



CHAPTER 2

nādattamupatiṣṭhati

The Story of King Śveta

Śrīkrṣṇa's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira to give food and to keep giving, appears at the beginning of the discourse on annadānamāhātmya, the greatness of giving food, in the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa. Continuing the discourse, Śrīkrṣṇa recalls that even Śrīrāma, during his days in the forest, has to run around in search of food. While thus searching for food, once Śrīrāma begins to wonder why, while the earth is laden with food, he along with his brother, Lakṣmaṇa, has to live in want. And he concludes that it must be because of their not having sufficiently given of food earlier. Because as Śrīrāma tells Lakṣmaṇa:

यन्न प्राप्यं तदप्राप्यं विद्यया पौरुषेण वा ।

सत्यो लोकप्रवादोऽयं नादत्तमुपतिष्ठति ॥

*yanna prāpyam tadaprāpyam vidyayā pauruṣeṇa vā
satyo lokapravādo'yaṁ nādattamupatiṣṭhati*¹

What we have not earned, we shall not get, neither by knowledge, nor by prowess. It is truly said that what is not given, cannot be enjoyed.

Having recalled this precept from the experience of Śrīrāma for the edification of Yudhiṣṭhira, Śrīkrṣṇa begins to tell the story of Śveta, the king who lived a life of dharma and who was generous with his giving at the proper occasion, but who gave no food to any seeker, and therefore had to suffer the pangs of hunger even in the heavens that he had earned by his otherwise righteous conduct.

¹ Bhaviṣya 4.169.6, p. 527.

Exasperated by the hunger that persisted with him even in the heavens, Śveta approached Brahmā, who told him that he was suffering the consequences of having failed to perform annadāna during his life on earth:

अन्नदानस्य फलं त्वयेदमुपभुज्यते ।
 तर्ह्यन्नदानतो नान्यच्छरीरारोग्यकारकम् ।
 नान्यदन्नादृते पुंसां किञ्चित्सञ्जीवनौषधम् ॥

*anannadānasya phalaṁ tvayedamupabhujyate.
 tarhyannadānato nānyaccharīrārōgyakārakam
 nānyadannādṛte puṁsāṁ kiñcitsañjīvanauśadham²*

O Śveta, you are reaping the fruit of *anannadāna*, of not having performed annadāna. Except for annadāna there is nothing that can keep the body healthy. And except for anna, there is no other sañjīvanauśadha – life restoring medicine – amongst men.

Śveta was finally relieved of his terrible fate by sage Agastya, who accepted food from his hands and thus freed him of the taint of *anannadāna*. After satiating him, Śveta offered sage Agastya an iridescent necklace in dakṣiṇā, as a token of gratitude for having accepted his worshipful offering of food. That same flamingly iridescent necklace of Śveta was given by sage Agastya to Śrīrāma, when the latter visited him at his āśrama.

Sage Agastya recounts the story to Śrīrāma

Śrīrāma, according to the Vālmīkiyārāmāyaṇa, visits the āśrama of sage Agastya during a journey that he undertakes to establish and protect dharma on earth. As a mark of respect for the visiting king, sage Agastya offers him Śveta's necklace and begins to tell him how he came to acquire that celestial ornament. Sage Agastya says:³

“Śrīrāma, what I am narrating to you happened long ago, in an earlier tretāyuga. At that time, there was a great forest, that

² Bhaviṣya 4.169.22-23, p. 527.

³ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 77 and 78, pp. 1627-30.

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extended to a hundred yojanas on all sides. But there were no animals, nor any birds, within that vast expanse.

“I entered that lonely and quiet forest in search of a place to perform tapas—high austerities. The grandeur of that forest was beyond description. There were many a tree of different kind and shape, and there was a great plenty of sweet roots and fruit. In the midst of this abundance, there was a lake that spread over a yojana on each side. Birds of rare grace—hamsas, kāraṇḍavas and cakravākas—adorned the waters of the lake. Water lilies and lotus flowers covered its surface. And there were no weeds anywhere. The lake was a wonder to behold. Its water tasted like none other. A drink from it left one greatly refreshed.

“In the vicinity of that serene lake of clean pure water swarming with birds of rare grace, there was an ancient āśrama. The āśrama in its grandeur rivalled the lake: it was big, it was a place of great piety, it was a wonder to behold. And there was nobody inhabiting it.

“O Śrīrāma, the best amongst men, I spent that summer night in that āśrama, and getting up early in the morning began to prepare for a bath on the banks of the lake. Suddenly, I saw a dead body floating on the waters. It was a well-formed and well-nourished body. It was clean and fresh. It showed no signs of decay. And, it was lying on the waters irradiating great splendour.

