



CHAPTER 7

abhṛtānām bhaved bhartā

Provider of the Unprovided

*abhṛtānām bhaved bhartā bhṛtānāmanvavekṣakaḥ*¹

Be the provider of the unprovided. And carefully look after those who happen to be in your care.

Thus says Bhīṣma, to Yudhiṣṭhira in the śāntiparvan, while commenting on the actions and attitudes proper to a king; and then almost immediately, within a couple of chapters, repeats the advice, quoting the nītiśāstra, the science of worldly living, created by Brahmā himself.²

The king, for Bhīṣma, is thus a great gṛhasṭha, who is charged with extraordinary gṛhasṭha responsibilities. Like a gṛhasṭha he has the responsibility to provide for the sustenance of all beings, especially the humans, who happen to be in his care. But, unlike an ordinary gṛhasṭha, he also has the responsibility to provide sustenance to those who, though not his direct dependents, happen to lack sustenance in society. The king is an ordinary gṛhasṭha as far as his own household and those employed under his care are concerned. For them, his bhṛtyas, he is the careful provider, anva-vekṣaka. But his responsibilities extend beyond them. The whole of the land is, in a way, part of his gṛhasṭha responsibility.

The classical Indian texts speak repeatedly of the responsibility of the king towards the un-fed and un-cared for. And, as we shall see below, the texts also insist that the sin of hunger and want anywhere in the land, even of hunger and want caused by natural causes and

¹ Mahā śānti 57.19, p. 4565.

² Mahā śānti 59.54, p. 4573.

disasters, lies primarily upon the king. The king being essentially a great gr̥hastha, he shares as it were in the sin of all gr̥hasthas who eat without having first fed the hungry.

While laying down detailed rules of kingly action, of rājadharmā, however, the classical texts and especially the dharmasāstra texts, largely concentrate upon prescriptions regarding the proper application of daṇḍa and kṣatra, bearing of arms against internal and external disruptions, which are the special responsibilities of the king. The texts assume that the daṇḍa and kṣatra are wielded in order that the rāṣṭra, the people, may continue to live as an extended household within which everyone finds appropriate sustenance. Āpastambadharmasūtra, in fact, begins its discussion on rājadharmā with what reads like a prescription for the installation of the king as a great gr̥hastha.

King as great gr̥hastha: Āpastambadharmasūtra

The Āpastambadharmasūtra, like other dharmasūtra texts, is of course primarily a text laying down the discipline of ordinary day-to-day living for different varṇas and āśramas, but especially for the brāhmaṇas. It is not a text specifically of rājānīti, of the discipline of the kings. This aspect of dharma is discussed towards the end of the text after, as the text puts it, the specific and general disciplines of all varṇas have been laid down: *vyākhyātāssarvavarṇānām sādhaṇānavaiśeṣikā dharmā rajñastu viśeṣādvakṣyāmah.*³

Initiating the discussion, Āpastamba advises the king to settle his capital, with its entrance facing south, and set up his personal house, veśma, in the centre of the capital. In front of this personal house, he is advised to build a greater house, āvasatha, for welcoming and offering hospitality to all those who would come to his door. And then, he is advised to build an assembly hall, sabhā, where he would meet with his people and his counsellors, and receive embassies from other lands.

Having built these three houses, the king is asked to light the household-fire in all three and thus become a householder thrice over, as it were. As the text says:⁴

³ Āpastamba 2.25.1, p. 283.

⁴ Āpastamba 2.25.6-11, p. 284.

सर्वेष्वेवाऽजस्रा अग्रयस्स्युः ॥

sarveṣvevā'jasrā agnayassyuḥ

Let the agni, the household-fire, burn unceasingly at all places: the veśma, the āvasatha and the sabhā.

अग्निपूजा च नित्या यथा गृहमेधे ॥

agnipujā ca nityā yathā grhamedhe

To all the three agnis, offer reverential worship everyday, in the manner prescribed for a grhastha.

आवसथे श्रोत्रियावराध्यानतिथीन् वासयेत् ॥

āvasathe śrotriyāvarārdhyānatithīn vāsayet

In the āvasatha offer hospitality to all atithis, all those who come, beginning with the śrotriyas, the ones who are well read in the vedas.

