

ANNAM BAHU KURVĪTA



*Recollecting the Indian Discipline
of Growing and Sharing Food in Plenty*



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India today suffers from an extreme scarcity of food. For almost two hundred years, 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 millions, 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.

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

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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.

Table 1: Average annual consumption of staple foods in 1990 (kg p.cap/y)

	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
USA	113.4	59.8	3.4	176.6	119.0	21.6	317.2
USSR	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 AM.	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

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 subcontinent, 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 couple 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 some

ANIMALS REMAIN HUNGRY TOO

other 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; and in other countries of Africa as also in Central and South America large quantities of plantains, bananas and other fruits often make substantially large contributions to the staple.

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 in Asia and Kenya in Africa, 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 average staple consumption of around 260 kg per capita per year seems not too badly off, and Bangladesh with average annual staple consumption of 230 kg per capita is at least better 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 Remain Hungry too

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 comparison with rest of the world, seems to be even worse. The supply of foodgrains and edible roots together 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.

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 United States of America is around 900 kg and for China about 454 kg per capita per year. [See Table 2].

Table 2: Average annual supply and consumption as human food of cereals, pulses and roots (in kg per capita per year)

	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
USA	113.4	874.0	3.4	3.8	59.8	75.2	176.6	952.9
USSR	166.4	887.6	2.2	33.3	97.0	146.2	265.6	1067.1
AUSTRALIA	111.8	463.8	0.8	33.4	66.0	74.4	178.6	571.6
SOUTH AM.	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	346.6
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

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 of 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 HAVE BECOME THE NORM

Table 3: Quantities of food utilised 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
USA	152.0	0.0	0.3	2.1	0.7	0.8	0.8	1.1
USSR	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 AM.	28.1	0.0	12.5	0.9	0.2	0.1	3.3	1.8
AFRICA	14.6	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	1.9
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

Scarcity and callousness have become the norm

The figures for availability of food in India clearly point towards widespread hunger of people and animals in India. And 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 the children under the age of five are malnourished and 88 percent of pregnant women suffer from anaemia.

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.

A journey through any part of India in the great railway trains, that criss-cross the country heralding the arrival of modernity here,

brings one in even closer contact with hunger and starvation. Young children, with their eyes glimmering with the sharp intellect of early age, sweep the floors of the trains to earn a bellyful of food, and fight with the passengers, with the waiters and with each other for the right to the left-overs of food. 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 pilgrimage 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 everyday.

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, and we should make efforts to export some food and shift some of the foodgrain lands to more exportable cash-crops.

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.

But India always valued abundance and sharing

India, however, was not always like this. Indians in the past have laid extra-ordinary 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 civilization, and sharing of food was for us the primary discipline of civilized living. And indeed it is the discipline of civilized 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 *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, a venerable *śruti* 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 *Taittirīyopaniṣad* is a text of *brahmavidyā*; its objective is to prepare the seeker for and lead him towards a *darśana*, 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 *brahmavidyā*, *anna*, the food, and manifestations of *anna* keep appearing at every step. *Anna*, in fact, forms the entrance to the edifice of *brahmavidyā*, 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 *darśana*, bursts into a joyous celebration of having become one with *anna*, singing thus: *ahamannaṁ ahamannaṁ ahamannaṁ*, 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 *darśana*, the *Upaniṣad* prescribes a number of *vratas*, inviolable rules of living, for such a seeker to follow. And these are:

अन्नं न निन्द्यात्। तद्व्रतम्॥

annaṁ na nindyāt. tadvratam.

Do not look down upon *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for the one who knows.

अन्नं न परिचक्षीत। तद्व्रतम्॥

annaṁ na paricakṣīta. tadvratam.

Do not neglect *anna*. That is the inviolable discipline of life for the one who knows.

अन्नं बहु कुर्वीत। तद्व्रतम्॥

annaṁ bahu kurvīta. tadvratam.