“I was baffled by the sight of that body. Wondering about it, I sat on the banks of the lake for a while. And soon I saw a celestial chariot descending there. The chariot was carried by hamsas, it flew around with the speed of thought, its grandeur was unimaginable, nothing like it had been seen before.

“On that celestial chariot there sat a man from the heavens. He was surrounded by thousands of apsarās who were all adorned with celestial ornaments. Some of them were singing for his pleasure. Others were playing on various musical instruments. Some others were dancing. And still others, of lotus eyes, were gently fanning him with celestial fans, which in their whiteness glistened like the rays of the moon and whose handles were made of pure gold.

“And then, what do I see, O Śrīrāma, the delight of raghukula? Like the sun, the god of light, descending from the peaks of the Meru mountains, that man from the heavens got down from his celestial chariot, and he, in front of my very eyes, began to eat the flesh of the dead body floating on the lake. After taking his fill of

the well-nourished and plentiful flesh of that body, he entered the lake and began to wash.

“Having performed his ablutions with ceremonial thoroughness, he was getting ready to ascend his celestial chariot, when I approached him and asked:

‘O gracious and heavenly one, who are you? And why do you partake of such vile food? Who can have such divine attributes and yet be eating of such food? I am perplexed. I cannot conceive that this dead body is the proper food for you. I want to hear the truth behind these strange happenings.’

“Paying heed to my enquiry, couched in proper and pleasant words, that man from the heavens replied with folded hands, thus:

‘O Brahman, the great one, listen to the story of my past, which is the irrevocable cause of both my good and bad fortune in the present, and about which you have sought to know.

‘It happened long ago. My illustrious father, Sudeva, was then the king of Vidarbha. His prowess was great and he was renowned in the three lokas. He had two wives. In time, both of them gave birth to a son each. I was the elder of the two. I was named Śveta, and my younger brother was given the name of Suratha.

‘On my father’s ascension to the heavens, the people anointed me the king. There I ruled, carefully observing the dictates of dharma. I was engaged in protecting the people and running the state in accordance with dharma, and thus a thousand years passed by.

‘Then, as luck would have it, I somehow came to know of the destined extent of my life on earth. Knowing of the inexorability of kāla, of the unchangeable flow of time, I left the kingdom and took to the life of a forest-dweller.

‘It was then that I came to this forest, which is difficult to reach and where there are neither animals nor birds. And I sat on the banks of this auspicious lake to perform tapas.

‘Having placed my younger brother, Suratha, on the throne, I performed tapas on the banks of this lake for a long long time. I was immersed in severe tapas in this great forest for three thousand years, at the end of which I attained to brahmaloka, the heavenly world where Brahmā himself resides.

‘However, O Agastya, the first among the twice-born, even in that heavenly world of Brahmā I was harassed by persistent thirst and

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hunger. I was sorely distressed. My hunger and thirst were so great that I felt their pangs tormenting everyone of my sense organs.

‘Once, in my distress, I went to Brahmā, the foremost amongst the gods in the three lokas, and said, ‘Bhagavan! The brahmaloka, this heavenly world of yours, is said to be free of all hunger and thirst. Then why do I keep suffering from these even here? The consequences of what karmas of mine are thus being visited upon me? And, O Brahmā, what is to be my food now? Please tell me what is it that I should eat to satisfy this thirst and hunger that persists in me even in your heavenly world?’

‘Responding to my request, Brahmā said:

‘O son of Sudeva, you should eat the delicious flesh of your own corporeal body. That is assigned to be your food. Partake of it every day.

‘O Śveta, you indeed undertook tapas of high order in your earthly life. But you nurtured only your own body. Not even a morsel of food was ever given out of your hands. And you, with your high intellect, must know that what is not sown can never be reaped: *anuptam rohate śveta na kadācinmahāmate*.⁴

‘Since you did not ever give food on earth, therefore, even here in the heavens you are destined to suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst.

‘Therefore, partake of the flesh of your body that you have nurtured so well during your life on earth. That body is full of nourishing rasas, life-giving essences. That alone is your proper assigned food. Live off it.

‘You shall be released from this state when, in the far future, sage Agastya arrives in this forest. He, the sage Agastya, is capable of granting mokṣa to even the devas. Offering a reprieve to you, who are so deeply in the grip of hunger and thirst, is a small matter for that great sage.’

“And Śveta continued his story thus:

‘Bowing to the will of Brahmā, I began to partake of the vile food assigned to me. I have been eating the flesh of this corporeal body of mine for many many years. Yet it has remained undiminished, and it has been satisfying my hunger.

⁴ Rāmāyana *uttara* 78.15, p. 1630.