तेषां यथागुणमावसथाः शय्याऽन्नपानं च विदेयम् ॥

teṣāṃ yathāguṇamāvasathāḥ śayyā'nnapānam ca videyam

To them, the atithis in the āvasatha, offer proper room, bed and food, and let the offerings be appropriate to the accomplishments of each.

गुरून्मात्यांश्च नातिजीवेत् ॥

gurūnamātyāṃśca nātijīvet

Do not indulge in a living superior to that of the elders and the counsellors.

न चास्य विषये क्षुधा रोगेण हिमातपाभ्यां वाऽवसीदेदभावादबुद्धिपूर्वं
वा कश्चित् ॥

na cāsya viṣaye kṣudhā rogeṇa himātapābhyaṃ vā'vasīdedabhāvādbuddhipūrvam vā kaścit

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

For Āpastamba thus, as for Bhīṣma, the king is essentially a gr̥hastha, except that he looks after not one but three agnis. He runs three households, one for his immediate family, the other for the multitudes to whom he provides personal hospitality, and the third for the sabhā. He lives a life of austerity, never living beyond what his elders, teachers and counsellors can afford. And he constantly endeavours to ensure that nobody living in the lands under his care suffers from hunger or want.

King as great gr̥hastha: Mahābhārata

Yudhiṣṭhira's regret in exile

The ideal king of the Mahābhārata is, of course, Yudhiṣṭhira. And Yudhiṣṭhira, as is well known, has little attachment to the power and perquisites of kingship. During the long period that he has to stay away from his capital, it is seldom that he regrets the loss; and later when he regains the right to enter his capital after winning the great Mahābhārata war, he is so hesitant to do so that it requires urgent entreaties of long-suffering Draupadī and all of his brothers, and the enormous persuasive skills of Bhīṣma and Śrīkṛṣṇa, to make him accept the kingly mantle.

The detached and reluctant king Yudhiṣṭhira too, however, cannot overlook his gr̥hastha responsibilities of looking after and feeding others, especially his dependents. At the beginning of his exile, we find him worrying about the complete lack of material resources to which he has been reduced. This is perhaps the only occasion in the Mahābhārata when Yudhiṣṭhira is seen feeling sorry about the loss of his kingdom. And the loss he laments is not of the power and prestige of kingship, but of the resources necessary for looking after others. He says so in so many words to ṛṣi Śaunaka and the other brāhmaṇas who choose to accompany him in exile and who advise him about the inconsequentiality of mere material wealth. As he puts it:

नार्थोपभोगलिप्सार्थमियमर्थेषुता मम ।
भरणार्थं तु विप्राणां ब्रह्मन् काङ्क्षे न लोभतः ॥

PROVIDER OF THE UNPROVIDED

*nārthopabhogalipsārthamiyamarthepsutā mama
bharaṇārthaṃ tu viprāṇāṃ brahman kāṅkṣe na lobhataḥ*⁵

O brahman, this desire for wealth that has arisen in me is not for the sake of personal enjoyment. I desire wealth, not to fulfil my greed, but to provide proper care and nurture to the eminent ones.

कथं ह्यस्मद्विधो ब्रह्मन् वर्तमानो गृहाश्रमे ।

भरणं पालनं चापि न कुर्यादनुयायिनाम् ॥

*kathaṃ hyasmadvidho brahman vartamāno grhāśrame
bharaṇaṃ pālanaṃ cāpi na kuryādanuyāyinām*⁶

O brahman, how can it be that I, who am bound by the discipline of gr̥hasthāśrama, should fail to provide for even my followers?

And then he goes on to define the duties of the king as a gr̥hastha, in words and phrases almost identical to the ones that we have had occasion to hear while discussing Manu's description of the daily pañcamahāyajña of an ordinary gr̥hastha. Yudhiṣṭhira says:

संविभागो हि भूतानां सर्वेषामेव दृश्यते ।

तथैवापचमानेभ्यः प्रदेयं गृहमेधिना ॥

*samvibhāgo hi bhūtānāṃ sarveṣāmeva dr̥śyate
tathaiivāpacamānebhyaḥ pradeyaṃ gr̥hamedhinā*⁷

There is a share of all bhūtas, all beings, in everything. It is seen everywhere. Therefore, a gr̥hastha must give a proper share of food to all those who do not cook for themselves.

