have enough to eat has over time become a cliche among the relatively well-off Indians, especially those who claim to have acquired a modern, rational consciousness.

However, in spite of all the efforts of the British, the habit of sharing before eating remained widespread enough for the Famine Commission of 1880 to fret about its consequences on what they described as the administration of famine. They were afraid that such caring by the people themselves may detract from the majesty and the sovereignty of the state and recommended:

"Native society in India is justly famous for its charity.... Such charity is to be encouraged at the beginning of distress;... but when famine has once set in with severity it may become a serious evil unless it can be brought under some systematic control. ...When once Government has taken the matter thoroughly in hand and provided relief in one shape or another for all who need it, and a proper inclosed place of residence for all casuals and beggars, street-begging and public distribution of alms to unknown

1943 Cartoon in the Hindustan Times depicting the viceroy visiting a famine stricken Calcutta

applicants should be discouraged, and if possible entirely stopped."

Incidentally, in the Indian scheme of things it is indeed the uninvited and unknown seeker at the door who is honoured by the name of *atithi* and who has to be sheltered and fed with great ceremony and respect by the householder for his daily discipline, of feeding others before eating for oneself, to be properly accomplished.

Ruins of Sethubawa Chatram[4]

As against the great ceremony and respect that the Indian tradition insisted must be bestowed upon a seeker, the relief that the British administration provided in times of famine, and which according to the famine commissioners justified their discouraging, if not completely banning, the Indian tradition of caring for others, consisted in providing a survival wage, "sufficient for the purposes of maintenance but not more", in return for a day's hard labour at specially organised work sites. For those whose health had deteriorated beyond the possibility of work, the commissioners recommended provision of "dole" after due examination by inspecting officers, and the dole was to be withdrawn as soon as a person, in the eyes of the inspecting officer, began to look fit enough for work. Even from women "who by national custom" were "unable to appear in public", the commissioners expected work, in the form of spinning cotton for the state, in return for the dole of grains provided to them and their children.

Such was the horror that the British administrators felt for the "gratuitous" giving out of food, which for the Indians is the very essence of being human. And, the famine commissioners' report of 1880 became the basis for the creation of an elaborate bureaucracy for the management of relief and distress, and the judgments and sensibilities of the British thus became institutionalized into state-controlled mechanisms for commanding the supply and distribution of food, that remain with us till today.

In spite of all this the ordinary Indians till recently retained some sense of the discipline of endeavouring to have a plenty of food and sharing what one has with others before partaking of it oneself. However, the continued scarcity and the almost total conversion of the mainstream of Indian public life to the western ways have so befuddled our minds that even the residual memory of the Indian ways seems to be finally fading. And amongst the more resourceful of the Indians there is not even a feeling of shame for the continuance of extreme scarcity or for the all-pervading hunger of men and animals around them.

We, who, as a people, used to be so scrupulous about caring for all creation, have become callous about the hunger and starvation of people and animals. We know of the hunger around us, and we fail to care. We, all of us together, all the resourceful people of India, bear this terrible sin, in common.

A National Resolve

But we cannot continue to live in sin. No nation with such a sin on its head can possibly come into itself without first expiating it.

We shall be liberated from the sin only when we begin to take the classical injunction of *annam bahu kurvita* seriously, and begin to grow a great abundance of food again. We have not so far taken to the task with proper application. It is true that during the last fifty years, productivity of foodgrains has improved sufficiently to lift the national average to near two tons per hectare. But this average is quite below what was achieved in the eighteenth century in a relatively difficult and dry coastal terrain like that of Chengalpattu, and it is far below the level of productivity today in almost any other region of the world. And, in any case, all increase in productivity has taken place on about 30 percent of the Indian lands, which have high resources of capital and modern technology and which produce for the market. The remaining about 70 percent of the lands, large parts of which lie in the fertile plains of the bounteous Indian rivers, continue in the state of deprivation

and neglect to which they were reduced during the British rule and continue to produce barely one indifferent crop a year.

