



CHAPTER 5

saktuprasthena vo nāyaṃ yajñastulyo narādhipāḥ

Yajñas of the Tapasvins

At the end of Yudhiṣṭhira's aśvamedhayajña – the great yajña during which mountains of grains and rivers of ghee were consumed, and kings and people from all over the world were served for days and months together – a mongoose gets up, lets off a fierce growl that thunders like lightning and makes the birds and animals tremble with fear, and then adopting a human voice says:

सक्तुप्रस्थेन वो नायं यज्ञस्तुल्यो नराधिपाः ।

उञ्छवृत्तेर्वदान्यस्य कुरुक्षेत्रनिवासिनः ॥

saktuprasthena vo nāyaṃ yajñastulyo narādhipāḥ
uñchavṛttervadānyasya kurukṣetranivāsinaḥ¹

O kings of the earth, this great yajña of yours has not yet equalled the one single measure of roasted grain given away by a generous resident of Kurukṣetra, who himself used to live off the left-over grains painstakingly collected from harvested fields and marketplaces.

And on being asked the reason for this unbelievable assertion, the mongoose begins to tell the story of the austere, but generous, brāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra.

Story of the uñchavṛttibrāhmaṇa

Once upon a time in Kurukṣetra, the land of dharma, the land that is always inhabited by those who know dharma, there lived a

¹ Mahā aśvamedhika 90.7, p. 6293.

brāhmaṇa. He obtained his livelihood by uñchavṛtti – by gathering the left-over grains from harvested fields and marketplaces. Like a pigeon, he would painstakingly collect his food grain by grain. And on such food did he nurture his whole family, comprising his wife, son and daughter-in-law.

This brāhmaṇa family, though living the life of a worldly household was engaged in great austerities. They were pure in their thoughts and actions. They had subdued their worldly desires. Of the meagre food that they gathered, they ate only once in six meal-times. And if for some reason they had no food when the sixth mealtime arrived, they would skip the next five and wait for the sixth again.

And then it so happened that the land was visited upon by a terrible famine. The crops in the fields dried up. There were no grains to be collected from anywhere. The brāhmaṇa family, who lived off the left-over grains gathered afresh for every meal, of course had no stocks in their home. They were reduced to total destitution. The sixth mealtime arrived and passed again and again, but the brāhmaṇa family had nothing to eat.

They remained without food for many weeks. Then, one hot summer afternoon, when the sun was emitting fire, the whole of the brāhmaṇa family went out in search of left-over grains. They were suffering greatly from the hunger and the heat, yet they kept searching for long to somehow find enough grains for their meagre meals. They returned empty-handed. They could not find even a single grain of food.

They waited and somehow survived the next five mealtimes. And then they set out again in search of food. This time they were in luck. They were able to gather one measure of barley. They brought it home, roasted and pounded the grain, and prepared for their long-awaited meal. They performed the proper ablutions and made their offering to the fire. And, only then did they divide the roasted and pounded grain into four quarters and sit down to partake of that austere meal.

But before they could begin eating, there appeared a twice-born guest on the door. Hungry though they were, the sight of a guest arriving at mealtime pleased them no end. They warmly welcomed him, enquired about his welfare, acquainted him of their own learning and antecedents, and escorted him into their little mud-house. And the head of the family respectfully invited him to take a seat.

and partake of his quarter of the roasted grain, assuring him that what was being offered had indeed been justly acquired.

On being thus invited and assured of the justness of the offering, the guest ate the quarter measure of grains. But this could hardly satisfy his appetite. And when the host saw that the guest had remained hungry, he felt deeply worried. How could he let someone go away hungry from his door?

Noticing the anxiety of her husband, the wife suggested that her quarter-share of grains might be offered to the guest. The husband remembered that his old wife had been suffering the pangs of hunger for many many days: lack of nourishment had extremely weakened her and she had been reduced to a mere skeleton. He, therefore, felt hesitant in accepting the suggestion of his wife. But the wife insisted, reminding him that she was an equal partner in his dharma and artha, his duties and his seekings. The brāhmaṇa then took her quarter-share of grains and respectfully offered it to the guest. The guest partook of this second quarter measure of grains, but even this did not fully satisfy his hunger. And the brāhmaṇa host was left worrying again.

At this the son offered his quarter-share of grains to be given to the guest. The father was even more reluctant to accept this offer. For him, as he said, the son – even if fully grown up – remained a child. And how could he deprive a child of essential nourishment? But the son insisted, reminding him that the sons are sons because they help in preserving the dharma of man, and in any case a son is the man himself born again. The brāhmaṇa was pleased to find that the son had well learnt the ways of self-control and propriety. He took the quarter-share of his son and happily offered it to the guest. But, the guest was still hungry.

