



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 tuśyanti 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 hr̥ṣṭapuṣṭajanāvṛte*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
hṛṣṭapuṣṭajanākīrṇaṁ puram janapadāstathā
nākāle mriyate kaścinna vyādhīḥ prāṇināṁ 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 Vālmikīyārāmāyaṇa – 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 Vālmikīyārāmāyaṇa 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

determination to perform the yajña and asks them to begin preparing for the great event.

The ministers then begin making preliminary arrangements, and Daśaratha, on the advice of his foremost counsellor, Sumantra, travels to Aṅgadeśa along with his family and entourage to specially request ṛṣi R̥ṣyaśṛṅga to be the leading priest for the forthcoming yajña and to personally escort the ṛṣi and his wife, Śānta, to Ayodhyā. The preliminary preparations continue for a long time, and Śānta spends many happy days in the company of Daśaratha's wives.

The preparations

It is much later that Daśaratha, finding an auspicious time at the beginning of spring, makes up his mind to formally begin the yajña. The position of the chief priest is now ceremonially offered to R̥ṣyaśṛṅga, who, while accepting the honour, directs Daśaratha to send out the yajña horse on its journey around the earth and to prepare the yajña grounds on the northern bank of river Sarayū that flows by the city of Ayodhyā. And Daśaratha once again calls his counsellors and asks them to begin the final arrangements.

Another year passes in the making of such arrangements, and at the beginning of spring the following year, Daśaratha approaches sage Vasiṣṭha and requests him to take up personal responsibility for the successful completion of the yajña. It is only at this stage that Vasiṣṭha begins to issue urgent and specific instructions of the kind Śrīrāma is seen issuing immediately following the decision to perform the aśvamedhayajña. Sage Vasiṣṭha calls the great scholars, priests and craftsmen, and puts them to the task of preparing the yajña grounds. And he asks Sumantra to invite the kings and the people to participate in the yajña.

Like Lakṣmaṇa in Śrīrāma's aśvamedha, Sumantra is instructed to invite the great kings and the ordinary people from all walks of life. Thus, Vasiṣṭha instructs:

निमन्त्रयस्व नृपतीन् पृथिव्यां ये च धार्मिकाः ।

ब्राह्मणान् क्षत्रियान् वैश्याञ्छूद्रांश्चैव सहस्रशः ॥

*nimantrayasva nr̥patīn pṛthivyāṃ ye ca dhārmikāḥ
brāhmaṇān kṣatriyān vaiśyāñśūdrāmścaiva sahasraśah*⁹

⁹ Rāmāyaṇa *bāla* 13.20, p. 55.

ĀŚVAMEDHA OF DAŚARATHA

Invite all the righteous kings on the earth. And invite brāh-
maṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and sūdras in their thousands.

Sumantra is asked to go and personally invite the greatest of the kings of the age. King Janaka of Mithilā; the king of Kāśī; the king of Kekaya, who also happens to be the elderly father-in-law of Daśaratha; king Romapāda of Āṅgadeśa, whose daughter is married to the chief priest, Rṣyaśṛṅga, of Daśaratha's yajña; Bhānumān, the king of Kośala; and the king of Magadha: all of them are to be invited in person by Sumantra. And kings of the eastern kingdoms, the kings of Sindhu, Sauvīra and Saurāṣṭra in the west, and those of the south are invited through high ambassadors carrying personal messages from king Daśaratha.

The preparation of the yajña grounds, as Vasiṣṭha directs it, is more elaborate than that of Śrīrāma's āśvamedhayajña. In the yajña grounds on the northern banks of river Sarayū, hundreds of houses are built for the brāhmanas, as also vast complexes for the people of Ayodhyā, huge cantonments for the armies of the visiting kings, and great palaces for the kings themselves. Vasiṣṭha also directs special sheds to be erected for horses and elephants. And he has all these houses and palaces filled with varied articles of food.

Sage Vasiṣṭha insists that everyone who comes to the yajña grounds must be fed, and fed in great dignity and with respect. He is particularly insistent that whatever is given to anyone must be offered with respect and without compromising the dignity of the receiver, and he expressly instructs all those connected with the various arrangements for the yajña that:

दातव्यमन्नं विधिवत् सत्कृत्य न तु लीलया ।

सर्वे वर्णा यथा पूजां प्राप्नुवन्ति सुसत्कृताः ॥

*dātavyamannaṁ vidhivat satkṛtya na tu līlayā
sarve varṇā yathā pūjāṁ prāpṇuvanti susatkṛtāḥ*¹⁰

Food should be offered with all ceremony and honour. Serving of food should never be undertaken with an attitude of indifference; it should be done with such care that all varṇas feel revered and honoured.

¹⁰ Rāmāyaṇa bāla 13.14, p. 54.

And later, when those assigned to various tasks come back to report the completion of the arrangements for the yajña, sage Vasiṣṭha once again advises them:

अवज्ञया न दातव्यं कस्यचिल्लीलयापि वा ।

अवज्ञया कृतं हन्याद् दातारं नात्र संशयः ॥

*avajñayā na dātavyam kasyacillīlayāpi vā
avajñayā kṛtam hanyād dātāram nātra saṁśayah¹¹*

Never give anything to anyone with indifference or contempt. Never affect such indifference or contempt even in playfulness. Indifference or contempt shown towards the receiver destroys the giver: there can be no doubt about it.

The yajña and annadāna

After thus making detailed arrangements for the yajña and instructing all concerned in the proper conduct during the yajña, sage Vasiṣṭha requests king Daśaratha to enter the yajña grounds. And, it is then that Daśaratha and his wives are formally initiated as the yajamānas, hosts of the yajña, and the yajña proper begins under the guidance of ṛṣi Ṛṣyaśṛṅga.

The yajña involves great ritual and a grand recitation by the gathered priests and scholars. But all the ritual and the recitation seem to be taking place in the midst of a great and continuous annadāna. As in the aśvamedha of Śrīrāma, in this yajña too, annadāna seems to be at the centre of all activity, and notwithstanding the various differences in the two yajñas, the epic describes the annadāna of the two in almost similar terms. Thus, describing the aśvamedhayajña of king Daśaratha, sage Vālmiki says:

न तेष्वहःसु श्रान्तो वा क्षुधितो वा न दृश्यते ।

नाविद्वान् ब्राह्मणः कश्चिन्नाशतानुचरस्तथा ।

ब्राह्मणा भुञ्जते नित्यं नाथवन्तश्च भुञ्जते ।

तापसा भुञ्जते चापि श्रमणाश्चैव भुञ्जते ।

वृद्धाश्च व्याधिताश्चैव स्त्रीबालाश्च तथैव च ।

¹¹ Rāmāyaṇa *bāla* 13.33-34, p. 55.