ŚRĪ VARĀHA'S ADVICE

'I am thus fallen in great misery. Please release me from this state. You, who have arrived in this forest, can be none else but the sage Agastya. O gracious sage, the first amongst the twice-born, let all auspiciousness visit you. Please accept this ornament from my hands, and bestow your pleasure on me.

'O sage, this celestial ornament provides gold, jewels, clothes, food and riches of all kinds. By giving this ornament to you I am also giving away all desires and enjoyments. Bhagavan, I beseech you, be pleased upon me and release me from this state.'"

Having narrated this sorrowful story of Śveta in Śveta's own words thus far, sage Agastya tells Śrīrāma that he accepted that celestial ornament from the hands of Śveta. And as soon as he received that auspicious ornament, the corporeal body of Śveta disappeared from the lake without a trace. With the destruction of his body king Śveta was greatly relieved and, suffused with heavenly bliss, he once again ascended to brahmaloka.

Śrī Varāha lays down the vrata of annadāna

The story of Śveta also appears in the Varāhapurāna, where it is told by Śrī Varāha, an avatāra of Viṣṇu, to dharaṇī, the goddess earth, when she asks to be instructed about the vrata—the sacred observance—that the earthly man with his short life and limited capacities may undertake without too much effort. Śrī Varāha says that long ago a similar request was made by king Śveta to sage Vasiṣṭha, to which the latter had replied:

अन्नदानं ददद् राजन् सर्वकालसुखावहम् ।

अन्नेन चैव दत्तेन किं न दत्तं महीतले ॥

annadānam dadad rājan sarvakālasukhāvaham

*annena caiva dattena kim na dattam mahītale*⁵

O king, give food. Giving of food ensures well-being at all times. One who gives food gives all that is worth giving on the surface of the earth. Having given food, nothing remains un-given.

⁵ Varāha 98.61, p. 345.

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King Śveta, says Śrī Varāha, was not impressed by sage Vasiṣṭha's advice. He thought that food was too insignificant an object to be worthy of giving at the hands of a great king like him. He, therefore, gave away precious jewels, expensive garments, priceless elephants and flourishing cities. He conquered the earth, performed a thousand aśvamedhayajñas, and at the end of each gave away unfathomable riches. But he never gave any food or water.

In time, the great king Śveta died and was duly received into the heavens. But he continued to be afflicted by hunger and thirst there. One day he saw sage Vasiṣṭha in the heavens and eagerly implored him to relieve him of his terrible fate. Sage Vasiṣṭha began to wonder about how to release Śveta from this state, but even he was not sure what he could do for the poor king. Because as he said, echoing the teachings of Śrīrāma quoted in the Bhaviṣyapurāṇa: *adattam nopatiṣṭheta kasyacit kimciduttamam.*⁶

And the sage went on to remind Śveta of the imperative of giving food, which he had tried to impress upon him even earlier:

रत्नहेमप्रदानेन भोगवान् जायते नरः ।
अन्नदानप्रदानेन सर्वकामैस्तु तर्पितः ।
तेन दत्तं त्वया राजन् स्तोकं मत्वा नराधिप ॥

*ratnahemapradānena bhogavān jāyate narah
annadānapradānena sarvakāmaistu tarpitaḥ
tanna dattam tvayā rājan stokam matvā narādhipa⁷*

By giving away gold and precious stones men come to enjoy great luxuries. But it is by giving of food that they get complete satisfaction. And, O king, food is what you did not give. For, you did not find it to be of any significance.

Annadāna is sadāvratā

The story of king Śveta also appears in the thirteenth century work Caturvargacintāmaṇi of Hemādri, the scholarly minister of the Cālukya kingdom who compiled the essentials of dharma as laid

⁶ Varāha 98.75, p. 346.

⁷ Varāha 98.75-76, p. 346.

down in the *itihāsas*, *purāṇas* and other *smṛtis* in his voluminous compendium.

One of the relatively longer books of *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* is named the *vratakhaṇḍa*. This book is concerned with detailed descriptions of the fasts and observances that a householder is required to undertake regularly. The book consists of 32 chapters, each of which describes the virtue that accrues to the one who undertakes some prescribed fast or observance. The text also lays down the calendar for such fasts and observances, and the proper procedure for their performance. The twenty-first chapter of *vratakhaṇḍa* is about *nanātiithivratāni*, the various observances relating to those who arrive at one's door. One of the longer sections of this chapter concerns *annadānamāhātmya*, which is taken from the corresponding chapter in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, and recounts the story of king Śveta.