Then it was the turn of the daughter-in-law to respectfully urge the father-in-law to accept her quarter-share of grains and offer it to the guest. The hesitation of the father-in-law in accepting this offer was perhaps the most extreme. The daughter-in-law was a mere child, who was suffering the pangs of hunger, and who had been entirely enfeebled by days and days of fasting. It was his duty, as he told her, to protect her in all respects. How could he deprive such a one – who was a child, a woman, a fasting person and an enfeebled one – of her meagre food? And after all she, as the daughter-in-law, was the font of love and affection for everyone in the family.

The father-in-law was indeed hesitant. But the daughter-in-law insisted, telling him that for her he as the elder of the house was both the teacher and the god. And her dharma, her earthly body, and the life that animated it, were all dependent on the service of the elders. She implored him not to deprive her of this honour. The father-in-law was greatly pleased. He profusely blessed her and took her quarter-share of grains to offer it to the guest.

The guest was finally satisfied. And, the guest was Dharma himself, who had appeared in the human form to test the depth of the brāhmaṇa's commitment to dharma. The brāhmaṇa had proved himself. He and all his dependents had offered justly and painstakingly collected food to a guest, even as they themselves were almost dying of hunger. Even the gods in the heavens were struck with wonder at the tenacity with which the brāhmaṇa and his family held on to the dharma of annadāna, to the discipline of satisfying the hungry before eating for oneself.

Such selfless offering of food, as Dharma told him, was greater than all the gifts offered in several aśvamedha- and rājasūya-yajñas. With the gift of that one measure of roasted and pounded grains, he had in fact conquered, for all times, the brahmaloka: *saktuprasthena vijīto brahmalokastvayākṣayah.*²

Soon a celestial chariot appeared there. The brāhmaṇa, invited with great reverence by Dharma himself, took his place in the chariot along with his wife, son and daughter-in-law. And all of them ascended to the brahmaloka in great glory.

Turning dust into gold

After narrating the story, the mongoose informs the gathering of the great in the aśvamedhayajña of Yudhiṣṭhira that he himself witnessed the whole sequence of events from his hole in the ground nearby. He came out of the hole after the ascent of the brāhmaṇa with his family. The smell of the roasted and pounded grains offered by the brāhmaṇa family to their celestial guest entered his nostrils, the soil moistened with the water offered by the brāhmaṇa touched his body, and he came in contact with a few grains that had fallen from the hands of the generous hosts and the celestial guest. Such

² Mahā aśvamedhika 90.104, p. 6300.

TURNING DUST INTO GOLD

contact with that meagre, yet great, gift of anna turned the whole of his head and half of his torso to gold.

The mongoose goes on to say that since then he has been roving across the earth to find a place or occasion that would make the rest of his body golden. He has attended many yajñas and visited many a forest where the tapasvins perform their great austerities; but to no avail. He came, he says, to the yajña of Yudhiṣṭhira in great expectation. But his hopes have been belied. The grand annadāna of Yudhiṣṭhira's aśvamedha has failed to compare with the gift of one measure of roasted and pounded grain made by that austere brāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra. A few grains fallen from the hands of the giver and the receiver of that insignificant gift of food turned half his body golden, but the unending annadāna and other gifts of the aśvamedhayajña could not repeat that miracle. That is why, says the mongoose, he is convinced that this great aśvamedha has not equalled the giving of that single measure of justly and painstakingly obtained grains: *saktuprasthena yajño'yaṁ sammito neti sarvathā*.³

The kings and the rich, of course, must keep performing great yajñas and distributing anna and other precious gifts. Such distribution of food and wealth is a part of their responsibilities as repositories of power and riches in society. It is for them to so organize the affairs of society that nobody is left in hunger or want. It is for them to organize great yajñas so that the wealth accumulated in the treasuries may begin to flow through the society again, and the diverse skills emerging amongst the people may find opportunities for concerted expression.

Such formulation of the responsibility of the kings and the rich, especially of their responsibility to ensure eradication of hunger and destitution, is part of the essential doctrine of political organization in India and we shall explore it further in subsequent chapters.

The responsibility for sharing of food is, however, placed much more widely in society. It is for everyone to share food with others before partaking of it oneself. This, according to the classical Indian texts, seems to be the basic precept of righteous living as a human being. We have discussed this precept to some extent in

³ Mahā aśvamedhika 90.115, p. 6301.

the earlier chapters and we shall have occasion to discuss it further in the following.

The story of the uñchavṛttibrāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra, however, seems to teach that the call of dharma goes beyond the responsibility of the kings to distribute and the householders to share what they have. Dharma may even require going hungry oneself to assuage the hunger of another. Distributing wealth accumulated in the treasuries and sharing the food before eating oneself are of course righteous acts, but these merely amount to performing one's assigned duty. All kings and ordinary householders must do it in order to remain within the discipline of dharma. But it is the giving away of the last morsel of food one has that conforms to dharma at its best. Kings who perform great yajñas and give away plentiful food and wealth, and householders who always feed others before eating for themselves, merely avoid incurring great sin; it is only those who feed others even when they themselves have nothing to eat who earn great virtue. The former are the upholders of the worldly order, they make the world move; the presence of the latter, however, turns even dust into gold.