अनिशं भुञ्जमानानां न तृप्तिरुपलभ्यते ।
 दीयतां दीयतामन्नं वासांसि विविधानि च ।
 इति संचोदितास्तत्र तथा चक्रुरनेकशः ।
 अन्नकूटाश्च दृश्यन्ते बहवः पर्वतोपमाः ।
 दिवसे दिवसे तत्र सिद्धस्य विधिवत् तदा ।
 नानादेशादनुप्राप्ताः पुरुषाः स्त्रीगणास्तथा ।
 अन्नपानैः सुविहितास्तस्मिन् यज्ञे महात्मनः ।
 अन्नं हि विधिवत्स्वादु प्रशंसन्ति द्विजर्षभाः ।
 अहो तृप्ताः स्म भद्रं ते इति शुश्राव राघवः ॥

*na teṣvahaṅsu śrānto vā kṣudhito vā na dr̥śyate
 nāvidvān brāhmaṇaḥ kaścinnāsatānucarastathā
 brāhmaṇā bhuñjate nityam nāthavantaśca bhuñjate
 tāpasā bhuñjate cāpi śramaṇāścaiva bhuñjate
 vṛddhāśca vyādhitāścaiva śrībālāśca tathiva ca
 aniśam bhuñjamānānām na tr̥ptirupalabhyate
 dīyatām dīyatāmannam vāsāmsi vīvidhāni ca
 iti samcoditāstatra tathā cakruranekaśaḥ
 annakūṭāśca dr̥śyante bahavaḥ parvatopamāḥ
 divase divase tatra siddhasya vidhivat tadā
 nānādeśādanuprāptāḥ puruṣāḥ strīganāstathā
 annapānaiḥ suvihitāstasmin yajñe mahātmanah
 annam hi vidhivatsvādu praśamsanti dvijarṣabhāḥ
 aho tr̥ptāḥ sma bhadrām te iti śuśrāva rāghavaḥ¹²*

Throughout that great yajña there is none who looks tired or is in hunger, nor is there a brāhmaṇa who is not a great scholar or one who is not accompanied by hundreds of followers.

An unending feast is on: brāhmaṇas are eating, ordinary people are eating, tapasvins are eating, śramaṇas are eating. The old, the sick, the women and the children are eating. They are eating continuously, and yet none wants to stop.

Those who serve are being continuously urged to give, give food and give clothes. And thus urged they keep going

¹² Rāmāyaṇa bāla 14.11–17, p. 57.

YAJÑAS OF THE GREAT KINGS: RĀMĀYAṆA

round and round, distributing food and clothes of various kinds.

Day after day there are seen several huge mountains of food, all cooked and prepared with great care.

In this yajña of mahātma Daśaratha, whole communities of men and women that have arrived from distant places are being carefully looked after with abundant food and drink.

The foremost among the twice-born are singing praises of the feasting and they are blessing the king of raghukula thus:

“The food is delicious, it is properly cooked and served. We are indeed contented. Let all auspiciousness visit you.”

The description of annadāna here is even more elaborate than that of the annadāna in Śrīrāma’s aśvamedhayajña. And in conformity with the generally relaxed and detailed narration of events preceding and during king Daśaratha’s yajña, the rituals associated with the aśvamedhayajña, and the putreṣṭiyajña that immediately follows it, are described in great detail in sage Vālmiki’s epic. But, notwithstanding these details, the narration leaves no doubt that, anna and annadāna, food and the giving of food, occupy the pre-eminent position both in the preparations for king Daśaratha’s yajña and its actual performance, just as they do in the yajña that Śrīrāma undertakes much later.

Rāmarājya

Thus the great epic opens with a great yajña and ends with another; and these two yajñas, separated from each other by the whole story of the life of Śrīrāma on earth and hence very different in their mood and object, seem to be very similar at the core. Both yajñas are grand celebrations of anna and annadāna. The story of Śrīrāma’s life on earth is played out between two great annadānas. It is no wonder that sage Vālmiki’s descriptions of rāmarājya are replete with images of the abundance of food for all at all times and of the un-perturbed well-being of all creation:

प्रहृष्टमुदितो लोकस्तुष्टः पुष्टः सुधार्मिकः ।

निरामयो ह्यरोगश्च दुर्भिक्षमयवर्जितः ।

न पुत्रमरणं केचिद् द्रक्ष्यन्ति पुरुषाः क्वचित् ।
 नार्यश्चाविधवा नित्यं भविष्यन्ति पतिव्रताः ।
 न चाग्निजं भयं किञ्चिन्नाप्सु मज्जन्ति जन्तवः ।
 न वातजं भयं किञ्चिन्नापि ज्वरकृतं तथा ।
 न चापि क्षुद्भयं तत्र न तस्करभयं तथा ।
 नगराणि च राष्ट्राणि धनधान्ययुतानि च ।
 नित्यं प्रमुदिताः सर्वे यथा कृतयुगे तथा ॥

*prahr̥ṣtamudito lokastustah puṣṭah sudhārmikāḥ
 nirāmāyo hyarogaśca durbhikṣabhayavarjitah
 na putramaraṇaṁ kecid drakṣyanti puruṣāḥ kvacit
 nār̥yaścāvidhavā nityaṁ bhaviṣyanti pativratāḥ
 na cāgnijaṁ bhayaṁ kiṁcinnāpsu majjanti jantavaḥ
 na vātajaṁ bhayaṁ kiṁcinnāpi jvarakṛtaṁ tathā
 na cāpi kṣudbhayaṁ tatra na taskarabhayaṁ tathā
 nagarāṇi ca rāṣṭrāṇi dhanadhānyayutāni ca
 nityaṁ pramuditāḥ sarve yathā kṛtayuge tathā¹³*

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.

¹³ Rāmāyaṇa *bāla* 1.90–94, p. 30.



CHAPTER 4

dundubhirmeghanirghoṣo muhurmuhuratādyata

Yajñas of the Great Kings: Mahābhārata

The other great epic of India, the Mahābhārata, also opens and ends with a great yajña. It is the rājasūyayajña of Yudhiṣṭhira, described in the sabhāparvan, that makes the tiny kingdom of the pāṇḍavas an object of jealousy for Duryodhana and thus sets the stage for future events. And it is the aśvamedhayajña that Yudhiṣṭhira performs after the death of Bhīṣma that marks not only the culmination of his reign, but also more or less the end of Śrīkrṣṇa's sojourn on earth, who is born into this world towards the end of dvāparayuga in order to relieve the earth of the great burden of adharma that accumulates on her with the passage of time.

The rājasūyayajña of Yudhiṣṭhira

Rājasūyayajña, as Bharata says to Śrīrāma, is a yajña that involves the subduing of all kingly dynasties on earth. And the description of Yudhiṣṭhira's rājasūya in the Mahābhārata is largely a description of how Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers, through their great valour and the unrivalled political acumen of Śrīkrṣṇa, achieve a position of pre-eminence amongst the kings. This process of the establishment of cākravartya in a polity, that by the very nature of its fundamental doctrine is constituted of small self-respecting kingdoms, ought to be of great interest to the students of political theory in India. We, however, shall deal briefly with the momentous political events that form an essential part of the preparations for Yudhiṣṭhira's rājasūyayajña.