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

न कंचनवसतौ प्रत्याचक्षीत। तद्व्रतम्। तस्माद्यया कया च विधया बह्वन्नं प्राप्नुयात्। आराध्यस्मा अन्नमित्याचक्षते। एतद्वै मुखतोऽन्नं राद्धम्।

मुखतोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते। एतद्वै मध्यतोऽन्नं राद्धम्। मध्यतोऽस्मा

अन्नं राध्यते। एतद्वा अन्ततोऽन्नं राद्धम्। अन्ततोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते॥

na kañcana vasatau pratyācakṣīta. tadvratam. tasmādyayā

kayā ca vidhayā bahvannaṁ prāpnuyāt. ārādhyasmā

annamityācakṣate. etadvai mukhato'annaṁ rāddham.

mukhato'smā annaṁ rādhyate. etadvai madhyato'annaṁ

rāddham. madhyato'smā annaṁ rādhyate. etadvā

antato'annaṁ rāddham. antato'smā annaṁ rādhyate.

Do not turn away anyone who comes seeking your hospitality. This is the inviolable discipline for the one who knows. Therefore, obtain a great abundance of *anna*, exert all your efforts to ensure such abundance; and welcome the guests with the announcement that the food is ready. Because 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 and 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 the same small measure and with similar indifference.

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

मोघमन्नं विन्दते अप्रचेताः। सत्यं ब्रवीमि वध इत्स तस्य।
नार्यमणं पुष्यति नो सखायं। केवलाघो भवति केवलादी॥
moghamannaṁ vindate apracetāḥ
satyaṁ bravīmi vadha itsa tasya
nāryamaṇaṁ puṣyati no sakhāyaṁ
kevalāgho bhavati kevalādī

Food that comes to the one who does not give is indeed a waste. This is the truth. I, the ṛṣi, 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* nor the men who arrive at his door as *atithis*, *abhyāgatas* and friends. Eating for himself alone, he becomes the partaker of sin alone.

In the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* of the *Kṛṣṇayajurveda* we hear the *Annadevatā*, the god residing in food, himself speaking about the importance of food and of the inviolability of the discipline of giving before eating. The *Annadevatā* proclaims:

अहमस्मि प्रथमजा ऋतस्य। पूर्वं देवेभ्यो अमृतस्य नाभिः।
यो मा ददाति स इदेव माऽऽवाः। अहमन्नमन्नमदन्तमन्नि॥
ahamasmi prathamajā ṛtasya. pūrvaṁ devebhyo amṛtasya
nābhiḥ. yo mā dadāti sa ideva mā"vāḥ
ahamannamannamadantamadmi.

I, the *Annadevatā*, am the first progenitor of *yajña*: the first *yajña* was born of me. It is I who, at the earliest times, become the nucleus of *amṛta* for the *devas*.

The one who gives me is in fact the one who obtains me. On the other hand, the one who does not give is consumed by me. I am the *Annadevatā*, I eat the one who does not give *anna*.

पूर्वमग्नेरपि दहत्यन्नम्। यत्तौ हाऽऽसाते अहमुत्तरेषु। व्यात्तमस्य
पशवः सुजम्भम्। पश्यन्ति धीराः प्रचरन्ति पाकाः॥

*pūrvamagnerapi dahatyannam. yattau
hā”sāte ahamuttareṣu. vyāttamasya paśavaḥ sujambham.
paśyanti dhīrāḥ pracaranti pākāḥ.*

The one who eats before giving is consumed by the food that he eats, even before the food itself is consumed by the digestive fires. Between the one who gives before eating and the one who eats without giving, the former is the worthy one. I am with him. The other is indeed like an animal. For such animal-like ones the sharp-toothed jaws of the *Annadevatā* are wide open. The wise know this; while the ignorant continue to indulge in eating without giving.

The discipline of growing an abundance of food and sharing it in abundance that is taught in the *śruti*, like the *Rgveda*, the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* and the *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, is of course emphasized again and again in the *smṛti* texts like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the various *purāṇas* and the *dharmasāstras* of different times and communities.