तृणानि भूमिरुदकं वाक् चतुर्थी च सूनुता ।

सतामेतानि गेहेषु नोच्छिद्यन्ते कदाचन ॥

*ṭṛṇāni bhūmirudakam vāk caturthī ca sūnṛtā
satāmetāni geheṣu nocchidyante kadācana*⁸

⁵ Mahā vana 2.51, p. 952.

⁶ Mahā vana 2.52, p. 952.

⁷ Mahā vana 2.53, p. 952.

⁸ Mahā vana 2.54, p. 952.

A stretch of earth to lie down, a bed of straw, a bowl of water, and pleasing speech – these four are never lacking in the house of a virtuous person.

देयमार्तस्य शयनं स्थितश्रान्तस्य चासनम् ।

तृषितस्य च पानीयं क्षुधितस्य च भोजनम् ॥

*deyamārtasya śayanam sthitaśrāntasya cāsanam
tṛṣitasya ca pānīyam kṣudhitasya ca bhōjanam*⁹

To the sick a bed to lie down, to the tired a place to sit, to the thirsty water to drink, and to the hungry a proper meal, must always be given.

Yudhiṣṭhira continues in the same vein, recalling the responsibility of the gr̥hastha towards others, and especially towards the atithis and abhyāgatas. And, at the end he reminds Śaunaka that for a gr̥hastha such caring for others indeed is the highest dharma, and enquires whether he, Śaunaka, can really recommend otherwise to him:

एवं यो वर्तते वृत्तिं वर्तमानो गृहाश्रमे ।

तस्य धर्मं परं प्राहुः कथं वा विप्र मन्यसे ॥

*evam yo vartate vṛttim vartamāno gr̥hāśrame
tasya dharmam param prāhuḥ katham vā vipra manyase*¹⁰

It is said that the dharma of the one who lives like this, caring and providing for all others, while passing through the gr̥hasthāśrama, is indeed great. O eminent one, what do you have to say about this?

Yudhiṣṭhira's insistence on acquiring the means to provide proper share of food and sustenance to his followers is so intense that there seems no way he would leave it unfulfilled. He keeps worrying about the problem, and finally his kulapurohita, the family priest, Dhaumya, advises him to seek the blessings of the sun who, by virtue of his action of gathering and then raining water over the earth, happens to be the creator of all anna, all food:

⁹ Mahā vana 2.55, p. 952.

¹⁰ Mahā vana 2.63, p. 953.

एवं भानुमयं ह्यन्नं भूतानां प्राणधारणम् ।

पितृषु सर्वभूतानां तस्मात् तं शरणं ब्रज ॥

*evam bhānumayaṁ hyannaṁ bhūtānāṁ prāṇadhāraṇam
pitṛiṣu sarvabhūtānāṁ tasmāt taṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja*¹¹

Anna, that sustains life in all bhūtas, is bhānumaya, is formed of the sun. The sun, therefore, is the father of all bhūtas. Go and seek his help.

This understanding of the sun as the cause of all anna occurs often in the classical Indian texts; we have earlier heard Śrīkr̥ṣṇa explaining how anna arises from the sun, and in the next chapter we shall hear the upaniṣad teaching the precept. Let us however continue with the story of the early days of Yudhiṣṭhira's exile.

Yudhiṣṭhira accepts Dhaumya's advice and propitiates the sun, who then offers him an akṣaya-pātra, a pot that will provide him unending quantities of food for twelve years. The pot, blessed by the sun, would fill everyday and would exhaust for the day only after Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira, having fed all their guests and dependents, partake of the food themselves.

It is only after obtaining the akṣaya-pātra, and thus the ability to look after those who are under his care and those who come seeking his hospitality, that Yudhiṣṭhira settles down to the life of an exile. It seems that though he is willing to forego the power and privilege of kingship, yet, being the rightful king, he is not willing to give up his responsibilities as a great gr̥hastha. And for the first twelve years of his exile he indeed continues to run a more or less kingly household. Only during the last year of the exile, which the pāṇḍavas spend as the dependents of Virāṭa, does Yudhiṣṭhira give up the attributes of a great gr̥hastha.