The first suggestion that Yudhiṣṭhira perform a rājasūyayajña comes from Nārada, the roving sage of Indian classical antiquity,

who is almost an ally of *kāla*, and who, by planting an ambition here or inciting a jealousy there, keeps events moving along their destined course. Nārada's suggestion to Yudhiṣṭhira in this instance is in the form of a message from king Pāṇḍu, the father of the pāṇḍavas, whom Nārada happens to meet in the heavens. While making his suggestion, Nārada also cautions Yudhiṣṭhira that this kind of *yajña* can lead to great disasters and wars, and he must carefully weigh the possibilities before deciding upon undertaking it.

Yudhiṣṭhira, of course, does not really need such cautioning. He thinks long and hard, and repeatedly consults with his brothers, with his counsellors, and with the great sages and ṛṣis of his time, all of whom agree that he is entirely capable of performing a *rājasūyayajña*. But even this does not fully reassure Yudhiṣṭhira, who keeps worrying about his resources and capabilities for such an endeavour.

Establishing the cākravartya

Finally, he decides to seek the advice of Śrīkrṣṇa. Śrīkrṣṇa begins by saying that Yudhiṣṭhira indeed fulfils all qualifications of a king desirous of performing a *rājasūyayajña*: *sarvaiguṇairmahārāja rājasūyam tvamarhasi*.¹ And then he goes on to offer Yudhiṣṭhira an exhaustive overview of the *kṣatriyakulas* and kingdoms of the time. He assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each of these *kulas* and kingdoms, recounts their past and present alliances and their future inclinations, and enumerates the military and political obstacles and openings that each of them is likely to present to Yudhiṣṭhira's ambitions of *cākravartya*.

Śrīkrṣṇa's assessment, in brief, is that Jarāsaṁdha, the ruler of Magadha in central India, is the keystone of the established military and political arrangements of the time. If these arrangements are to be altered so as to establish the primacy of Yudhiṣṭhira, then Jarāsaṁdha will have to be eliminated: *na tu śakyaṁ jarāsaṁdhe jīvamāne mahābale rājasūyastvayāvāptumeṣā rājan matirmama*.² And Jarāsaṁdha deserves to be eliminated, probably because he has violated the *dharma* of *cākravartya* by imprisoning the kings that he has subdued, and by playing the game of making different

¹ Mahā sabhā 14.1, p. 706.

² Mahā sabhā 14.62, p. 710.

kingdoms fight amongst themselves merely for the sake of retaining his superiority.

Jarāsaṁdha, however, seems invincible by ordinary military means and, in any case, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa does not want Jarāsaṁdha to die the honourable death that a kṣatriya achieves by dying valiantly in an armed military conflict. Therefore, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa himself travels to Magadha with the pāṇḍava brothers, Bhīmasena and Arjuna, and gets Jarāsaṁdha killed by challenging him to bare-handed one-to-one combat with Bhīmasena, who cannot be equalled in this mode of fighting. After the victory, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa, along with the pāṇḍava brothers, personally goes to the cave-prisons of Jarāsaṁdha and releases the kings that Jarāsaṁdha had held in captivity. This victory alone thus brings innumerable kings, constituting, as the epic says, eighty-six percent of all kings on earth, under the protection of Yudhiṣṭhira. And Sahadeva, the son of Jarāsaṁdha who is designated the future king of Magadha by Jarāsaṁdha himself before engaging in combat with Bhīmasena, also seeks and obtains abhaya, protection, from Śrīkr̥ṣṇa and thus becomes an ally of the pāṇḍavas.

Once the primary recipient of the reverence of the kings is thus removed from the scene, the rest of the task becomes relatively simple. The four brothers of Yudhiṣṭhira are sent in different directions to establish Yudhiṣṭhira's cākṛavartya over the earth. Arjuna goes to the north, Bhīmasena to the east, Sahadeva to the south, and Nakula to the west. The brothers reach the farthest corners of the known earth: across the Himālayas up to the Meru hills in the north; across the seas and up to the island kingdoms in the east; to the coast and beyond to Śrī Laṅkā in the south; and up to the coast and across the seas again in the west.

Few of the numerous kingdoms that the pāṇḍava brothers pass through offer them any resistance. Most of the kings, like the great Vibhiṣaṇa of Śrī Laṅkā and Śiśupāla of Cedi, accept the cākṛavartya of Yudhiṣṭhira after hearing of his antecedents, of the valour of his brothers and of Śrīkr̥ṣṇa's friendship for them. Even where a fight does take place – as between Arjuna and Bhagadatta of Prāgyotiṣapura or between Sahadeva and the vānara kings Mainda and Dvidida – it is in the nature of putting the famed valour of the pāṇḍava brothers to a proper test; and the battle often ends without any of the parties winning or losing. But, what is perhaps most remarkable is that even when a king is defeated by force of arms,

he is invariably re-installed on his throne. This happens even in the case of what are known to be essentially alien kingships, like those of the śakas, the hūṇas, the barbaras, and the mlecchas.

This is perhaps one of the finest illustrations of the basic principle of Indian political doctrine according to which even a conquered and alien people retain the right to rule themselves according to their own ways and customs; in accordance with their own kula-, jāti- and deśa-dharma, and under the kingship of their own venerated leaders. The acceptance of Yudhiṣṭhira's cākravartya by a king during the campaigns of the pāṇḍava brothers never amounts to an abdication of the rights and duties of the king and his people within their domain. In the epic, such acceptance is almost always described as an exchange of mutual honours between the visiting pāṇḍava or his envoys and the accepting king, and offers of valuable gifts and other contributions towards the rājasūyayajña of Yudhiṣṭhira by the latter. This is all that is demanded and received by the pāṇḍava brothers from every king who agrees to accept the primacy of Yudhiṣṭhira, whether after a defeat in war or in warm and welcoming friendship.