While attributing his section on *annadānamāhātmya* to the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, Hemādri adds that *annadāna* is *sadāvratā*. Concluding the section, he says: *iti śrībhaviṣyottare sadāvratam nāmānnadānamāhātmyam*.⁸

Literally, *sadāvratā* implies a *vrata*, an observance, that is performed at all times. And from the context in which Hemādri uses this term, it obviously implies that while the various fasts and observances described in the rest of the *vratakhaṇḍa* are all undertaken at particular times – at particular seasons, particular days and particular conjunctions of the celestial objects – the *vrata* of *annadāna* is not subject to the considerations of time. It is to be undertaken always, at all times. *Annadāna* is *sadāvratā*, while all others are *naimittikavratas*, *vratas* of specified times and occasions.

Sadāvratā, incidentally, is the name that Indians across the country prefer to use for *annadāna* even today.

Sharing anna is the discipline of living

Annadāna is thus *sadāvratā*, the *vrata* that must be performed by all at all times. And the greatness of *annadāna*, the *annadānamāhātmya*, is to be understood through the story of Śveta, the righteous king who lived and ruled according to the dictates of

⁸ *Caturvargacintāmaṇi vratakhaṇḍa* 21, p. 475.

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dharma, who performed great yajñas and gave away great riches in charity, but who failed to offer food or water to anyone, and who was therefore reduced to the eating of the flesh of his own corporeal body to assuage the pangs of hunger and thirst that kept tormenting him even in the heavens. The story of Śveta is emblematic of the Indian understanding of the precept of *annadāna*.

The story, as we have seen, keeps appearing in different contexts with varied details and emphases, but always with the imperative injunction that what is not given cannot be enjoyed, and therefore the one who has not assuaged the hunger and thirst of others during his life is bound to remain hungry and thirsty ever after. This is what Śrīrāma tells Lakṣmaṇa in the forest, this is what Brahmā tells Śveta, and this is what is told to Śveta by the sage Vasiṣṭha.

We have also heard sage Vasiṣṭha telling Śveta, in the *Varāha-purāṇa*'s rendering of the story, that no amount of giving of diverse riches in charity can substitute for the giving of food. All the righteous living of king Śveta and all his generous gifts could be of no avail in offsetting his failure to give food. Because, giving of food is not a matter of merely earning virtue, which may be exchanged with virtue earned otherwise. Giving of food, before sitting down to eat, is a matter of the essential discipline of living, and as we shall see later, for the Indians such giving is in the nature of a debt repaid. There is no virtue to be earned from such repayment, there is only a transgression to be avoided.

The story of the great king Śveta being reduced to the eating of his own flesh in fact evokes the image of not someone who lacks in well-earned virtue, but of one who has committed a terrible transgression. The mere act of living, according to the Indian understanding, involves partaking of the share of other components of the universe, which creates a debt not only towards other members of the human society but towards the universe in general. Giving of food, before eating, is both a recognition and a partial repayment of that debt. Not recognizing and not attempting to repay that debt is a transgression that puts one outside the pale of the intricate relations of give and take on which the universe is structured. And this makes one an outcaste, a *caṇḍāla*, not merely from the human society, but from the universe as it were. And then there is nothing in the universe that may be assigned for him as food. All that is left to him is his body which alone has been nourished by him to the exclusion of the whole universe. He therefore must live on himself,

literally partake of his own flesh. And king Śveta indeed looks like an outcaste from the universe.

The descriptions of king Śveta eating his own flesh often seem repugnantly detailed. But the image is probably meant to convey the repugnance that Indian society, functioning according to its own norms, would have felt towards the act of eating without sharing. In the following we shall hear again and again of the terrible sin of eating with one's doors shut upon others; of having one's fill, while men, animals and birds around remain un-fed; and of enjoying a meal while young children watch with hungry eyes. The great and righteous king Śveta sitting all alone on the banks of a beautiful lake in the midst of a rich forest full of delicious roots and fruit, and eating the flesh of his own corporeal body, represents the culmination of such eating without sharing.

The fate that befalls Śveta is thus the fruit of his conduct. It is the inexorable consequence of violating what Indians regard to be the appropriate attitude towards food and its place in the universe. This attitude is enshrined in the most basic of Indian texts. Thus, the Taittirīyopaniṣad advises in its resounding verses:

न कंचन वसतौ प्रत्याचक्षीत । तद्व्रतम् । तस्माद्यया कया च विधया
बह्वन्नं प्राप्नुयात् । आराध्यस्मा अन्नमित्वाचक्षते ॥

*na kañcana vasatau pratyācakṣīta. tadvratam.
tasmādyayā kayā ca vidhayā bahvannam prāpnuyāt.
ārādhyasmā annamityācakṣate.*⁹

Do not send away anyone who comes to your door, without offering him food and hospitality. That is the inviolable discipline of mankind;

Therefore, have a great abundance of food, and exert all your efforts towards ensuring such abundance;

And announce to the world that this abundance of food is ready, to be partaken of by all.