The great gr̥hastha of Indra-prastha

Later in the vanaparvan, Draupadī, describing her life in exile to Satyabhāmā in a powerful dialogue, parts of which we have had occasion to recall in the previous chapter, tells her of how she scrupulously feeds and looks after the dependents and guests, and endeavours to properly perform śrāddha, bhikṣā and bali, the observances that constitute the essential discipline of

¹¹ Mahā vana 3.9, p. 955.

gṛhasthāśrama. And while recalling the times when Yudhiṣṭhira ruled at Indraprastha, she describes the great household where thousands of brāhmaṇas, snātakas and yatis found permanent shelter and food; and where a hundred thousand beautiful and finely bedecked women bustled around, with trays of food in their hands, to welcome and feed the guests, who arrived at all times of the day and night.¹²

Draupadī, of course, is concerned not only with the running of a kingly household but also with the attributes of kingly power. She and Śrīkr̥ṣṇa, in fact, are probably the only important personages of the Mahābhārata who display no ambivalence about the acquisition and application of power. And recalling her days in Indraprastha, Draupadī remembers how thousands of great warrior-kings used to sit at the feet of Yudhiṣṭhira and how a hundred thousand elephants and a hundred thousand horses used to form his entourage whenever he chose to travel out of Indraprastha. She recalls these attributes of great power especially to Bhīmasena, in the virāṭaparvan, while trying to induce him to somehow save her from the insulting attentions of Kīcaka, the dandyish general of the armies of Virāṭa.¹³

But the fondest memories of Draupadī, it seems, are of the great household where food continued to be served to all comers unceasingly throughout the day and night; and where not only the scholars and saṁnyāsins, but also the old, the young and the handicapped, and indeed all those who had no one else to look after them, found shelter, food and care. She remembers this care and feeding that streamed through the great household of Yudhiṣṭhira, the king of Indraprastha, much more than the symbols of his power and prestige as a cakravartin. And she seems to be emphasizing the greatness of the householder, rather than the power of the king, even at a time of great distress and imminent humiliation in the Virāṭa capital.

Kuntī urges Yudhiṣṭhira to war

Still later, in the udyogaparvan, we find Kuntī sending a message to Yudhiṣṭhira through Śrīkr̥ṣṇa – who arrives in Hastināpura to make a last, and unsuccessful, effort at negotiating peace – urging her son to win back his kingdom through the exercise of his valour.

¹² Mahā vana 233, pp. 1618–22.

¹³ Mahā virāṭa 18, pp. 1895–99.

She requests Śrīkr̥ṣṇa to convey to Yudhiṣṭhira that his insistence on peace under all circumstances is neither wise nor in accordance with the rājadharmā that his ancestors would have commended to their progeny. He must reclaim the right to his kingdom like a warrior.

Yudhiṣṭhira must undertake this great effort to win a kingdom so that he may fulfil his responsibility of looking after the people and the lands. But this looking after the people, as Kuntī describes it, seems no different than living the life of a great gr̥hastha. Kuntī is urging her son to war in order that he may have the opportunity to perform the yajñas appropriate to a great gr̥hastha. She asks Śrīkr̥ṣṇa to tell her son:

न ह्येतामाशिषं पाण्डुर्न चाहं न पितामहः ।
 प्रयुक्तवन्तः पूर्वं ते यया चरसि मेधया ।
 यज्ञो दानं तपः शौर्यं प्रज्ञा संतानमेव च ।
 माहात्म्यं बलमोजश्च नित्यमाशंसितं मया ।
 नित्यं स्वाहा स्वधा नित्यं दद्युर्मानुषदेवताः ।
 दीर्घमायुर्धनं पुत्रान् सम्यगाराधिताः शुभाः ।
 पुत्रेष्वाराशासते नित्यं पितरो दैवतानि च ।
 दानमध्ययनं यज्ञं प्रजानां परिपालनम् ।
 एतद् धर्ममधर्म्यं वा जन्मनैवाभ्यजायथाः ।
 ते तु वैद्याः कुले जाता अवृत्त्या तात पीडिताः ।
 यत्र दानपतिं शूरं क्षुधिताः पृथिवीचराः ।
 प्राप्य तुष्टाः प्रतिष्ठन्ते धर्मः कोऽभ्यधिकस्ततः ॥