Preparations for the yajña

It is after thus being accepted as the foremost amongst the kings on earth, that Yudhiṣṭhira begins to prepare for his rājasūyayajña in earnest. With the gifts and contributions brought by his brothers from their various campaigns, and with the contributions that keep flowing in every day from different kingdoms, his treasury is by now overflowing with riches. And it has become almost incumbent upon him to undertake the great yajña in order to redistribute the accumulated wealth. As the Mahābhārata puts it:

धर्म्यैर्धानागमैस्तस्य ववृधे निचयो महान् ।
 कर्तुं यस्य न शक्येत क्षयो वर्षशतैरपि ।
 स्वकोष्ठस्य परीमाणं कोशस्य च महीपतिः ।
 विज्ञाय राजा कौन्तेयो यज्ञायैव मनो दधे ॥

*dharmyairdhanāgamaistasya vavṛdhe nicayo mahān
 kartuṁ yasya na śakyeta kṣayo varṣaśatairapi*

*svakoṣṭhasya parimāṇam kośasya ca mahīpatih
vijñāya rājā kaunteyo yajñāyaiva mano dadhe*³

With the rightful contributions thus flowing in from all directions, Yudhiṣṭhira's wealth kept increasing. The accumulation reached such levels that it would have been impossible to significantly diminish it even over hundreds of years. Having thus learnt of the extent of his treasury and the granary, Kuntī's son Yudhiṣṭhira resolved that such abundance could be expended only in a yajña.

Yudhiṣṭhira informs Śrīkrṣṇa of his resolution and obtains his consent. And immediately afterwards, he begins to issue detailed directions for the performance of the yajña. The preparations for the yajña proper then follow more or less along the lines of the yajñas of the Rāmāyaṇa. The chief priests and hosts are appointed, embassies are sent to all kingdoms to invite the kings and all their people, great craftsmen are put to the job of constructing grand houses for the visitors, which are then filled with abundant food and all possible luxuries, and the best of the cooks are engaged in preparing an unending supply of rare delicacies.

The annadāna

And the yajña then proceeds amidst a plenty of food and a grand feeding, during which the only sounds that are heard are those conveying directions to serve and respectful requests to partake of the food:

दीयतां दीयतामेषां भुज्यतां भुज्यतामिति ।

एवमप्रकाराः संजल्पाः श्रूयन्ते स्मात्र नित्यशः ।

*dīyatām dīyatāmeṣāṃ bhujyatām bhujyatāmiti
evamprakārāḥ samjalpāḥ śrūyante smātra nityaśaḥ*⁴

“Serve, serve them, keep serving!”, and “Please partake of the food. Please eat!”, such are the sounds that were being heard continuously in this yajña.

³ Mahā sabhā 33.7-8, p. 767.

⁴ Mahā sabhā 33.51, p. 770.

Having recently acquired great riches, Yudhiṣṭhira also gives away precious gifts in quantities that seem unusually large. But within this surcharged flow of gold, silver and precious stones, the paramount concern of the performers of the yajña seems to be the giving of food, and ensuring that every one is well-fed, well-nourished and in good cheer. Describing the great annadāna that takes place during this great yajña, the Mahābhārata says:

सर्वाञ्जनान् सर्वकामैः समृद्धैः समतर्पयत् ।

अन्नवान् बहुभक्ष्यश्च भुक्तवज्जनसंवृतः ।

रत्नोपहारसम्पन्नो बभूव स समागमः ।

इडाज्यहोमाहुतिभिर्मन्त्रशिक्षाविशारदैः ।

तस्मिन् हि ततृपुर्देवास्तते यज्ञे महर्षिभिः ।

यथा देवास्तथा विप्रा दक्षिणात्नमहाधनैः ।

ततृपुः सर्ववर्णाश्च तस्मिन् यज्ञे मुदान्विताः ॥

*sarvāñjanān sarvakāmaih samṛddhaiḥ samatarpayat
annavān bahubhaksyaśca bhuktavajjanasamvṛtaḥ
ratnopahārasampanno babhuva sa samāgamah
idājyāhomāhutibhirmantraśikṣāviśāradaih
tasmin hi tatṛpurdevāstate yajñe maharṣibhiḥ
yathā devāstathā viprā dakṣiṇānnamahādhanaiḥ
tatṛpuḥ sarvavarṇāśca tasmin yajñe mudānvitāḥ⁵*

All were honoured with plentiful fulfilment of all their desires. That gathering was overflowing with food and varied delicacies. People everywhere were satiated. Precious stones were being given away all around.

In that great yajña, great ṛṣis, knowing the hymns and their correct recitation, satisfied the devas with their singing and with the plentiful offerings of ghee and other substances in the homa.

Just as the devas were satisfied, so were the vipras, with the offerings of plentiful food and wealth. All the varṇas were similarly honoured and satisfied in that great yajña. All felt fulfilled.

⁵ Mahā sabhā 35.17-19, p. 773.

Leading Yudhiṣṭhira to the aśvamedhajayña

Yudhiṣṭhira's viśāda

At the end of the Mahābhārata war, Yudhiṣṭhira is in a state of inconsolable grief and deep remorse at the death of so many of his near and dear. He holds himself responsible for the great destruction, and wishes to renounce the victory, earned with so much effort, and to take to the life of a saṁnyāsīn. Almost all his well-wishers – the pāṇḍava brothers, Draupadī, Śrīkrṣṇa himself, and even Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa, the grandfather of the kuruvamśa and the seer of the epic – try to dissuade Yudhiṣṭhira from this self-denying course. They repeatedly urge and advise him, sometimes in fairly strong words, to take the reins of the kingdom in his hands and begin performing the kingly duties of protecting the earth and undertaking great yajñas.

Draupadī, in particular, seems to find Yudhiṣṭhira's refusal to accept the throne of Hastināpura beyond comprehension. She begins to worry about his state of mental health and goes to the extent of telling Yudhiṣṭhira that he is afflicted with some kind of madness – *unmāda* is the word she uses – and the same madness is affecting his brothers too. And, she warns Yudhiṣṭhira that if he fails to suppress his unmāda, he would be inviting great trouble upon himself.

It takes such insistent urging and persuasion before Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to be anointed king of his rightful kingdom and sit on the throne of Hastināpura, the capital city of kuruvamśa. But Śrīkrṣṇa, it seems, is not yet fully reassured of Yudhiṣṭhira's willingness to fulfil his kingly responsibilities, and advises him to go to Bhīṣma and learn the way of righteous conduct from him, who, as Śrīkrṣṇa says, is the sun of knowledge that keeps shining on the kuruvamśa and with whose death that light will disappear for ever:

तस्मिन्नस्तमिते भीष्मे कौरवाणां धुरंधरे ।

ज्ञानान्यस्तं गमिष्यन्ति तस्मात् त्वां चोदयाम्यहम् ॥

tasminnastamite bhīṣme kauravāṇām dhuramdhare,
jñānānyastam gamiṣyanti tasmāt tvām codayāmyaham⁶

⁶ Mahā śānti 46.23, p. 4531.

And, perhaps not surprisingly, the first question Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma is that:

राज्ञां वै परमो धर्म इति धर्मविदो विदुः ।

महान्तमेतं भारं च मन्ये तद् ब्रूहि पार्थिव ॥

*rājñām vai paramo dharmā iti dharmavidō viduḥ
mahāntametam bhāraṁ ca manye tad brūhi pārthiva⁷*

Those who know about dharma say that great indeed is the dharma of the kings. I however find it to be a great burden. O, great king, please enlighten me about it.