And, the upaniṣad goes on to authoritatively lay-down the inviolable principle that anna is obtained strictly in the same measure in which it is given:

⁹ Taitt Up 3.10, p. 230.

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एतद्वै मुखतोऽन्नं राद्धम् । मुखतोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते । एतद्वै
मध्यतोऽन्नं राद्धम् । मध्यतोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते । एतद्वै
अन्ततोऽन्नं राद्धम् । अन्ततोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते ॥

*etadvai mukhato'nnam rāddham. mukhato'smā
annam rādhyate.*

*etadvai madhyato'nnam rāddham. madhyato'smā
annam rādhyate.*

*etadvā antato'nnam rāddham. antato'smā
annam rādhyate.¹⁰*

One, who prepares and gives food in abundance with high care and veneration, obtains food in abundance with the same high care and veneration;

One, who prepares and gives food in a modest measure with modest care and veneration, obtains food in the same modest measure and with similarly modest care and veneration;

And the 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 abjectness.

¹⁰ Taitt Up 3.10, p. 230.



CHAPTER 3

prahr̥ṣṭamudito lokah

Yajñas of the Great Kings: Rāmāyaṇa

Before laying down the inviolable discipline of not letting anyone go un-fed and un-cared for from one's door, the Taittiriyaopaniṣad lays down another vrata:

अन्नं बहु कुर्वीत । तद्व्रतम् ॥

*annam bahu kurvīta. tadvrataṃ.*¹

Endeavour so that there be a great abundance of food. That is the inviolable discipline of mankind.

Being bound by such explicit discipline, it is not surprising that the celebrated kings of Indian classical literature seem to be perpetually engaged in organizing an abundance of food and sharing it with all. Such annadāna, as we shall see, happens all the time. But the great yajñas of the great kings about which so much is said in Indian literature are especially grand celebrations of the giving of food to large numbers over long periods of time.

The yajñas of the great kings, of course, involve much more than merely annadāna. These are occasions for the dispersal of all kinds of wealth that accumulates in a capital city over a period of time. And such periodic dispersal forms one of the basic principles of the Indian theory and practice of political organization.

The yajñas are also occasions for grand displays of the skills of the great craftsmen: the builders, the sculptors, the carpenters, the metal-workers and others. These are occasions for the coming together of the best of the musicians, dancers, athletes, artists, scholars, poets and grammarians, all of whom have the opportunity in

¹ Taitt Up 3.9, p. 229.

these yajñas to show-off their competence and skills, and also to compare notes with their professional colleagues and competitors from far and wide.

And, perhaps most important of all, the great yajñas of the great kings, are occasions for the re-assertion of the territorial and cultural oneness of Bhāratavarṣa. These gatherings of the princes and kings of diverse dynasties, of the venerated leaders of diverse republics and communities, and of the foremost experts of diverse disciplines, all of them representing the farthest nooks and corners of the Indian sub-continent, are obviously in the nature of grand celebrations of the unity of India and her people, notwithstanding the multiplicity of political arrangements that they devise for themselves in keeping with the essential Indian understanding that political power, if it is to remain within the bounds of dharma, must remain widely dispersed.

But at the centre of all the great celebration and activity there always is, according to the descriptions of the great yajñas in the classical Indian texts, a great feeding. Great yajñas involve great annadāna. Annadāna alone, without any other observance, may constitute a yajña, but there can be no great yajña without annadāna.

The aśvamedhayajña of Śrīrāma

One of the greatest of yajñas described in the Indian literature is the aśvamedhayajña of Śrīrāma that marks the culmination of his reign, and ends with the return of Śrī Sītā to the welcoming lap of goddess earth, whose daughter she is. After this yajña the only great event that the epic describes is the departure of Śrīrāma from Ayodhyā, followed by his brothers and all his people, to return to his eternal abode.

Śrīrāma begins preparing for the yajña immediately on his return from the āśrama of sage Agastya, where he is told the story of the great king Śveta. It seems that Śrīrāma has made up his mind to perform a great yajña even before reaching Ayodhyā. As soon as his flying chariot, *puṣpakavimāna*, descends into the central quadrangle of his palace, he gets down, dispatches the vimāna, and asks the door-keeper to quickly call his brothers, Bharata and Lakṣmaṇa. And, upon their presenting themselves before him, he informs them of his determination, almost without any preliminaries.