*na hyetāmāśiṣam pāṇḍurna cāham na pitāmahaḥ
 prayuktavantah pūrvam te yayā carasi medhayā
 yajño dānam tapah śauryam prajñā samtānameva ca
 mähātmyam balamojaśca nityamāśamsitam mayā
 nityam svāhā svadhā nityam dadyurmānuṣadevatāḥ
 dīrghamāyurdhanam putrān samyagārādhitāḥ śubhāḥ
 putreṣvāśāsate nityam pitaro daivatāni ca
 dānamadhyayanam yajñam prajānām paripālanam
 etad dharmyamadharmyam vā janmanaiivābhyajāyathāḥ
 te tu vaidyāḥ kule jātā avṛtyā tāta pīḍitāḥ*

*yatra dānapatiṁ sūram kṣudhitāḥ pṛthivīcarāḥ
prāpya tustāḥ pratiṣṭhante dharmāḥ ko'bhyadhikastataḥ*¹⁴

Neither I, nor your father Pāṇḍu, nor your grandfather Bhīṣma, have ever offered our blessings for you to follow the path that you seem disposed to. I have always wished for you to perform yajñas, offer dāna and undertake great austerities; I have wished for great valour, intellect, and progeny in you; and I have wished for great repute, strength and vigour in you. I have wished that auspicious brāhmaṇas, properly propitiated by you, may always perform yajña and homa for you, and always bless you with long life, great wealth and abundant progeny. The devas and pitṛs, the gods and the ancestors, always hope that their descendants shall engage in dāna, adhyayana and yajña, and shall look after the people with care.

O Śrīkṛṣṇa, you by your very nature know whether what I am saying is in accordance with dharma or not. But, dear one, the pāṇḍavas, even though they are all of them greatly learned and are born in a high kula, are stricken with a lack of disposition to act. And, what can be a higher state of dharma than that when the hungry of the earth find a generous and valorous warrior, and through him attain happiness and contentment?

Yudhiṣṭhira assumes headship of the great household

Later still, after the war has been won and Yudhiṣṭhira is being urged to accept the kingly responsibilities, we find the pāṇḍava brothers repeatedly recalling the virtue and glory of a great gṛhastha. Draupadī, it is true, seems to have little concern for the gṛhastha life at this stage. Seemingly exasperated with the persistent inclination of Yudhiṣṭhira for untimely renunciation, she challenges his wisdom and valour, and invites him to exercise the power that he has won with the help of his brothers. She wants to see him not merely fulfilling his responsibilities towards the world as the head of a great household, which he must of course do, but

¹⁴ Mahā udyoga 132.23–28, p. 2397.

also asserting and enjoying the privileges and duties of a great king, before whom the lesser kings of the earth bow in reverence.

His brothers, however, seem content with weaning him away from the path of renunciation and making him accept the discipline of a gr̥hastha. They do refer to the duty of the king to exercise his power in favour of dharma, but they speak much more of his gr̥hastha responsibility to propitiate the pitṛs and devas, to offer hospitality to the guests and to look after the dependents. Arjuna and Nakula enter into long expositions on the gr̥hasthadharma, and even the impetuous Bhīmasena seems to be concerned less with the power of kingship and more with the opportunity it offers to look after and care for others. The pāṇḍava brothers it seems are inviting Yudhiṣṭhira not so much to the throne of Hastināpura, as to the headship of the great household of kuruvamśa.¹⁵

Bhīṣma's blessings

Bhīṣma, during his long discourse on rājadharmā, of course, refers to all aspects of kingship, which together encompass all that there is to know about dharma, at least about the dharma of worldly living. But Bhīṣma, too, keeps on returning to the duties of the king as a great gr̥hastha, who has to look after not only his dependents, but also those who have no one else to depend upon. His advice to Yudhiṣṭhira to become a gr̥hastha under whose care the dependents and the otherwise unprovided would find food and shelter, *abhṛtānām bhaved bhartā bhṛtānāmanvavekṣakaḥ*, with which we have opened this chapter, appears almost at the very beginning of his discourse. And at the end of the discourse, which runs through almost the whole of śāntiparvan and anuśāsanaparvan, we find him blessing Yudhiṣṭhira thus:

क्षत्रधर्मरतः पार्थ पितृन् देवांश्च तर्पय ।
 श्रेयसा योक्ष्यसे चैव व्येतु ते मानसो ज्वरः ।
 रञ्जयस्व प्रजाः सर्वाः प्रकृतीः परिसान्त्वय ।
 सुहृदः फलसत्कारैरर्चयस्व यथार्हतः ।
 अनु त्वां तात जीवन्तु मित्राणि सुहृदस्तथा ।
 चैत्यस्थाने स्थितं वृक्षं फलवन्तमिव द्विजाः ॥

¹⁵ Mahā śānti 7 to 18, pp. 4435–4463.

