

॥ अन्नं बहु कुर्वीत ॥

ANNAM BAHU KURVĪTA



CHAPTER 1

dadasvānnaṁ yudhiṣṭhira

Greatness of Food and the Giving of Food

dadasvānnaṁ dadasvānnaṁ dadasvānnaṁ yudhiṣṭhira

“Give food! Give food! Give food!” Thus spake Śrīkr̥ṣṇa to Yudhiṣṭhira, while advising him on dāna, the discipline of giving, in the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa.¹

The Bhaviṣyapurāṇa is probably recounting the conversation that takes place in the Mahābhārata between Śrīkr̥ṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira at the culmination of the aśvamedhayajña undertaken by the latter after the victory in the war. Before the yajña, Yudhiṣṭhira along with his brothers, and in the presence of Śrīkr̥ṣṇa, sits at the feet of Bhīṣma lying on his bed of arrows, and at his request, the grand old man instructs the freshly anointed king of Hastināpura on all aspects of dharma. Bhīṣma’s instructions run to about 25,000 verses, constituting almost a quarter of the epic, and comprising two major parvans, the śāntiparvan and anuśāsanaparvan of the Mahābhārata. It is at the end of this great instruction that Bhīṣma leaves his mortal body, and Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa and Śrīkr̥ṣṇa advise the grief-stricken Yudhiṣṭhira to undertake aśvamedha, the yajña of the great kings.

After performing the aśvamedha, and being relieved of the great effort and activity that such a yajña involves, Yudhiṣṭhira wants to be instructed by Śrīkr̥ṣṇa himself on the intricacies of dharma. Śrīkr̥ṣṇa’s instructions run through another 1,300 verses, constituting the vaiṣṇavadharmaparvan in the southern reading of the Mahābhārata.

¹ Bhaviṣya 4.169.2, p. 526

GREATNESS OF FOOD AND THE GIVING OF FOOD

Towards the end of this grand discourse on dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Śrīkrṣṇa for the essence of the entire teaching of Bhīṣma: *bhīṣmavākyaṭ sārabhūtam vada dharmam sureśvara*.²

To which Śrīkrṣṇa replies: *annena dhāryate sarvaṃ jagadetaccarācaram... annadaḥ prāṇado loke prāṇadaḥ sarvado bhavet. tasmādannam viśeṣeṇa dātavyaṃ bhūtimicchatā*.³ “The world, both animate and inanimate, is sustained by food... 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 make special endeavour to give food.”

This is how Śrīkrṣṇa summarizes the monumental teachings of Bhīṣma. It is not for nothing therefore that the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa renders the essence of dharma as conveyed by Śrīkrṣṇa in the urgently imperative command: *dadasvānnaṃ dadasvānnaṃ dadasvānnaṃ yudhiṣṭhira*.

Annadānamāhātmya: the greatness of the giving of food

Śrīkrṣṇa’s exposition of the essence of Bhīṣma’s teachings is presented in just 15 verses. The first ten of these lay down the centrality of annadāna, the giving of food, in the life of a householder; and the next 5 celebrate the greatness of food, its emergence out of the vital essences of earth and its intimate connection with all life. Most of the vast classical Indian literature on annadāna, some of which we shall have occasion to recall in the following, seems to be in the nature of an elaboration of these 15 verses.

Teaching the greatness of annadāna to Yudhiṣṭhira, Śrīkrṣṇa says:⁴

अन्नेन धार्यते सर्वं जगदेतच्चराचरम् ।

अन्नात् प्रभवति प्राणः प्रत्यक्षं नास्ति संशयः ॥

annena dhāryate sarvaṃ jagadetaccarācaram

annāt prabhavati prāṇaḥ pratyakṣam nāsti saṃśayaḥ

² Mahā āśvamedhika 92, p. 6355

³ Mahā āśvamedhika 92, p. 6355

⁴ Mahā āśvamedhika 92, p. 6355

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.

कलत्रं पीडयित्वा तु देशे काले च शक्तिः ।

दातव्यं भिक्षवे चान्नमात्मनो भूतिमिच्छता ॥

*kalatram pīdayitvā tu deśe kāle ca śaktiḥ
dātavyam bhikṣave cānnamātmano bhūtimicchata*

Therefore, one who wishes to attain well-being in this world and beyond should offer food to all who seek. One should give food in accordance with time and place, and should keep giving to the limits of one's capacity, even if it were to cause inconvenience to one's own family.