The *Mahābhārata* recalls the greatness of food and the giving of food in a particularly imposing manner. As is well known, in the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma Pitāmaha, the grand wise old man of *Kuruvaṃśa*, gives a long discourse instructing Yudhiṣṭhira in great detail about all aspects of *dharma*. This discourse runs to about 25,000 verses and forms nearly a quarter of the epic. Bhīṣma leaves his mortal body almost immediately after the end of this discourse, and Yudhiṣṭhira after much persuasion undertakes to perform an *aśvamedha-yajña*. After accomplishing the *yajña* and being relieved of the great effort and activity that such an observance involves, Yudhiṣṭhira requests Śrīkṛṣṇa to let him know the essence of the entire teaching of Bhīṣma. Śrīkṛṣṇa, in response, utters just fifteen verses, the first ten of which lay down the centrality of *annadāna*, 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 Śrīkṛṣṇa utters while summarizing the teachings of Bhīṣma for Yudhiṣṭhira is:

अन्नेन धार्यते सर्वं जगदेतच्छराचरम्।

अन्नात् प्रभवति प्राणः प्रत्यक्षं नात्र संशयः ॥

annena dhāryate sarvaṃ jagadetaccarācaram

annāt prabhavati prāṇaḥ pratyakṣaṃ nāsti saṃśayaḥ

The world, both animate and inanimate, is sustained by food. Life arises from food: this is observed all around, and there can be no doubt about it.

And he ends his discourse on *annadāna* with:

अन्नदः प्राणदो लोके प्राणदः सर्वदो भवेत्।

तस्मादन्नं विशेषेण दातव्यं भूतिमिच्छता ॥

annadaḥ prāṇado loke prāṇadaḥ sarvado bhavet

tasmādannam viśeṣeṇa dātavyaṃ bhūtimicchata

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 *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* in its chapter on *annadāna-māhātmya*, the greatness of the giving of food, while probably recounting this incident from the *Mahābhārata*, renders the teachings of Śrīkṛṣṇa in the cryptic commanding phrase:

ददस्वान्नं ददस्वान्नं ददस्वान्नं युधिष्ठिर ॥

dadasvānnaṃ dadasvānnaṃ dadasvānnaṃ yudhiṣṭhira

O Yudhiṣṭhira! Give food! Give food! And, keep giving!

Bhīṣma himself during his long discourse, and also elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*, reminds Yudhiṣṭhira 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 Śrīrāma offers Bharata while enquiring after the welfare of Kosala when the latter visits him at Citrakūṭa during the early phase of Śrīrāma's long sojourn in the forests.

Incidentally, all descriptions of *Rāmarājya*, 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 at the very beginning of *Śrīmad Vālmīkiyarāmāyaṇa*, in the first chapter of the *bālakāṇḍa*, the great sage describes the forthcoming reign of Śrīrāma thus:

प्रहृष्टमुदितो लोकस्तुष्टः पुष्टः सुधार्मिकः।
 निरामयो ह्यरोगश्च दुर्भिक्षभयवर्जितः।
 न पुत्रमरणं केचिद् द्रक्ष्यन्ति पुरुषाः क्वचित्।
 नार्यश्चाविधवा नित्यं भविष्यन्ति पतिव्रताः।
 न चाग्निजं भयं किंचिन्नाप्सु मज्जन्ति जन्तवः।
 न वातजं भयं किंचिन्नापि ज्वरकृतं तथा।
 न चापि क्षुब्धयं तत्र न तस्करभयं तथा।
 नगराणि च राष्ट्राणि धनधान्ययुतानि च।
 नित्यं प्रमुदिताः सर्वे यथा कृतयुगे तथा॥

*prahṛṣṭamudīto lokastuṣṭaḥ puṣṭaḥ sudhārmikāḥ
 nirāmāyo hyarogaśca durbhikṣabhayavarjitaḥ
 na putramaraṇaṁ kecid drakṣyanti puruṣāḥ kvacit
 nāryacāvidhavā nityaṁ bhaviṣyanti pativratāḥ
 na cāgnijaṁ bhayaṁ kiṁcinnāpsu majjanti jantavaḥ
 na vātajāṁ bhayaṁ kiṁcinnāpi jvarakṛtaṁ tathā
 na cāpi kṣudbhayaṁ tatra na taskarabhayaṁ tathā
 nagarāṇi ca rāṣṭrāṇi dhanadhānyayutāni ca
 nityaṁ pramuditāḥ sarve yathā kṛtayuge tathā*

There is happiness and cheer all around. All are contented. All are well-nourished. All follow *dharma*. All are in good health. All are without disease. And, all are free from fear and hunger.