PROVIDER OF THE UNPROVIDED

*ksatradharmarataḥ pārtha pitṛn devāṁśca tarpaya
śreyasā yoksyase caiva vyetu te mānaso jvarah
rañjayasva prajāḥ sarvāḥ prakṛtīḥ parisāntvaya
suhṛdah phalasaṅkārairarcayasva yathārhatāḥ
anu tvām tāta jīvantu mitrāṇi suhṛdastathā
caityasthāne sthitam vṛkṣam phalavantamiva dvijāḥ*¹⁶

O son of Pṛthu, intently pursue the kṣatradharma, and propitiate the devas and pitṛs. You shall certainly attain virtue in the world. Therefore, cleanse yourself of all afflictions of the mind.

Offer happiness to the people and encouragement to different limbs of the state. And honour your friends with hospitality and gifts appropriate to each.

O dear one, let your friends and well-wishers find livelihood under your shelter, the way numerous birds find shelter in the foliage of a great tree blooming in the courtyard of a temple.

Provider of the unprovided

The simile of a great fruit-laden tree standing in a place of worship and providing food and shelter to all is a particularly apt summary of the teachings of Bhīṣma about the gṛhasṭha role of the king. Of course, every gṛhasṭha is like a fruit-laden tree providing food and shelter to many. But the ordinary gṛhasṭha is a tree that is rooted in the family courtyard, while the tree of the kingly gṛhasṭha stands in a public square, welcoming all those who happen to be in need of care and protection. The gṛhasṭha looks after his dependents and atithis, but the king looks after even those who have none to depend upon, those who have no family courtyard to seek shelter in.

The weak and the destitute thus become a special responsibility of the king. Bhīṣma, while advising Yudhiṣṭhira on how to set up and maintain the kingly household in the early part of śāntiparvan, specifically draws his attention to his responsibilities towards the weak and the unprovided, saying:

¹⁶ Mahā anuśāsana 166.11-13, p. 6092.

कृपणानाथवृद्धानां विधवानां च योषिताम् ।
योगक्षेमं च वृत्तिं च नित्यमेव प्रकल्पयेत् ॥

*kṛpaṇānāthavṛddhānām vidhavānām ca yoṣitām
yogakṣemam ca vṛttim ca nityameva prakalpayet*¹⁷

Always arrange for the welfare and livelihood of those who have no resources, those who have no one to look after them, those who are afflicted by old age, and those who have lost their husbands.

Agnipurāṇa, Matsyapurāṇa and Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa offer the same advice in almost exactly the same words in the course of their discourse on the duties of the king.¹⁸ And Gautamadharmasūtra, expressing the same sentiment in somewhat less poetic but more urgently commanding terms, instructs: *bibhryādbrāhmaṇān śrotriyān*, provide for brāhmaṇas and the śrotriyas; and, *nirutsāhām-ścābrāhmaṇān*, provide for the non-brāhmaṇas who lack livelihood.¹⁹

Similar teachings, expressed in different words and phrases, are found in every Indian text concerned with the discipline of the kings. Bhīṣma himself, continuing his instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira, commends to him the same precept again in another form, this time quoting ṛṣi Utathya's advice to king Māndhātā:

संविभज्य यदा भुङ्क्ते नृपतिर्दुर्बलान् नरान् ।
तदा भवन्ति बलिनः स राज्ञो धर्म उच्यते ॥

*saṁvibhajya yadā bhun̄kte nṛpatirdurbalān narān
tadā bhavanti balinaḥ sa rājño dharmā ucyaṭe*²⁰

When the king partakes of all things only after taking out proper shares for the weak, then the weak become strong, and this is the dharma of the king.

कृपणानाथवृद्धानां यदाशु परिमार्जति ।
हर्षं संजनयन् नृणां स राज्ञो धर्म उच्यते ॥

¹⁷ Mahā sānti 86.24, p. 4648.

¹⁸ Agni 225.25, p. 1024; Matsya 215.61, p. 244; Viṣṇudharmottara 2.65.54, p. 221.