With care and application these lands can produce the abundance that classical India cherished, and in the process can enliven large numbers of Indians who have been forced into economic idleness because of the idleness of the lands. Much is said about the growing population of India that has made it difficult for the lands to feed them all. But India is a country endowed with rare natural abundance. Unlike almost any other major region of the world, India is a country, where more than half of the geographical area is potentially cultivable, where almost every major geographical region is traversed by a great perennial river, and where the climate is so fecund that crops can grow throughout the year in almost every part. Notwithstanding her density of population, arable land per capita in India is still twice that in China and only marginally less than that in Europe.

The sin of scarcity shall be wiped off the face of India only when the idle lands begin to be looked after with care and attention once again, and the bounty that nature has bestowed upon India is converted into an abundance of food. We have of course been paying some attention to the lands and agriculture. But so far our concern has been to somehow achieve an average growth of around 2.5 percent per year to keep pace with the growth in population. We have not attempted to reach a level of growth that would remove the scarcity of the last two centuries, and make India a country of plenty. Achieving such plenty would probably require reorienting all our resources and all our thinking towards the land. And once the Indian lands begin to yield a plenty, and the blocked vitality of the Indian people begins to flow again, other attributes of prosperity, which we have been trying so hard to acquire, will also arrive in abundant measure.

We should begin to pay attention to the lands and to the fulfilling of the inviolable discipline, *annam bahu kurvita*. But we cannot continue to be indifferent to the hunger around us until the abundance arrives. Because, as classical India has taught with such insistence, hungry people and animals exhaust all virtue of a nation. Such a nation is forsaken by the *devas*, and no great effort can possibly be undertaken by a nation that has been so forsaken. In fact, not only the nation in the abstract, but every individual *grhastha* bears the sin of hunger around him. We have been instructed, in the authoritative injunctions of the *vedas*, that anyone who eats without sharing, eats in sin, *kevalagho bhavati kevaladi*.

Therefore, even before we begin to undertake the great task of bringing the abundance back to the Indian lands, we have to bring ourselves back to the inviolable discipline of sharing. We have to make a national resolve to care for the hunger of our people and animals. There is not enough food in the country to fully assuage the hunger of all; but, even in times of great scarcity, a virtuous *grhastha* and a disciplined nation would share the little they have with the hungry. We have to begin such sharing immediately, if the task of achieving an abundance is to succeed.

To us, Indians, sharing of food comes naturally. We do not have to be taught how to share, how to perform *annadana* because, we have been taught the greatness of *anna* and of *annadana* by our ancestors, and we have practised the discipline of growing and sharing in abundance since the beginning of time. For such a nation to obliterate the memory of a mere two centuries of scarcity and error is a simple matter. Let us recall the inviolable discipline of sharing that defines the essence of being Indian. Abundance will inevitably arrive in the wake of such *annadana*.

Additional Information on Pictures

1. The goddess Ganga emerging from the celestial Kalpataru (Bengal, Sena, 12th century A.D.). Ganga and other perennial rivers that criss-cross almost every part of India are indeed the wish-fulfilling deities that have suffused India with abundance through the ages. We must turn to these rivers and the fertile lands that they have endowed upon us to recapture the plenty that has escaped us during the recent past.

   Courtesy: National Museum, Delhi.

2. Perumalayyan Chatram on the Madras-Kanchipuram road. This *chatram* is known to have functioned as a place for food and shelter to seekers well into the nineteenth century. All these structures have fallen into disrepair and dilapidation during the last two centuries.

   Courtesy: Tamilnadu State Archaeology Department, Madras.

3. Late eighteenth century palm leaf accounts of the Chengalpattu localities from the collection of the Department of Palm Leaf Manuscripts, Tamil University, Thanjavur. The leaves record paddy yields of as much as nine tons per hectare in some of the localities of the region, especially in those that lie on the banks of the life-giving "river of milk", Palar, that passes through the region. Average production of grains per household in the region was around five-and-a-half tons per year.

   Courtesy: Tamil University, Thanjavur

4. Ruins of Sethubawa Chatram in the Thanjavur region — another of the great institutions of hospitality that the Raja of Thanjavur mentions in his letter of 1801. Food was served here throughout the day to all those who came, and at midnight bells were rung to call upon the laggard seeker to come and receive his share. ❐