No parent witnesses the death of a child. No wife witnesses the death of her husband. And, all women are chastely devoted to their husbands.

Fire causes no disasters. No living being ever drowns in water. Winds remain benign. Fevers hold no fear. Nobody has to worry about hunger. Nothing is ever stolen.

The capital cities and all parts of the country are laden with grain and all kinds of wealth. Everyone is always happy. It is as if *kṛtayuga* has returned.

And in the *Mahābhārata* we hear sage Vyāsa describing the *Rāmarājya* that came to prevail on earth during the reign of Yudhiṣṭhira in similar words, thus:

ववर्ष भगवान् देवः काले देशे यथेप्सितम् ।
निरामयं जगदभूत् क्षुत्पिपासे न किंचन ।
आधिर्नास्ति मनुष्याणां व्यसने नाभवन्मतिः ॥
vavarṣa bhagvān devaḥ kāle deśe yathepsitam
nirāmayam jagadabhūt kṣutpipāse na kiṁcana
ādhirnāsti manuṣyāṇām vyasane nābhavanmatih

Devas granted rains, at the right place and the right time, to fulfil 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,

मही सस्यप्रबहुला सर्वरत्नगुणोदया ।
कामधुधेनुवद् भोगान् फलति स्म सहस्रधा ॥
mahī sasyaprabahulā sarvaratnaguṇodayā
kāmadhugdhenuvad bhogān phalati sma sahasradhā

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

The opposite of *Rāmarājya* is *yugakṣaya*, 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. The condition of the world at such a time is narrated in graphic detail by ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya for the edification of Yudhiṣṭhira in the *vanaparvan*, thus:

अट्टशूला जनपदाः शिवशूलाश्चतुष्पथाः ।
केशशूलाः स्त्रियश्चापि भविष्यन्ति युगक्षये ॥

aṭṭaśūlā janapadāḥ śivaśūlā ścatuṣpathāḥ
keśaśūlāḥ striyaścāpi bhaviṣyanti yugakṣaye

When our current cycle of time nears its end, the people of the country shall be reduced to the selling of food, the *brāhmaṇas* to the selling of *Vedas*, and women to the selling of their bodies.

युगान्ते हुतभुक् चापि सर्वतः प्रज्वलिष्यति ।
पानीयं भोजनं चापि याचमानास्तदध्वगाः ।
न लप्स्यन्ते निवासं च निरस्ताः पथि शेरते ॥

yugānte hutabhuk cāpi sarvataḥ prajvaliṣyati
pānīyaṁ bhojanaṁ cāpi yācamānāstadadhvagāḥ
na lapsyante nivāsaṁ ca nirastāḥ pathi śerate

When *kaliyuga* is about to end, an all consuming fire shall burn all around. The travellers who seek shall not receive even food, water or shelter; and, refused from all sides, they shall be seen lying around 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. Because, as the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* proclaims with such finality, it is the primary duty of the king to ensure that none within his domain suffers from hunger, want or deprivation. Sage *Āpastamba* lays down the discipline of the kings in this context, thus:

न चास्य विषये क्षुधा रोगेण हिमातपाभ्यां वाऽवसीदेदभावादबुद्धिपूर्वं
वा कश्चित् ॥

na cāsya viṣaye kṣudhā rogeṇa himātapābhyāṁ
vā 'vasīded abhāvād buddhipūrvāṁ vā kaścit

Let no one suffer from hunger and disease, or from extremes of heat and cold. No one in the kingdom ought to suffer thus, either because of general scarcity or because of specific design against him.