There follows a discussion between Śrīrāma and his brothers on whether he should perform a rājasūyayajña or an āśvamedha. Śrīrāma is initially inclined towards the undertaking of the rājasūyayajña. But Bharata gently reminds Śrīrāma that it would be inappropriate for him, who is universally acknowledged as the foremost among kings and who is known to protect all kings and all living beings like a father, to perform a yajña that is likely to lead to the extinguishing of all kingly dynasties on earth, and the disappearance of all initiative amongst the brave and resolute. The dialogue is of course merely to recall and assert once again one of the fundamental principles of rāmarājya, the Indian model of ideal polity: In rāmarājya political power is widely shared and, as is said in the very first chapter of the Vālmīkīyārāmāyaṇa, it is an attribute of Śrīrāma that during his reign the number of rājavamśas, kingly dynasties, rises a hundred-fold: *rājavamśāñchataguṇān sthāpayaṣyati rāghavaḥ*.²

Thus advised by his brothers, Śrīrāma decides to undertake an āśvamedhayajña, in which Śrīrāma's horse, escorted by Lakṣmaṇa, would visit various kingdoms and receive the veneration of the kings; such offerings of veneration would presumably only enhance the dignity of the kings, and not challenge the sovereignty of their domain. Having made the decision, Śrīrāma asks Lakṣmaṇa to invite Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva, Jābāli, Kāśyapa and all other venerable persons of his time to seek their advice and blessings for the great undertaking. Presently, preparations for the yajña begin in earnest and Śrīrāma begins to give detailed directions for the proper conduct of the ensuing event.

The preparations

The first step in these preparations is to send urgent invitations to Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa, the two kings of extra-human kingdoms—one of the vānaras and the other of the rākṣasas—who become Śrīrāma's friends and allies during his campaign against Rāvaṇa. These extra-human kings, Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa, with their armies of vānaras and rākṣasas, are to perform the duties of the hosts of this great yajña of Śrīrāma.

The next step is to send invitations to all the kings, all the brāhmaṇas and the twice-born, all the ṛṣis, tapasvins and other scholars,

² Rāmāyaṇa *bāla* 1.96, p. 30.

and to all the artists and performers, living within the country or elsewhere – all of them to come with their families and followers and be the guests of Śrīrāma. Next, Śrīrāma asks for the preparation of a vast ground for the yajña in Naimiṣāraṇya, the forest on the banks of the Gomatī, which flows some distance away from Ayodhyā. He also instructs that śāntikarma, the ritual invocation for the quieting of all obstacles, should begin immediately at the place selected for the yajña.

And once these preliminaries are over, Śrīrāma advises Lakṣmaṇa to quickly invite all the people – the term used is *janah*, all people without any distinction – and to ensure that everyone who comes returns satiated, greatly nourished and highly honoured: *tuṣṭah*, *puṣṭah*, *mānitah*. Thus, says Śrīrāma:

तुष्टः पुष्टश्च सर्वोऽसौ मानितश्च यथाविधि ।

प्रतियास्यति धर्मज्ञ शीघ्रमामन्त्र्यतां जनः ॥

*tuṣṭah puṣṭaśca sarvo'sau mānitaśca yathāvidhi
pratiyāsyati dharmajña śīghramāmantryatām janah*³

For such feeding of great multitudes, great quantities of food would of course be required. And Śrīrāma gives specific instructions about the provisions to be gathered for the yajña:

शतं वाहसहस्राणां तण्डुलानां वपुष्मताम् ।

अयुतं तिलमुद्गस्य प्रयात्वग्रे महाबल ।

चणकानां कुलित्थानां माषाणां लवणस्य च ।

अतोऽनुरूपं स्नेहं च गन्धं संक्षिप्तमेव च ॥

*śatam vāhasahasrāṇām taṇḍulānām vapuṣmatām
ayutam tilamudgasya prayātvagre mahābala
caṇakānām kulitthānām māṣāṇām lavaṇasya ca
ato'nurūpam sneham ca gandham samkṣiptameva ca*⁴

Let hundreds of thousands of pack animals carry fine healthy-grained rice, let tens of thousands of them carry sesame, green-gram, black-gram, other lentils and salt. Let

³ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 91.18, p. 1649.

⁴ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 91.19–20, p. 1649.

there be ghee and oil appropriate to the quantities of other provisions. And also let there be enough of fragrant substances. O mahābala, the mighty Lakṣmaṇa, let all these go in the front.

All these provisions, along with several crores of gold coins and much more of un-coined gold, are to reach the yajña grounds in advance. And these are to be followed by a huge concourse that includes, besides a large number of cooks, craftsmen, entertainers, traders, scholars and priests, also the elders, women and children of Ayodhyā. Śrīrāma assigns the responsibility of escorting this great movement of people and provisions to Bharata and his armies.

The annadāna

The feeding at Naimiṣāraṇya begins even before the commencement of the yajña proper. Bharata reaches Naimiṣāraṇya, and immediately, Sugrīva and his army of vānaras take over the task of serving food to all; and Vibhīṣaṇa, his rākṣasas, and the women of Ayodhyā take up the responsibility of according a proper welcome to the arriving guests.