The story of the kapotadampatī

The Mahābhārata records another touching story of a host giving up his all, in fact his very life, to satisfy the hunger of the guest. The host in this other story is a bird, a pigeon, and the guest a hunter who has earlier engaged the bird-wife of the pigeon. The story is in a way a premonition of the story that the mongoose tells towards the end of Yudhiṣṭhira's aśvamedhayajña: the story of the brāhmaṇa who gathers his food grain by grain, like a pigeon, and gives up what he has gathered for the sake of a guest, putting his own life and the life of his entire family in jeopardy.

The story of the self-sacrificing pigeon is told, in the āpaddharma-parvan of śāntiparvan, to Yudhiṣṭhira by Bhīṣma, who says that in earlier times it was told to Mucukunda by Paraśurāma, when the former had sought to know the dharma of looking after one who comes to the abode seeking protection. The story goes thus:

Once upon a time in a great forest there roamed a terrible hunter. He was fearsome to look at. With red eyes on a dark body, dark like

a black crow, huge thighs, small feet, broad face, and a wide chin: he looked like *kāla*, the god of death himself. His cruelty knew no bounds. No gentle thought ever crossed his mind. Everyday he would set up his snare, catch birds of the forest in droves, kill them all, and sell them for their flesh. This was his daily routine. And he continued to ply his cruel trade day after day, for a long long time.

One day, while he was going about his business of dispensing death in the forest, suddenly there arose a vicious storm. Mighty winds began to fell the trees, the sky was overcast with dense clouds, and the darkness was broken only by the occasional glow of lightning. Soon it began to rain. And in no time the whole earth was covered deep in water.

The hunter almost fainted in that incessant rain and the sudden cold. He lost his way. And while moving around wildly without direction, he could not even make out the mounts and the ditches in the forest. Around him he saw droves of birds and herds of animals running around in great fright.

Birds hid themselves in their nests, animals sought out the safety of dry high lands. But many perished in the rain and cold. The hunter was also half-dead with cold. He could neither stand, nor walk. In this state he saw a she-pigeon lying on the ground. Suffering from severe cold, she was unable to move or fly. The hunter too was in an equally helpless condition. But, even then, by sheer force of habit, he picked her up and consigned her to the cage. Used to living in sin, he could think of nothing better even in his hour of intense suffering.

Then, all of a sudden, he saw a big tree. Its foliage was thick, dense and dark like a cloud. Numerous birds, seeking shade, shelter and fruit, had made it their home. It seemed as if the tree, like a saint, had taken form only for the purpose of serving others. As soon as the hunter saw that tree, the clouds began to break, and bright stars began to shine through.

In the clear dark night lit by the shining stars, the hunter noticed that he had strayed far away from his home. And, he was still shivering with cold. Therefore, he made up his mind to spend the night under the tree. And invoking the gods of the tree for protection, he spread some leaves on the ground and lay down with a stone as his pillow.

As luck would have it, there lived a beautiful spotted pigeon on that tree with all his relatives. His wife had been away in search of grain since the morning. She had not returned in the evening. And as the night fell, the pigeon began to worry about her. When the hunter reached the tree, the pigeon was crying for his dear wife, recalling her beauty and her unswerving faithfulness. He recalled the way she provided him constant companionship and unerring assistance in all difficult situations. And he wondered what kind of a place would his home be if his loving and caring wife were not there to enliven it with her pleasant speech? Would such a home be any different from the wild forest?

His wife, ensnared in the hunter's cage, heard him wailing thus for her. And she felt greatly fulfilled. If her husband was so intensely pleased with her, there was nothing more that she wanted in the world. Forgetting her own woes, she could think only of protecting the dharma of her husband. And she advised him that he had a guest in the house, and it was his primary duty to look after him. He should therefore stop worrying about her and prepare to offer proper hospitality to the hunter. She even advised her husband that he had been blessed with sons and daughters, he had already fulfilled himself, and therefore he need not be constrained to protect his own body while arranging the necessary hospitality for the guest.