Bhīṣma, as is well known, instructs Yudhiṣṭhira in expansive detail about different aspects of dharma, and especially about rājadharmā, the dharma of the kings. The instruction continues almost till the beginning of uttarāyana, till the sun changes his course from the south to north, at which point of time Bhīṣma chooses to end his earthly life.

Urgent entreaties of sage Vyāsa and Śrīkṛṣṇa

At the end of this great instruction, Yudhiṣṭhira has still not overcome his grief and remorse. In fact, the death of Bhīṣma seems to make his grief even deeper. It is at this stage that he is advised by Śrīkṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa to perform an aśvamedhayajña and thus expiate the sin of war for which he holds himself responsible.

By this time, both Śrīkṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa seem to have been exasperated by the unnaturally prolonged grieving of Yudhiṣṭhira, and there is an edge of urgency in their advice to him. Thus Śrīkṛṣṇa tells him that one who grieves for the dead beyond what is normal is in fact putting those dear and departed ones in great grief. He, Yudhiṣṭhira, has already heard what is worth knowing and has done whatever needs to be done for the dead. Therefore, he must now get over his grief and begin performing the yajña proper to a king: *yajasva vividhairyajñairbahubhiḥ svāptadakṣiṇaiḥ*.⁸

Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa does not even care to hide his exasperation, when he tells Yudhiṣṭhira that there is hardly any use of his

⁷ Mahā śānti 56.2, p. 4560.

⁸ Mahā aśvamedhikā 2.3, p. 6100.

advising him any further, because all that is told to him seems to have little effect. As far as he, Yudhiṣṭhira, is concerned, the teachings of the elders seem to be nothing better than futile ravings of the senseless: *kimākārā vayam tāta pralapāmo muhurmuhuh?*⁹

And then he goes on to insistently implore Yudhiṣṭhira not to keep grieving like the ignorant ones, and to concentrate his mind upon the performance of great yajñas. Because, as Kṛṣṇadvaipāyana-vyāsa says:

आत्मानं मन्यसे चाथ पापकर्माणमन्ततः ।

शृणु तत्र यथापापमपकृष्येत भारत ।

तपोभिः क्रतुभिश्चैव दानेन च युधिष्ठिर ।

तरन्ति नित्यं पुरुषा ये स्म पापानि कुर्वते ॥

*ātmānam manyase cātha pāpakarmānamantataḥ
sr̥ṇu tatra yathāpāpamapakṛsyeta bhārata
tapobhiḥ kratubhiḥcaiva dānena ca yudhiṣṭhira
taranti nityam puruṣā ye sma pāpāni kurvate*¹⁰

O Bhārata, if you still believe that you are responsible for unrighteous conduct, then hear how such conduct is expiated. Those who fall into such unrighteous conduct always get over their sins by tapas, yajña and dāna – by undertaking great austerities, by performing yajñas and by giving away of gifts.

And, of all the modes of expiation, yajña is the primary for those who have the resources and the prowess. Therefore, says sage Vyāsa:

यजस्व वाजिमेधेन विधिवद् दक्षिणावता ।

बहुकामान्नवित्तेन रामो दाशरथिर्यथा ।

यथा च भरतो राजा दौष्यन्तिः पृथिवीपतिः ।

शाकुन्तलो महावीर्यस्तव पूर्वपितामहः ॥

*yajasva vājimedhena vidhivad dakṣiṇāvata
bahukāmannavittena rāmo dāśarathiryathā*

⁹ Mahā āśvamedhika 2.16, p. 6101.

¹⁰ Mahā āśvamedhika 3.3–4, p. 6102.

LEADING TO THE AŚVAMEDHA

*yathā ca bharato rājā dausyantih pṛthivīpatih
śakuntalo mahāvīryastava pūrvapitāmahaḥ*¹¹

Perform a great aśvamedhayajña. Perform it in the proper manner, with abundant recompense for those who accept your hospitality. Perform it so that all those who come, partake of food and other riches to their hearts' content. Perform a great aśvamedhayajña, the way it was performed by Rāma, the son of Daśaratha, and the way it was performed by your own great ancestor, king Bharata, the son of Duśyanta and Śakuntalā, who ruled the entire earth and who was known for his great prowess.

Yudhiṣṭhira, however, continues to indulge in his grief, and asks Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa how, after having got all his near and dear killed in this great war and having denuded the earth of all her riches, would he now find the wealth to properly perform a yajña like the aśvamedha?

Sage Vyāsa then tells Yudhiṣṭhira of the great treasure of king Marutta, who ages ago performed a great yajña in which Saṁvarta, the recluse son of ṛṣi Aṅgirā and brother of Bṛhaspati, the priest to the devas, officiated as the chief priest. Saṁvarta's power was such that even indra could not resist his invocation. Indra, the foremost amongst the devas, had been trying to subvert the yajña of Marutta and had even dissuaded Bṛhaspati from participating in it. But, when invoked by Saṁvarta, indra could not but appear in the yajña and accept the offerings along with other devas. For such a great yajña, Marutta collected immense wealth, which could not be expended even after the generous offerings made to all those who attended that yajña. The great and varied riches that were thus left over from the yajña were deposited by king Marutta in a treasury built at the yajña grounds near the Meru hills across the Himālayas.

Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa advises Yudhiṣṭhira to bring this left-over treasure of king Marutta for his aśvamedhayajña. This brings some cheer to Yudhiṣṭhira and he begins to consult his counsellors about the possibility of his performing an aśvamedhayajña.

¹¹ Mahā aśvamedhika 3.9-10, p. 6102.

Watching Yudhiṣṭhira continuing to grieve inconsolably after the departure of Bhīṣma, Śrīkrṣṇa in fact seems to have come to believe, like Draupadī earlier, that Yudhiṣṭhira's continued distraction with grief and remorse is a kind of disease, that needs to be treated urgently. Therefore, he sets about explaining the Indian understanding of disease to Yudhiṣṭhira, telling him that mental and physical diseases are mutually dependent, that one cannot arise without the other. Both result from an imbalance in the essential attributes of the body or the mind. Śrīkrṣṇa goes on to advise Yudhiṣṭhira that his mind seems to have lost its natural proclivities: he does not know any longer how to be happy in happiness and how to grieve in grief. He is only lost in past memories, and this is nothing but a mental aberration: *sa tvam na duḥkhī duḥkhasya na sukhī susukhasya ca smartumicchasi kaunteya kimanyad duḥkhavibhramāt*.¹²

Śrīkrṣṇa is worried about this state of affairs. He, therefore, reminds Yudhiṣṭhira that while he is immersed in the memories of the battles he has fought with Bhīṣma and Droṇa, a much bigger battle is ahead of him. This is the battle that he has to fight within himself, in his own mind. This is also the battle that he has to fight all alone: no servants, brothers or friends can be of any help to him. And, Śrīkrṣṇa goes on to warn him of the unimaginable disasters that are likely to befall him if he fails to win this battle and pull himself out of his diseased state of mind.