It is only after all these preparations have been made that Śrīrāma sends out an auspicious dark horse with a sheen like that of a black deer, assigns Lakṣmaṇa as its escort, and proceeds to Naimiṣāraṇya to begin the yajña. The yajña lasts a whole year. Throughout this period Śrīrāma stays at Naimiṣāraṇya, personally supervising the arrangements, accepting the veneration of the kings who arrive from all over the earth, and in turn honouring them with gifts of food, drink and raiment.

Besides this exchange of honours between Śrīrāma and the kings, what seems to be going on at Naimiṣāraṇya during that year of the āśvamedhayajña is a grand and unending feast, under the competent, careful and enthusiastic direction of Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa and their extra-human armies. Vālmīki describes the scene of the yajña and the feasting thus:

ईदृशं राजसिंहस्य यज्ञप्रवरमुत्तमम् ।
नान्यः शब्दोऽभवत् तत्र ह्यमेधे महात्मनः ।
छन्दतो देहि देहीति यावत् तुष्यन्ति याचकाः ।

तावत् सर्वाणि दत्तानि क्रतुमुख्ये महात्मनः ।

विविधानि च गौडानि खाण्डवानि तथैव च ।

न निःसृतं भवत्योष्ठाद् वचनं यावदर्थिनाम् ।

तावद् वानररक्षोभिर्दत्तमेवाभ्यदृश्यत ॥

*idr̥śam rājasimhasya yajñappravaramuttamam
nānyah śabdo bhavat tatra hayamedhe mahātmanah
chandato dehi dehīti yāvat tusyanti yācakāh
tāvat sarvāṇi dattāni kratumukhye mahātmanah
vivīdhāni ca gauḍāni khāṇḍavāni tathaiiva ca
na niḥsṛtam bhavatyoṣṭhād vacanam yāvadarthinām
tāvad vānararakṣobhirdattamevābhyadr̥śyata*⁵

Thus proceeds the great yajña of the lion amongst the kings. In this aśvamedha of mahātma Śrīrāma, there is only one cry that keeps rising again and again: serve, serve, serve properly. And the servers keep serving till the guests are satiated. In this foremost of the yajñas of mahātma Śrīrāma, a great variety of food is being served, including numerous kinds of sweetmeats prepared especially for the occasion. The armies of vānaras and rākṣasas rush to fulfil even the unexpressed desires of the guests. Before the guests can open their mouths to ask for what they want, the vānaras and rākṣasas are there to do their bidding.

And the feeding is so abundant and sumptuous that amongst the multitudes gathered in Naimiṣāraṇya there is not one who looks emaciated, downcast or distressed. Everyone present in that great yajña seems to exude well-being; everyone is well-fed, well-nourished and in high cheer:

न कश्चिन्मलिनो वापि दीनो वाप्यथवा कृशः ।

तस्मिन् यज्ञवरे राज्ञो हृष्टपुष्टजनावृते ॥

*na kaścinnmalino vāpi dīno vāpyathavā kṛśah
tasmin yajñavare rājño hr̥ṣṭapustajanāvṛte*⁶

⁵ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 92.10–13, p. 1650.

⁶ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 92.13–14, p. 1650.

Such is the aśvamedhayajña of Śrīrāma. And such is the greatness of annaḍāna that takes place in this yajña. The ultimate tribute sage Vālmīki pays this yajña is that, throughout the period of a year and more that the yajña lasts, nothing is ever found wanting there:

ईदृशो राजसिंहस्य यज्ञः सर्वगुणान्वितः ।

संवत्सरमथो साग्रं वर्तते न च हीयते ॥

*īdṛśo rājasimhasya yajñah sarvagunānvitah
samvatsaramatho sāgram vartate na ca hīyate*⁷

Departure of Śrī Sītā

There are of course many an event of great import occurring in this yajña. Vālmīki himself, the seer who sees the events of Śrīrāma's life on earth and narrates them in the epic poetry of his Rāmāyaṇa, arrives there with Lava and Kuśa, sons of Śrīrāma who are born to Śrī Sītā while she is in exile at the āśrama of the sage. On the advice of Vālmīki, Lava and Kuśa go around the yajña grounds melodiously reciting the story of Rāmāyaṇa in the various streets and squares. The strains of their singing reach the ears of Śrīrāma from afar, and listening to the story of his own life being recited in high verse and to the accompaniment of incomparable music, Śrīrāma invites the two young men to sing the story before a great gathering of kings, elders and the foremost scholars of different disciplines. And as the story proceeds, it is revealed that the two young men are in fact Śrīrāma's sons.