विप्रमध्वपरिश्रान्तं बालं वृद्धमथापि वा ।

अर्चयेद् गुरुवत् प्रीतो गृहस्थो गृहमागतम् ॥

*vīpramadhvaparīśrāntaṃ bālaṃ vṛddhamathāpi vā
arcayed gurutvāt prīto gṛhastho gṛhamāgataṃ*

Finding an old person, a child, a tired traveller or a venerable one at the door, a householder should offer him worshipful hospitality, with gladness in his heart, as he would to his own teacher.

क्रोधमुत्पतितं हित्वा सुशीलो वीतमत्सरः ।

अर्चयेदतिथिं प्रीतः परत्र हितभूतये ॥

*krodhamutpatitaṃ hitvā suśīlo vītamatsarah
arcayedatithim prītaḥ paratra hitabhūtaye*

Desirous of well-being beyond this world, the householder should purge himself of all anger, all jealousy, and offer worshipful hospitality, with grace and courtesy, to the one who appears at the door.

अतिथिं नावमन्येत नानृतां गिरमीरयेत् ।

न पृच्छेद् गोत्रचरणं नाधीतं वा कदाचन ॥

*atithim nāvamanyeta nānṛtāṃ giramīrayeṭ
na pṛcched gotracaraṇaṃ nādhītaṃ vā kadācana*

GREATNESS OF FOOD AND THE GIVING OF FOOD

Never offer slight to a person appearing at your door, never let a falsehood escape from your lips in his presence, and never ever ask him about his lineage or learning.

चण्डालो वा श्वपाको वा काले यः कश्चिदागतः ।

अन्नेन पूजनीयः स्यात् परत्र हितमिच्छता ॥

*caṇḍālo vā śvapāko vā kāle yaḥ kaścidāgataḥ
annena pujanīyaḥ syāt paratra hitamicchata*

The one who appears at the door at the proper time, even if he were an outcaste or such a one as partakes of the flesh of dog, deserves to be worshipped with the offering of food by him who seeks well-being beyond this world.

पिधाय तु गृहद्वारं भुङ्क्ते योऽन्नं प्रहृष्टवान् ।

स्वर्गद्वारपिधानं वै कृतं तेन युधिष्ठिर ॥

*pidhāya tu gṛhadvāraṁ bhun̄kte yo'nnam prahr̄ṣṭavān
svargadvārapidhānam vai kṛtam tena yudhiṣṭhira*

O Yudhiṣṭhira, the one who shuts his door on all comers and indulges in the enjoyment of food for himself alone is certainly ensuring that the doors of heaven shall be shut upon him.

पितृन् देवानृषीन् विप्रानतिथींश्च निराश्रयान् ।

यो नरः प्रीणयत्यन्नैस्तस्य पुण्यफलं महत् ॥

*pitṛn devānṛṣīn viprān atithīms̄ca nirāśrayān
yo naraḥ prīṇayatyannaistasya puṇya phalam mahat*

And his virtue is indeed great who propitiates with food the ancestors, the gods, the sages, the venerable ones, the destitute and all those who appear at his door.

कृत्वा तु पापं बहुशो यो दद्यादन्नमर्थिने ।

ब्राह्मणाय विशेषेण सर्वपापैः प्रमुच्यते ॥

*kṛtvā tu pāpaṁ bahuśo yo dadyādannamarthine
brāhmaṇāya viśeṣeṇa sarvapāpaiḥ pramucyate*

The one who gives food to those who seek, and especially to the brāhmaṇa seekers, is rid of all sins, even if his sins were immense.

अन्नदः प्राणदो लोके प्राणदः सर्वदो भवेत् ।
तस्मादन्नं विशेषेण दातव्यं भूतिमिच्छता ॥

*annadah prāṇado loke prāṇadah sarvado bhavet
tasmādannam viśeṣeṇa dātavyaṁ bhūtimicchatā*

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.

Annamāhātmya: the greatness of food

The ten verses above lay down the basic precepts associated with annadāna. The next five verses define the pre-eminence of food in the creation and sustenance of all life. Śrīkr̥ṣṇa says:⁵

अन्नं ह्यमृतमित्याहुरन्नं प्रजननं स्मृतम् ।
अन्नप्रणाशो सीदन्ति शरीरे पञ्च धातवः ॥

*annam hyamṛtamityāhurannaṁ prajananaṁ smṛtam
annāpraṇāśe sīdanti śarīre pañca dhātavaḥ*

Food is indeed the preserver of life and food is the source of procreation. When there is no food, the five elements constituting the body cease to be.