To win this war against his own desires and griefs, Yudhiṣṭhira must learn to concentrate his energies on some great task, and Śrīkrṣṇa's explicit advice to Yudhiṣṭhira is to undertake the performance of an aśvamedhayajña: *yajasva vājimedhena vidhivad dakṣiṇāvata*.¹³

Rāmarājya of Yudhiṣṭhira

The teachings of Bhīṣma, of Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa and, of course, of Śrīkrṣṇa, finally begin to have a soothing effect on Yudhiṣṭhira. He begins to feel deeply consoled and free of grief and remorse. Thus returned to a state of health, he makes up his mind to perform great yajñas and begins to apply himself to the fulfilment of his kingly responsibilities.

¹² Mahā āśvamedhika 12.7, p. 6125.

¹³ Mahā āśvamedhika 13.20, p. 6127.

Yudhiṣṭhira's kingdom soon begins to flourish, and his reign begins to approach that great Indian model of ideal times, the rāmarājya. In fact, as the epic describes it, Yudhiṣṭhira's reign has all the characteristics that are associated with rāmarājya: There are plentiful and timely rains; there is no hunger, thirst or disease; everyone endeavours to conduct himself righteously, even animals take care to avoid hurting each other; cows yield plentiful milk, bullocks are strong and docile; the earth is laden with rich crops and, like kāmadhenu, the celestial cow, offers all the wealth that anyone wishes for; and the great dynasties of kings flourish and multiply many-fold.

Description of the ideal rājya of the Indians' dreams presented here is perhaps the most elaborate to be found anywhere in Indian literature. Sage Vaiśampāyana, the narrator of Mahābhārata, recalling the times when Yudhiṣṭhira ruled in Hastināpura, to king Janamejaya, the grandson of the pāṇḍavas, says:¹⁴

यथा मनुर्महाराजो रामो दाशरथिर्यथा ।
 तथा भरतसिंहोऽपि पालयामास मेदिनीम् ।
 नाधर्म्यमभवत् तत्र सर्वो धर्मरुचिर्जनः ।
 बभूव नरशार्दूल यथा कृतयुगे तथा ।
 कलिमासन्नमाविष्टं निवास्य नृपनन्दनः ।
 भ्रातृभिः सहितो धीमान् बभौ धर्मबलोद्धतः ॥

*yathā manurmahārājo rāmo dāsarathiryathā
 tathā bharatasimho'pi pālayāmāsa medinīm
 nādharmaṃyamaḥbhavat tatra sarvo dharmarucirjanah
 babhūva naraśārdūla yathā kṛtayuge tathā
 kalimāsannamāviṣṭam nivāsya nrpanandanah
 bhrātr̥bhiḥ sahito dhīmān babhau dharmabaloddhataḥ*

Yudhiṣṭhira, the lion of the bhāratas, ruled, protecting and nurturing the whole earth, as it was protected and nurtured by Manu, the great king, and by Rāma, the son of Daśaratha. While Yudhiṣṭhira ruled, there was no adharma, all were inclined towards dharma – it was as if kṛtayuga had dawned again. Knowing that the cycle of time was moving nearer to the beginning of kaliyuga, the dear and wise king,

¹⁴ Mahā āśvamedhika 14, pp. 6129-31.

Yudhiṣṭhira, along with his brothers, went beyond bounds in acquiring the might of dharma.

ववर्ष भगवान् देवः काले देशे यथेप्सितम् ।

निरामयं जगदभूत् क्षुत्पिपासे न किञ्चन ।

आधिर्नास्ति मनुष्याणां व्यसने नाभवन्मतिः ॥

*vavarṣa bhagavān devaḥ kāle deśe yathepsitam
nirāmayam jagadabhūt kṣutpipāse na kiñcana
ādhirnāsti manyuṣyāṇām 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.

ब्राह्मणप्रमुखा वर्णास्ते स्वधर्मोत्तराः शिवाः ।

धर्मः सत्यप्रधानश्च सत्यं सद्विषयान्वितम् ।

धर्मासनस्थः सद्भिः स स्त्रीबालातुरवृद्धकान् ।

वर्णाश्रमान् पूर्वकृतान् सकलान् रक्षणोद्यतः ॥

*brāhmaṇapramukhā varnāste svadharmottarāḥ śivāḥ
dharmah satyapradhānaśca satyam sadviṣayānvitam
dharmāsanasthaḥ sabbhiḥ sa strībālāturavṛddhakān
varṇāśramān pūrvakṛtān sakalān rakṣanodyataḥ*

All varṇas, beginning with the brāhmaṇa, were secure in the knowledge of the excellence of their respective dharma. Truth governed dharma, and the truth resided in its proper objects. Firmly established in dharma, and in the company of the noble, Yudhiṣṭhira constantly endeavoured to protect the women, the children, the sick and the aged. Similarly did he endeavour to protect the time-honoured varṇas and āśramas.

अवृत्तिवृत्तिदानाद्यैर्यज्ञार्थैर्दीपितैरपि ।

आमुष्मिकं भयं नास्ति ऐहिकं कृतमेव तु ।

स्वर्गलोकोपमो लोकस्तदा तस्मिन् प्रशासति ।

बभूव सुखमेकाग्रं तद्विशिष्टतरं परम् ॥

*avrttivr̥ttidānādyairyajñārthairdīpitairapi
āmuṣmikaṃ bhayaṃ nāsti aihikaṃ kṛtameva tu
svargalokopamo lokastadā tasmīn praśāsati
babhūva sukhamekāgraṃ tadviśiṣṭataram param*

Those without livelihood were given livelihood. Yajñas were provided for with abundant riches. There was abundance all around. Thus, there were no worldly worries left for anyone, and there was no cause to fear the world hereafter either. While Yudhiṣṭhira ruled, the world indeed had become like the heavens. Happiness on earth was, in fact, even greater than in the heavens.

नार्यः पतिव्रताः सर्वा रूपवत्यः स्वलंकृताः ।

यथोक्तवृत्ताः स्वगुणैर्बभूवुः प्रीतिहेतवः ।

पुमांसः पुण्यशीलाढ्याः स्वं स्वं धर्ममनुव्रताः ।

सुखिनः सूक्ष्ममप्येनो न कुर्वन्ति कदाचन ॥

*nāryaḥ pativrataḥ sarvā rūpavatyāḥ svalankṛtāḥ
yathoktavṛttāḥ svagūṇairbabhūvuḥ prītihetavaḥ
pumānsaḥ puṇyaśīlādhyāḥ svaṃ svaṃ dharmamanuvrataḥ
sukhinaḥ sūkṣmamapyeno na kurvanti kadācana*

Women exuded beauty. They were all well dressed and properly bejewelled. They were chaste in their devotion to their husbands. Their conduct was proper in all respects. They thus, with their inherent qualities, created an aura of affection and love all around.