And, Bhīṣma, in a particularly intense yet short chapter in the *anuśāsanaparvan* of *Mahābhārata*, warns Yudhiṣṭhira 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? In the words of Bhīṣma Pitāmaha:

रोद्रं कर्म क्षत्रियस्य सततं तात वर्तते ।
तस्य वैतानिकं कर्म दानं चैवेह पावनम् ॥
raudraṁ karma kṣatriyasya satataṁ tāta vartate
tasya vaitānikaṁ karma dānaṁ caiveha pāvanam

Dear Yudhiṣṭhira, the *kṣatriya* has to continuously engage in violent acts; that defilement is cleansed only by performing *vaidika yajñas*, and giving away generously.

वृद्धबालधनं रक्ष्यमन्धस्य कृपणस्य च ।
न खातपूर्वं कुर्वीत न रुदन्ती धनं हरेत् ।
हतं कृपणवित्तं हि राष्ट्रं हन्ति नृपश्रियम् ।
दद्याच्च महतो भोगान् क्षुब्धयं प्रणुदेत् सताम् ।
येषां स्वादूनि भोज्यानि समवेक्ष्यन्ति बालकाः ।
नाश्रन्ति विधिवत् तानि किं नु पापतरं ततः ।
यदि ते तादृशो राष्ट्रे विद्वान् सीदेत् क्षुधा द्विजः ।
भ्रूणहत्यां च गच्छेथाः कृत्वा पापमिवोत्तमम् ।
धिक् तस्य जीवितं राज्ञो राष्ट्रे यस्यावसीदति ।
द्विजोऽन्यो वा मनुष्योऽपि शिबिराह वचो यथा ।
यस्य स्म विषये राज्ञः स्नातकः सीदति क्षुधा ।
अवृद्धिमेति तद्राष्ट्रं विन्दते सहराजकम् ।
क्रोशन्त्यो यस्य वै राष्ट्राद्धियन्ते तरसा स्त्रियः ।
क्रोशतां पतिपुत्राणां मृतोऽसौ न च जीवति ॥
vrddhabāladhanam rakṣyam andhasya kṛpaṇasya ca
na khātapūrvam kurvīta na rudantī dhanam haret
hrtam kṛpaṇavittam hi rāṣṭram hanti nṛpaśriyam
dadyācca mahato bhogān kṣudbhayam praṇudet satām
yeṣāṁ svādūni bhojyāni samavekṣyanti bālakāḥ

*nāśnanti vidhivat tāni kiṃ nu pāpataram tataḥ
yadi te tādṛśo rāṣṭre vidvān sīdet kṣudhā dvijaḥ
bhrūṇahatyām ca gacchethāḥ kṛtvā pāpamivottamam
dhik tasya jīvitam rājño rāṣṭre yasyāvasīdati
dviḥ'nyo vā manuṣyo'pi śibirāha vaco yathā
yasya sma viṣaye rājnaḥ snātakāḥ sīdati kṣudhā
avrddhimeṭi tadrāṣṭraṃ vindate saharājakam
krośantyo yasya vai rāṣṭrāddhriyante tarasā striyaḥ
krośatām patiputrāṇām mṛto 'sau na ca jīvati*

The king must protect the wealth of the old, young, the blind and the poor. And he must not take away anything from the cultivators whose crops are grown on waters from wells that they have dug with their own effort.

The wealth that is taken from the poor takes away the prosperity of the king and destroys the country. Therefore, instead of depriving the poor, offer them great comfort and gratification, and relieve the people of all fear of hunger.

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 *brāhmaṇa* 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 womb, or worse. As Rāja Śibi has said, if there be a king in whose kingdom a twice-born or any one else is found suffering from hunger, then the life of such a king is indeed forfeit.

A king in whose kingdom even one *snātaka*, one person formally equipped in the learning of his discipline, suffers from hunger, that *rāṣṭra* stops prospering and the kingdom is lost to others.

A king in whose kingdom crying and wailing women are forcibly carried away in front of their sons and husbands who cry and wail in vain, that king is dead; he indeed is not alive.