¹⁹ Gautama 10.9–10, pp. 159–60.

²⁰ Mahā sānti 91.33, p. 4661.

PROVIDER OF THE UNPROVIDED

*kṛpaṅānāthavṛddhānām yadāśru parimāṛjati
harsam samjanayan nṛṇām sa rājño dharma ucyate*²¹

Wiping away tears from the faces of the destitute, the orphaned and the old, and spreading cheer amongst all – this is known as the dharma of the king.

Utathya's image of the king as the font of strength for the weak also keeps appearing repeatedly in the Indian classical literature. Thus, we hear in the Padmapurāṇa:

दुर्बलस्य त्वनाथस्य राजा भवति वै बलम् ।
अचक्षुषो भवेच्चक्षुरगतौ च गतिर्भवेत् ॥

*durbalasya tvanāthasya rājā bhavati vai balam
acakṣuṣo bhaveccakṣuragatau ca gatirbhavet*²²

The king should become the strength of the weak and the orphaned. He should become the eyes of those who cannot see, and legs of those who cannot walk.

Agnipurāṇa puts this Indian understanding of the kingly responsibility towards the weak and the unprovided in probably the most eloquent form, advising the king to become like the rain-bearing clouds that fulfil and suffuse all on earth: *ājīvyah sarvasattvānām rājā parjanyaavadbhavet*.²³ The simile of the rain-cloud to describe the righteous king is of course not unique to Agnipurāṇa. This image appears often in Indian literature; and we hear Vyāsaśmṛti saying: *parjanya iva lokānāmādhāraḥ pṛthivīpatih*.²⁴

Kālidāsa expresses the same thought through a different simile, comparing king Dilīpa to the all providing sun:

प्रजानामेव भूत्यर्थं स ताभ्यो बलिमग्रहीत् ।
सहस्रगुणमुत्सृष्टुमादत्ते हि रसं रविः ॥

*prajānāmeva bhūtyartham sa tābhyo balimagrahīt
sahasraguṇamutsrāṣṭumādatte hi rasam raviḥ*²⁵

²¹ Mahā śānti 91.38, p. 4661.

²² Padma 1.37.88, p. 111.

²³ Agni 239.43, p. 1124; also Kāmandakī 5.60, p. 129.

²⁴ Rājanīti p. 4; also Kāmandakī 1.13, p. 12.

²⁵ Raghuvamśa 1.18, p. 8.

PROVIDER OF THE UNPROVIDED

The way the sun extracts *rasa*, the life sustaining essence, from the earth to pour it back a thousand-fold, so does king Dilīpa collect his share only to multiply the welfare of the people many-fold.

Protector of vārtā and kṛṣi

If the king is to fulfil his unconditional responsibility to provide for the unprovided, then he must so arrange affairs that there is an abundance and plenty all around within his domain of responsibility, and nobody happens to be in want of sustenance. A righteous king therefore is expected to be especially vigilant in ensuring that activities related to the earning of livelihood proceed without let or hindrance.

The Indian term for what are nowadays known as economic activities is *vārtā*. *Arthaśāstra* says, *kṛṣipāśupālye vanijyā ca vārtā*,²⁶ agriculture, animal husbandry and trade constitute *vārtā*. And the king, according to the classical texts, is the protector of both *vārtā* and *dharma*. Thus *Yājñavalkya-smṛiti*, lays down that looking after his subjects is the primary activity of the king, *pradhānam kṣatriye karma prajānām paripālanam*, and *Vijñāneśvara* in his commentary, *Mitākṣarā*, explains that this looking after involves protection of both *dharma* and livelihood: *kṣatriyasya prajāpālanam pradhānam karma dharmārtham vṛtyartham ca*.²⁷

Kāmandakīyanītisāra conveys the same thought even more explicitly:

आयत्तं रक्षणं राज्ञि वार्ता रक्षणमाश्रिता ।

वार्ताच्छेदे हि लोकोऽयं श्वसन्नपि न जीवति ॥

*āyattam rakṣaṇam rājñi vārtā rakṣaṇamāśritā
vārtācchede hi loko 'yam śvasannapi na jīvati*²⁸

Rakṣaṇa, protection and defense, is dependent upon the king, and *vārtā* depends upon *rakṣaṇa*. With the interruption of *vārtā* the world is dead, even if it seems to be breathing.