Men were steadfast in virtue and propriety. They followed their respective dharma. Being happy in themselves they did not ever indulge in even the slightest of the vices.

सर्वे नराश्च नार्यश्च सततं प्रियवादिनः ।

अजिह्ममनसः शुक्लाः बभूवुः श्रमवर्जिताः ॥

*sarve narāśca nāryāśca satataṃ priyavādināḥ
ajihmamanasaḥ śuklāḥ babhūvuḥ śramavarjitāḥ*

Men and women always spoke pleasingly. They had no trace of false-heartedness. There was a lucid transparency about them. And they were thus free of all strain and fatigue.

भूषिताः कुण्डलैर्हरैः कटकैः कटिसूत्रकैः ।

सुवाससः सुगन्धाढ्याः प्रायशः पृथिवीतले ॥

*bhūṣitāḥ kuṇḍalairhārāiḥ kaṭakaiḥ kaṭisūtrakaiḥ
suvāsasaḥ sugandhāḍhyāḥ prāyaśaḥ pṛthivītale*

All men and women on earth were well-ornamented. Their ears, throats, wrists and waists were adorned with jewels. Their bodies were covered in fine raiment, and they wore pleasing fragrances.

सर्वे ब्रह्मविदो विप्राः सर्वत्र परिनिष्ठिताः ।

वलीपलितहीनास्तु सुखिनो दीर्घजीविनः ॥

*sarve brahmavidō viprāḥ sarvatra pariniṣṭhitāḥ
valīpalitahīnāstu sukhino dīrghajīvināḥ*

The venerable ones were all conversant with the essential truth about the universe. They were well-versed in all śāstras. They lived long happy lives, and yet their skin did not wrinkle and their hair did not grey.

इच्छा न जायतेऽन्यत्र वर्णेषु च न संकरः ।

मनुष्याणां महाराज मर्यादासु व्यवस्थितः ॥

*icchā na jāyate'nyatra varṇeṣu ca na saṁkaraḥ
manuṣyāṅām mahārāja maryādāsu vyavasthitāḥ*

O great king Janamejaya, there was no coveting of what was not one's own. There was no confusion amongst the varṇas. All were steadfast in the discipline of their dharma.

तस्मिञ्छासति राजेन्द्रे मृगव्यालसरीसृपाः ।

अन्योन्यमपि चान्येषु न बाधन्ते कदाचन ॥

*tasmicṅchāsati rājendre mṛgavyālasarīsrpāḥ
anyonyamapi cānyeṣu na bādhanṭe kadācana*

When that indra among the kings ruled, even the wild beasts and their prey, and the snakes and insects, never caused any trouble, either to one another, or to anyone else.

गावः सुक्षीरभूयिष्ठाः सुवालधिमुखोदराः ।

अपीडिताः कर्षकाद्यैर्हृतव्याधितवत्सकाः ॥

*gāvaḥ suksīrabhūyiṣṭhāḥ svāladhimukhodarāḥ
apīditāḥ karṣakādyairhṛtavādhitavatsakāḥ*

Cows were well-built. They had well-formed heads, bodies and tails. They gave abundant and nourishing milk. They were never ill-treated by the husbandmen or any others. They had calves that were free of all disease.

अवन्ध्यकाला मनुजाः पुरुषार्थेषु च क्रमात् ।
विषयेष्वनिषिद्धेषु वेदशास्त्रेषु चोद्यताः ॥

*avandhyakālā manuḥjāḥ puruṣārtheṣu ca kramāt
viṣayeṣvamiṣiddheṣu vedasāstreṣu codyatāḥ*

People did not while away their time. They worked towards the fulfilment of the puruṣārthas, the human objectives, in the proper order. They constantly engaged themselves in the acquisition of vedas and sāsāstras, and in the fulfilment of their desires, which were always in conformity with dharma.

सुवृत्ता वृषभाः पुष्टाः सुस्वभावाः सुखोदयाः ॥

suṁvṛttā vṛṣabhāḥ puṣṭāḥ susvabhāvāḥ sukhodayāḥ

Bullocks were well-built and healthy. They had an impressive demeanour and pleasing nature. And, they were a source of happiness for the husbandmen.

अतीव मधुरः शब्दः स्पर्शश्चातिसुखं रसम् ।
रूपं दृष्टिक्षमं रम्यं मनोज्ञं गन्धवद् बभौ ॥

*atīva madhuraḥ śabdaḥ sparśaścātisukhaṁ rasam
rūpaṁ dṛṣṭīkṣamaṁ ramyaṁ manojñaṁ gandhavat babhau*

All objects of senses acquired a pleasing character: *śabda*, sound, became melodious; *sparśa*, touch, became extremely soothing; *rasa*, taste, became highly nourishing; *rūpa*, vision, became pleasing to the eyes and the mind; and *gandha*, smell, became gratifyingly fragrant.

धर्मार्थकामसंयुक्तं मोक्षाभ्युदयसाधनम् ।

प्रह्लादजननं पुण्यं सम्बभूवाथ मानसम् ॥

*dharmārthakāmasamyuktaṁ mokṣābhuyodayasādhanam
prahlādajananaṁ puṇyaṁ sambabhūvātha mānasam*

The mind reached a state of piety and tranquillity and was properly directed towards dharma, artha and kāma; and thus it became the means for achieving perfection in this life and mokṣa beyond.

स्थावरा बहुपुष्पाढ्याः फलच्छायावहास्तथा ।

सुस्पर्शा विषहीनाश्च सुपत्रत्वक्प्ररोहिणः ॥

*sthāvarā bahupuṣpādhyāḥ phalacchāyāvahāstathā
susparśā viṣahīnāśca supatratvakprarohiṇaḥ*

The trees were laden with flowers. They provided abundant fruit and shade. They were pleasant to the touch and were free from all toxins. Their foliage was beautiful, their bark was healthy, and healthy saplings sprouted from them.

मनोऽनुकूलाः सर्वेषां चेष्टा भूस्तापवर्जिता ।

यथा बभूव राजर्षिस्तद्वृत्तमभवद् भुवि ॥

*mano 'nukūlāḥ sarveṣāṃ ceṣṭā bhūstāpavarjitā
yathā babhūva rājaraṣistadvṛttamabhad bhuvi*

Everyone always acted in an agreeable manner. Earth became free of all tāpa, all discomfort. In fact the righteous ways of Yudhiṣṭhira, who was a ṛṣi amongst kings, began to be reflected in the whole world.