The pigeon almost cried with pleasure on listening to the sage advice of his wife. And immediately, he offered himself and his house at the service of that cruel guest. He graciously welcomed the hunter, asked him to feel free as if he were in his own house, and lovingly enquired after his needs. The pigeon also reassured him that he, the hunter, had come to his house and even an enemy coming thus ought to be offered proper welcome. After all, a tree does not withdraw its shade from the one who comes to it with the intention of cutting it down: *chettumapyāgate chāyām nopasamharate drumah.*⁴

The hunter, accepting the offer of hospitality from the pigeon requested him to find a way of saving him from the biting cold. The pigeon gathered a large heap of dry leaves, and then flew to the blacksmith to bring fire. Soon he had a big blaze going. The

⁴ Mahā śānti 146.5, p. 4807.

hunter luxuriously warmed himself up on the fire. He was relieved of the cold. And then he began to feel the pangs of hunger.

There was of course no food accumulated in the nest of the host. He was a pigeon, who ate as he picked the grains. He had no occasion to put away any of the grains he picked for use at a later time. For once he felt unhappy about such livelihood of a pigeon. Of what use was this livelihood that left him with nothing for entertaining the guests at his door?

But, whatever be the kind of livelihood assigned to him, he could hardly allow a guest to go hungry. He, therefore, thought for some time and, quickly making up his mind, gathered some more leaves and let the fire blaze high again. He told the hunter that he had no food to offer him, but requested him to accept his body instead. With this request and with the resolve to satiate the hunger of his guest, he went around the fire thrice and then dropped himself into the blaze.

The hunter was shocked to the core of his being. He had seen the pigeon so gladly sacrificing himself to honour and satisfy a guest like him. He could no more bear to continue the life he had been leading till then. He quickly released the she-pigeon that he had engaged, and leaving behind everything – the stick, the torch, the snare and the cage – he set out on a great journey, that would lead to his death, with the resolve that he would follow the example of the pigeon and bring himself back to the life of dharma by incessant fasting and by undertaking great austerities.

The she-pigeon, released from the cage, began to recall the happy times she had spent with her husband, and unable to bear the pain of separation, she too jumped into the fire. Soon she was united with her husband, and the two of them together ascended to the heavens in a celestial chariot, escorted by hundreds of crores of men of great virtue, each of whom was sitting in his own celestial chariot.

The hunter, overcoming all temptations, entered a deep and inhospitable forest, full of thorny shrubs and savage beasts. Soon he was consumed by a great forest-fire, which cleansed him of all his sins; and thus he too found a distinguished abode in the heavens.

Thus did the sage pigeon-couple serve their guest, and fulfilled the dharma of gr̥hasthāśrama. Their commitment to dharma was, of

course, extraordinary. Through such commitment they not only earned a place for themselves in the heavens, but also brought a violent person, like the hunter, back to righteousness and opened the path of heavens for him.

But in honouring and endeavouring to serve the guest who had come to their house, the pigeon and his wife were performing, though indeed with extraordinary rigour, what is known to be the ordinary dharma of a householder. Because, as the pigeon told the hunter:

अरावप्युचितं कार्यमातिथ्यं गृहमागते ।

छेत्तुमप्यागते छायां नोपसंहरते द्रुमः ॥

*arāvapyucitāṃ kāryamātithyaṃ gr̥hamāgate
chettumapyāgate chāyāṃ nopasamharate drumah⁵*

Even if an enemy comes to the house, he ought to be offered all hospitality. After all a tree does not withdraw its shade from those who come to it with the intention of cutting it down.

And further, he said:

शरणागतस्य कर्तव्यमातिथ्यं हि प्रयत्नतः ।

पञ्चयज्ञप्रवृत्तेन गृहस्थेन विशेषतः ।

पञ्चयज्ञांस्तु यो मोहान्न करोति गृहाश्रमे ।

तस्य नायं न च परो लोको भवति धर्मतः ॥

*śaraṇāgatasya kartavyamātithyaṃ hi prayatnataḥ
pañcayajñapravṛttena gr̥hasthena viśeṣataḥ
pañcayajñāṃstu yo mohānna karoti gr̥hāśrame
tasya nāyaṃ na ca paro loko bhavati dharmataḥ⁶*

It is the duty of all to offer hospitality to the one who comes to their house. But it is the special duty of the gr̥hastha, the householder, who is committed to the observance of pañcamahāyajña.

⁵ Mahā s̄anti 146.5, p. 4807.

⁶ Mahā s̄anti 146.6-7, p. 4807-8.

THE KAPOTADAMPATĪ

The gr̥hastha who is so immersed in ignorance that he fails to perform pañcamahāyajña cannot rightfully obtain a dignified place, either in this world or in the world hereafter.

A gr̥hastha is indeed like a great tree that provides sustenance to all who seek his shelter. The discipline through which the gr̥hastha fulfils this onerous responsibility is pañcamahāyajña, the details of which we shall explore in the next chapter.

The pigeon, and the brāhmaṇa of Kurukṣetra who had adopted the kapotavṛtti—had taken to the livelihood of a pigeon—performed extraordinary pañcamahāyajña. In the following we describe the ordinary pañcamahāyajña of the ordinary gr̥hastha.