And, Bhīṣma adds:

अरक्षितारं हर्तारं विलोसारमनायकम् ।
तं वै राजकलिं हन्युः प्रजाः सन्नह्य निर्घृणम् ।
अहं वो रक्षितेत्युक्त्वा यो न रक्षति भूमिपः ।
स संहत्य निहन्तव्यः श्वेव सोन्माद आतुरः ॥
arakṣitāraṃ hartāraṃ viloptāraṃ anāyakam
taṃ vai rājakaliṃ hanyuḥ prajāḥsannahya nirghṛṇam
ahaṃ vo rakṣitetyuktvā yo na rakṣati bhūmipaḥ
sa saṃhatya nihantavyaḥ sveva sonmāda āturaḥ

A king who does not protect the people, who imposes oppressive exactions upon them, who extinguishes the opportunities of livelihood, and who does not lead, such a king is indeed *kali*. The people should surround and kill such a king.

Having given his promise to protect the people, a king who does not protect, he indeed should be killed by the people like a sick and mad dog.

But, though the responsibility to ensure an abundance of food and 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. 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 *bhūtas* 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 *Manusmṛti*, the authentically conservative *dharmasāstra* 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:

देवानृषीन्मनुष्यांश्च पितृन्गृह्याश्च देवताः ।
पूजयित्वा ततः पश्चाद्गृहस्थः शेषभुग्भवेत् ।

अद्यं स केवलं भुङ्क्ते यः पचत्यात्मकारणात्।

यज्ञशिष्टाशनं ह्येतत्सतामन्नं विधीयते ॥

*devān ṛṣīn manuṣyāṁśca pitṛṅgrhyāśca devatāḥ
pūjayitvā tataḥ paścādgrhasthaḥ śeṣabhugbhavet
aghaṁ sa kevalaṁ bhukte yaḥ pacatyātmakāraṇāt
yajñaśiṣṭāśanaṁ hyetatsatāmannaṁ vidhīyate*

The householder ought to eat only what is left after making reverential offerings to the *devas*, *ṛṣis*, ancestors, the *bhūtas* and the guests.

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 *pañcamahāyajña*, (of what has been shared with all), alone is proper food.

Such is the Indian insistence on the discipline of obtaining a plenty of food and sharing it in plenty. Śrīkrṣṇa in the third chapter of *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā*, in fact, teaches the entire essence of this discipline of *annabāhulya* and *annadāna* in just seven verses. Śrīkrṣṇa there says:

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः।

अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्त्विष्टकामधुक् ॥

*sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ
anena prasaviṣyadhvam eṣa vo'stviṣṭakāmadhuk*

At the beginning of creation, Prajāpati – Brahman in the aspect of creator – created the human beings along with the *yajña*, disciplined action, and then blessed them thus: Flourish through *yajña*. Let *yajña* be your *iṣṭakāmadhuk*, let it fulfil all your wishes and desires.

देवान् भावयतानेन ते देवा भावयन्तु वः।

परस्परं भावयन्तः श्रेयः परमवाप्स्यथ ॥

*devān bhāvayatānena te devā bhāvayantu vaḥ
parasparaṁ bhāvayantaḥ śreyaḥ param avāpsyatha*

Propitiate the *devas* through *yajña*, and let the *devas* propitiate you. Propitiating each other thus, let both

of you, the *devas* and the humans, achieve *paramaśreyas*, the best that there is.

इष्टान् भोगान् हि वो देवा दास्यन्ते यज्ञभाविताः ।
तैर्दत्तानप्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ॥

iṣṭān bhogān hi vo devā dāsyante yajñabhāvitāḥ
tairdattānapradāyaibhyo yo bhun̄kte stena eva saḥ

Propitiated by the *yajña* the *devas* enrich man with all desirable objects. Therefore, one who enjoys what is given by the *devas* without giving it back to them is indeed a thief.

यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वं किल्बिषेः ।
भुङ्क्ते ते त्वघं पापाः ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥

yajñasiṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ
bhuñjate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pacantyātma kāraṇāt

Those who partake of the left-overs of the *yajña* – those who eat after having offered the proper shares to all others and all of nature – are the virtuous. They are cleansed of all sins. Those who cook for themselves alone are the sinners: in eating alone they partake of only sin.

अन्नाद् भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः ।
यज्ञाद् भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः ॥

annād bhavanti bhūtāni parjanyaḍ annasambhavaḥ
yajñād bhavati parjanyaḥ yajñaḥ karmasamudbhavaḥ

All beings are formed of *anna*; *anna* arises from the rains; rains arise from *yajña*; and *yajña* arises from *karma*, action.

कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।

तस्मात् सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥

karmabrahmodbhavaṁ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam
tasmāt sarvagataṁ brahma nityaṁ yajñe pratiṣṭhitam

Know that *karma* arises from Brahman in the aspect of *Veda*, the knowledge, and Brahman in this aspect arises from *akṣara*, the imperishable first

sound. Therefore, know that Brahman, though he permeates all, is always resident in *yajña*.

एवं प्रवर्तितं चक्रं नानुवर्तयतीह यः ।

अघायुरिन्द्रियारामो मोघं पार्थ स जीवति ॥

*evam pravartitam cakram nānuvartayatīha yaḥ
aghāyurindriyārāmo mogham pārtha sa jīvati*

This is the cycle of mutual dependence initiated by Brahman. He who does not act according to it, who does not keep the cycle moving, is a sinner who is immersed merely in the pleasure of the senses. The living of such a one, O Pārtha, is a waste.

India followed the discipline till recently

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 *Maṇimekalai*, which pointedly disparages the *vaidika* tradition in many ways, tells the touching story of Āputran 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 alone from that pot, without sharing it with anyone else. And the older people in at least the state of Tamil Nadu 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 Harṣavardhana, 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 Harṣavardhana, describes the festivals of sharing that Harṣavardhana organized, it reads almost like the descriptions of grand giving and sharing that happened unceasingly during the great *yajñas* of Śrīrāma and Yudhiṣṭhira 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 *dharmarājya*, 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.

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 15-18 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 1760's. The best lands in the region, according to this information, pro-

duced as much as nine tons per hectare at a period when the British and French armies were criss-crossing 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.

Thus did India follow the discipline of growing a plenty and sharing it in abundance.

The British destroy the discipline

But, 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 1760's had come down to a mere 630 kg per hectare already by 1798. 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 1760's. Estimates of actual production in the 1890's, 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

BRITISH DESTROY THE DISCIPLINE

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 Wellesley, 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 Samāchār*, 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 clichè among the relatively well-off Indians, especially those who claim to have acquired a modern and 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 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.

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

THE SIN MUST BE EXPIATED

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.

The sin must be expiated

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 kurvīta* 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 re-orienting 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, *annam̄ bahu kurvīta*. 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, *kevalāgho bhavati kevalādī*

Therefore, even before we begin to undertake the great task of bringing the abundance back to the Indian lands, we have to bring

THE SIN MUST BE EXPIATED

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 *annadāna*. Because, we have been taught the greatness of *anna* and of *annadāna* 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. Let a great *annadāna* begin again through the whole of this sanctified land. Let a stream of *anna* begin to flow through every locality of the country. The abundance will surely arrive in the wake of such *annadāna*.

May we have the strength of mind and body to be Indians again, and fulfil the inviolable discipline of growing and sharing a plenty.

निकामे निकामे नः पर्जन्यो वर्षतु ।
फलिन्यो न ओषधयो पच्यन्ताम् ।
योगक्षेमो नः कल्पताम् ॥

स्वस्ति प्रजाभ्यः परिपालयन्ताम् ।
न्याय्येन मार्गेण महीं महीशाः ।
गोब्राह्मणेभ्यः शुभमस्तु नित्यम् ।
लोकास्समस्तास्सुखिनो भवन्तु ॥



अतुलितबलधामं हेमशैलाभदेहम् ।
दनुजवनकृशानुं ज्ञानिनामग्रगण्यम् ।
सकलगुणनिधानं वानरणामधीशम् ।
रघुपतिप्रियभक्तं वातजातं नमामि ॥

This essay is a summary of the book of the same title published by the Centre and released during the Dharma Sadas on *Annabāhulya and Annadāna* held at Śrī Tirumala on October 9 and 10, 1996. Detailed references to the quotations in this essay are available in the original book. The statistical information on food availability presented here is based on the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data for 1990. More detailed figures are available in a 1995 compilation *Indian Economy and Polity*, published by the Centre.

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