सर्वलक्षणसम्पन्नाः पाण्डवा धर्मचारिणः ।

ज्येष्ठानुवर्तिनः सर्वे बभूवुः प्रियदर्शनाः ॥

*sarvalakṣaṇasampannāḥ pāṇḍavā dharmacāriṇaḥ
jyeṣṭhānuvartinaḥ sarve babhūvuḥ priyadarśanāḥ*

The younger pāṇḍavas acted according to the wishes of their elder brother, Yudhiṣṭhira. They followed dharma scrupulously, acquired all auspicious characteristics, and became pleasing to all.

सिंहोरस्का जितक्रोधास्तेजोबलसमन्विताः ।

आजानुबाहवः सर्वे दानशीला जितेन्द्रियाः ॥

*siṃhoraskā jitaśrodhāstejobalasanvītāḥ
ājānubāhavaḥ sarve dānaśīlā jiteन्द्रियाḥ*

They, the pāṇḍavas, were lion-chested, they had long arms reaching up to their knees, and they positively glowed with the strength of their intellect and body. They were generous in giving. They had conquered anger. In fact, they had brought all their senses firmly under their control.

तेषु शासत्सु धरणीमृतवः स्वगुणैर्बभुः ।

सुखोदयाय वर्तन्ते ग्रहास्तारागणैः सह ॥

*teṣu śāsatsu dharaṇīmṛtavah svaguṇairbabhuḥ
sukhodayāya vartante grahāstārāṅaṇaiḥ saha*

While they ruled the earth, the seasons remained in their natural aspects, and the stars and planets occupied configurations that boded happiness.

मही सस्यप्रबहुला सर्वरत्नगुणोदया ।

कामधुग्धेनुवद् 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.

मन्वादिभिः कृताः पूर्वे मर्यादा मानवेषु याः ।

अनतिक्रम्य ताः सर्वाः कुलेषु समयानि च ।

अन्वशासन्त राजानो धर्मपुत्रप्रियंकराः ॥

*manvādibhiḥ kṛtāḥ pūrve maryādā mānaveṣu yāḥ
anatikramya tāḥ sarvāḥ kuleṣu samayāni ca
anvāsānta rājāno dharmaputrapriyaṅkarāḥ*

The kings, who always endeavoured to please dhramaputra Yudhiṣṭhira, ruled without violating the customs and practices of the kulas and the discipline of public life, that had been evolved since the ancient times by Manu and others.

महाकुलानि धर्मिष्ठा वर्धयन्तो विशेषतः ।

मनुप्रणीतया कृत्वा तेऽन्वशासन् वसुन्धराम् ॥

*mahākulāni dharmisthā vardhayanto viśeṣataḥ
manupraṇītayā kṛtyā te'nvaśāsan vasundharam*

The kings, established in the ways of dharma, took special care to let all the great kulas flourish. And, they all ruled the earth in accordance with the precepts of Manu.

राजवृत्तिर्हि सा शश्वद् धर्मिष्ठाभून्महीतले ।
प्रायो लोकमतिस्तात राजवृत्तानुगामिनी ॥

*rājavṛttirhi sā śaśvad dharmisthābhūnmahītale
prāyo lokamatistāta rājavṛttānugāminī*

All over the earth the ways of the kings were perpetually and firmly established in dharma. And, as generally happens, people followed the ways of the kings.

एवं भारतवर्षं स्वं राजा स्वर्गे सुरेन्द्रवत् ।

शशास विष्णुना सार्धं गुप्तो गाण्डीवधन्वना ॥

*evaṁ bhāratavarṣaṁ svaṁ rājā svarge surendravat
śaśāsa viṣṇunā sārḍhaṁ gupto gāṇḍīvadhanvanā*

Thus ruled king Yudhiṣṭhira, protected by Arjuna with his gāṇḍīva bow, and blessed with the friendship of Śrīviṣṇu in the form of Śrīkrṣṇa. Yudhiṣṭhira's rule in Bhāratavarṣa was indeed like the rule of indra in the heavens.

The aśvamedhayajña of Yudhiṣṭhira

Preparing for the aśvamedha

Śrīkrṣṇa tarries in Hastināpura till Yudhiṣṭhira's reign is well established in the image of rāmarājya. He spends this time roving around the hills, forests and the pleasant river-banks of the kingdom with his dear friend, Arjuna. And, on the request of Arjuna, he teaches him again, in a different form, what he has already taught him at the beginning of the war through the Bhagavadgītā. The Anugītā that Śrīkrṣṇa teaches now, of course, embodies the same sanātana truths about the universe and man's place and role in it, as are taught in the Bhagavadgītā. But the teachings in Anugītā somehow keep returning to the centrality of anna in the plan of the universe and in human life, and even to the details of how anna

is the cause of both disease and health, of birth and death. It seems as if, at the end of the hectic events of the war, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa wishes to bring the thoughts of everyone back to the essentials of ordinary life, and to re-establish the sanctity of the ordinary, of which *anna* is perhaps the foremost attribute.

It is only after teaching the *Anugītā* to Arjuna, and after reassuring himself that Yudhiṣṭhira's reign is securely established, that Śrīkr̥ṣṇa returns to his people in *Dvārakā*. And before leaving, Śrīkr̥ṣṇa promises to return for the *aśvamedhayajña* of Yudhiṣṭhira.

While Śrīkr̥ṣṇa is away in *Dvārakā*, *Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa* visits Yudhiṣṭhira again and directs him to endeavour to perform the *aśvamedhayajña*. Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers then decide to undertake the long journey across the *Himālayas* to discover the hidden treasure of king *Marutta*.

Śrīkr̥ṣṇa returns to *Hastināpura* even before the *pāṇḍava* brothers return from their journey. And preparations for the *aśvamedha* begin in earnest as soon as the *pāṇḍavas* arrive with king *Marutta*'s treasure. On the advice of *Kṛṣṇadvaipāyanavyāsa*, Arjuna is assigned the responsibility of escorting the *yajña* horse through its journey across the earth, *Bhīmasena* and *Nakula* are asked to look after and protect the kingdom during the *yajña*, and *Sahadeva* is charged with the care of the royal family.

Yudhiṣṭhira then sends Arjuna after the *yajña* horse, with the advice that during his campaign across the earth he should try his best to avoid war, and should endeavour to respectfully invite all the kings to the *yajña*.

Re-establishment of cākravartya

Arjuna's journey however leads him into fierce battles with innumerable kings. It seems that none of the *kṣatriyas* whose near and dear are killed in the *Mahābhārata* war is willing to yield primacy to the *pāṇḍavas* without a battle. And the *kirātas*, *mlecchas* and *yavanas*, who are defeated earlier, are impatient to assert themselves again. The battles that Arjuna has to engage in are therefore so numerous that sage *Vyāsa*, the seer of *Mahābhārata*, feels that he cannot possibly describe all of these, and chooses to describe only the ones that happen to be especially fearsome.

The battles that sage *Vyāsa* describes seem to involve the sons and survivors of almost every great king felled in the *Mahābhārata* war. Arjuna has to engage in separate battles with *Sūryavarman*,