Then, Śrī Sītā herself is invited to that gathering of kings, scholars and others. And Śrīrāma, in a striking exhibition of abject deference by a revered king to the norms of society, insists that Śrī Sītā should prove her purity and innocence in the presence of all. Śrīrāma, once earlier, subjects Śrī Sītā to a similar ordeal, when after his victory over Rāvaṇa he insists that before being received back into the folds of raghukula she should prove her innocence by passing through fire. Śrī Sītā undergoes that ordeal with fortitude. On this occasion, however, Śrī Sītā calls upon the goddess earth, of whom she is born at the beginning of Rāmāyaṇa, to stand witness to her innocence and receive her back into her lap. And, in the

⁷ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 92.19, p. 1650.

presence of the great gathering, the earth opens up and Śrī Sītā reverentially gathered back into the warm embrace of her mother.

These are momentous events, which leave even Śrīrāma benumbed with grief for a long while, and their import obviously reverberates through sage Vālmīki's description of the *aśvamedha* of Śrīrāma. But, these events occur in the background of the great *annadāna* that continues unabated. *Annadāna* is at the centre, the events seem to unfold around it.

The *aśvamedhayajña* of Śrīrāma ends with the heart-rending departure of Śrī Sītā into the warm depths of mother earth. Śrīrāma lives and rules for thousands of years during which he performs thousands of *yajñas*. In fact, the whole of his long rule is a continuous *yajña* during which he endeavours to ensure that there be none in want of food, and there be no disease and no disturbance of the natural order of the universe. As sage Vālmīki says:

काले वर्षति पर्जन्यः सुभिक्षं विमला दिशः ।

हृष्टपुष्टजनाकीर्णं पुरं जनपदास्तथा ।

नाकाले म्रियते कश्चिन्न व्याधिः प्राणिनां तथा ।

नानर्थो विद्यते कश्चिद् रामे राज्यं प्रशासति ॥

*kāle varṣati parjanyaḥ subhikṣam vimalā diśaḥ
hṛṣṭapuṣṭajanākīrṇam puram janapadāstathā
nākāle mriyate kaścinnā vyādhīḥ prāṇinām tathā
nānartho vidyate kaścid rāme rājyaṁ prasāsati*⁸

While Śrīrāma presides over the *rājya*, it rains at the proper time; there is an abundance of food and an air of clean freshness all around; the capital city and the diverse regions are thickly peopled with multitudes of healthy, cheerful and well-fed people; nobody dies an untimely death, and no living being suffers from any disease; and nothing untoward happens anywhere.

Thus the *rāmarājya* goes on. But the epic, it seems, is complete with the completion of the *aśvamedhayajña* of Śrīrāma and the departure of Śrī Sītā.

⁸ Rāmāyaṇa *uttara* 99.13-14, p. 1661.

It is not perhaps merely incidental that such climactic events are placed in the sanctified ambience of a great annadāna. In fact, the phrases that keep occurring repeatedly in the closing chapters of the Vālmikīyarāmāyaṇa – that describe the sorrowful event of Śrī Sītā's departure and the later long and uneventful ages through which a lonely Śrīrāma, often with a golden image of Śrī Sītā by his side, presides over the great rāmarājya – happen to be the ones that are connected with describing a healthy, well-fed and well-nourished people. The phrases that keep reverberating throughout are: *tusṭah*, *puṣṭah*, *hr̥ṣṭah*, and of course, *mānitah*.

The aśvamedhayajña of king Daśaratha

The Vālmikīyarāmāyaṇa describes another great aśvamedhayajña, the one that king Daśaratha performs at the beginning of the epic. There is a great difference between the ambience of the two yajñas: Śrīrāma's aśvamedha marks the sorrowful culmination of the story of his life on earth, while Daśaratha's yajña is in joyful anticipation of the coming of Śrīrāma. Accordingly there is an obvious difference between the pace at which the preparations for the two yajñas unfold, and in the scale of preparations made.

The resolution takes form

Preparations for Śrīrāma's aśvamedha, as we have seen, proceed at a tearing pace. Śrīrāma, as he returns from the āśrama of sage Agastya, is in a great hurry to get on with the task he has determined upon; and the quick pace he sets at the beginning is retained throughout. It almost seems as if the hand of destiny is propelling him towards the coming events.

The preparations for Daśaratha's aśvamedhayajña, on the other hand, proceed with slow and steady deliberation. As the resolution to perform an aśvamedhayajña, to invoke the blessings of the gods for the precious gift of sons, begins to take form in the mind of Daśaratha, he places the thought for consideration before the venerated elders and preceptors. Having obtained their approval, he brings the proposal before his council and asks the ministers to begin careful preparations for the great yajña, cautioning them that any deviation during the performance of such a yajña would bring forth terrible disaster. Next, he informs his wives about his