बलं बलवतो नश्येदन्नहीनस्य देहिनः ।
तस्मादन्नं विशेषेण श्रद्धयाश्रद्धयापि वा ॥

*balaṁ balavato naśyedannahīnasya dehinaḥ
tasmādannam viśeṣeṇa śraddhayāśraddhayāpi vā*

Without food even a strong man loses all his strength. Therefore food, whether taken in reverence or otherwise, has a special place in life.

आदत्ते हि रसं सर्वमादित्यः स्वगभस्तिभिः ।
वायुस्तस्मात् समादाय रसं मेघेषु धारयेत् ।

⁵ Mahā āśvamedhika 92, pp. 6355-6

तत् तु मेघगतं भूमौ शक्रो वर्षति तादृशम् ।
तेन दिग्धा भवेद् देवी मही प्रीता च भारत ॥

*ādatte hi rasam sarvamādityaḥ svagabhastibhiḥ
vāyustasmāt samādāya rasam meghesu dhārayet
tat tu meghagataṁ bhūmau śakro varṣati tādr̥śam
tena digdhā bhaved devī mahī prītā ca bhārata*

The sun, through his rays, draws out the vital essences, and vāyu, the wind god, gathers these and places them in the clouds. The vital essences thus collected in the clouds are showered back on the earth by indra. Suffused with the showers, the goddess earth, O Bhārata, is verily in contentment.

तस्यां सस्यानि रोहन्ति यैर्जीवन्त्यखिलाः प्रजाः ।
मांसमेदोऽस्थिमज्जानां सम्भवस्तेभ्य एव हि ॥

*tasyām sasyāni rohanti yairjīvantyakhilāḥ prajāḥ
māmsamedo'sthimajjānām sambhavastebhya eva hi*

Out of the contented earth grow the food-crops, which sustain all life. Flesh, fat, bone and marrow are formed of these alone.

Thus in these fifteen verses Śrīkr̥ṣṇa says all that needs to be said about the importance of food and the giving of food. He defines the major precepts associated with annadāna: the great and incomparable virtue associated with the giving of food, the imperative of offering food to others before eating for oneself, the imperative of giving food in worshipful humility towards the receiver, the imperative of giving to all those who come without ever enquiring into their antecedents, and the great sin that results from eating one's fill without first having fed others who may be waiting at the door. And Śrīkr̥ṣṇa goes on to teach about the central place that anna occupies in the Indian understanding of the plan of the universe. These precepts appear again and again in the Indian classical literature in different forms and different contexts. In the following chapters, we shall explore some of the more vivid expressions of these precepts found in Indian literature.

Karmayoga: the discipline of acting in the world

But, in the Śrīmadbhagavadgītā, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa himself seems to sum up these precepts and place them within the larger Indian understanding of the universe and the role of man in it. While teaching karmayoga, the discipline of acting in the world, to Arjuna in the third chapter of the Gītā, we find Śrīkr̥ṣṇa offering a short, yet intensely meaning-laden, exposition of how sharing of anna is the essential yajña – the essential action in accordance with the discipline of creation – in a universe that manifests through a sequence of mutual give and take between man and devas, between man and all other aspects of creation:⁶

सहयज्ञाः प्रजाः सृष्ट्वा पुरोवाच प्रजापतिः ।

अनेन प्रसविष्यध्वमेष वोऽस्त्विष्टकामधुक् ॥

*sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣṭvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ
anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vo'stviṣṭakāmadhuk*

At the beginning of creation, prajāpati – Brahman in the aspect of the 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
parasparam bhāvayantāḥ śreyah paramavāpsyatha*

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 ।

तैर्दत्तान्प्रदायैभ्यो यो भुङ्क्ते स्तेन एव सः ॥

⁶ Śrīmadbhagavadgītā 3.10-16, in Mahā bhīṣma 27.10-16, pp. 2614-16

*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 सर्वकिल्बिषैः ।

भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात् ॥

*yajñasīṣṭāśinaḥ santo mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ
bhun̄jate te tvaghaṁ pāpā ye pacantyātma-kāraṇāt*

Those who partake of the left-overs of yajña – those who eat after having offered 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 parjanyaḍannasambhavaḥ
yajñādbhavati parjanyaḥ 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 ॥

*karma brahmodbhavaṁ viddhi brahmākṣarasamudbhavam
tasmāt sarvagataṁ brahma nityaṁ yajñe pratiṣṭhitaṁ*

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 ॥

*evaṁ pravartitaṁ cakraṁ nānuvartayatīha yaḥ
aghāyurindriyārāmo moghaṁ pārtha sa jīvati*