²⁶ *Arthaśāstra* 1.4.1, p. 15.

²⁷ *Yājñavalkya* 1.119, p. 53.

²⁸ *Kāmandakī* 1.12, pp. 11-12.

Indian sages, in their instructions to the kings, often seem to be particularly insistent upon the protection of vārtā, and especially of agriculture. Thus we find Bhīṣma advising Yudhiṣṭhira:

कृषिगोरक्ष्यवाणिज्यं लोकानामिह जीवनम् ॥

*kr̥ṣigorakṣyavāṇijyam lokānāmiha jīvanam*²⁹

Agriculture, animal husbandry and trade are the very life of the people.

कच्चित् ते वणिजो राष्ट्रे नोद्विजन्ति करार्दिताः ।

क्रीणन्तो बहूनाल्पेन कान्तारकृतविश्रमाः ॥

*kaccit te vaṇijo rāṣṭre nodvijanti karārditāḥ
krīṇanto bahūnālpena kāntārakṛtavīśramāḥ*³⁰

Have you ensured that the traders in the country, who have to pass through many difficult terrains in order to exchange goods at high and low prices, are never put to trouble under the burden of oppressive exactions?

कच्चित् कृषिकरा राष्ट्रं न जहत्यतिपीडिताः ।

ये वहन्ति धुरं राज्ञां ते भरन्तीतरानपि ।

इतो दत्तेन जीवन्ति देवाः पितृगणास्तथा ।

मानुषोरगरक्षंसि वयांसि पशवस्तथा ॥

*kaccit kṛṣikarā rāṣṭram na jahatyatipīditāḥ
ye vahanti dhuram rājñām te bharantītarānapi
ito dattena jīvanti devāḥ pitṛganāstathā
mānuṣoragarakṣāṁsi vayāṁsi paśavastathā*³¹

Have you ensured that the cultivators are not reduced to deserting the country because of the exactions imposed by you? It is indeed the cultivators who carry the burden of the king on their shoulders and also provide for the sustenance of all others. The devas, pitṛs and manuṣyas, as also the reptiles and rākṣasas, and birds and animals, all of them, live on what the cultivators provide.

²⁹ Mahā śānti 89.7, p. 4655.

³⁰ Mahā śānti 89.23, p. 4656.

³¹ Mahā śānti 89.24-25, p. 4656.

Earlier, when Nārada comes to visit Yudhiṣṭhira in the sabhā-parvan, we find him solicitously enquiring about several aspects of the state of affairs in the kingdom, but especially about the state of vārtā:

कच्चिन्न चौरैर्लुब्धैर्वा कुमारैः स्त्रीबलेन वा ।
 त्वया वा पीड्यते राष्ट्रं कच्चित् तुष्टाः कृषीवलाः ।
 कच्चिद् राष्ट्रे तडागानि पूर्णानि च बृहन्ति च ।
 भागशो विनिविष्टानि न कृषिर्देवमातृका ।
 कच्चिन्न भक्तं बीजं च कर्षकस्यावसीदति ।
 प्रत्येकं च शतं वृद्ध्या ददास्युणमनुग्रहम् ।
 कच्चित् स्वनुष्ठिता तात वार्ता ते साधुभिर्जनैः ।
 वार्तायां संश्रितस्तात लोकोऽयं सुखमेधते ॥

*kaccinna caurairlubdhairvā kumārāiḥ strībaleṇa vā
 tvayā vā pīdyate rāṣṭraṃ kaccit tuṣṭāḥ kṛṣīvalāḥ
 kaccid rāṣṭre tadāgāni pūrṇāni ca brhanti ca
 bhāgaśo viniviṣṭāni na kṛṣirdevamātrkā
 kaccinna bhaktam bījam ca karṣakasyāvasīdati
 pratyekam ca śatam vṛddhyā dadāsyuṇamanugraham
 kaccit svanuṣṭhitā tāta vārtā te sādhubhirjanaiḥ
 vārtāyām saṃśritastāta loko 'yam sukhamedhate³²*

Have you ensured that the people of the country are not being oppressed by the thieves, the greedy, the princes or the women of the kingly household, or even by you yourself? And, have you ensured that the cultivators are contentedly at ease?

Have you ensured that in every part of the lands large irrigation tanks have been constructed, that these are brimming with water, and that agriculture is not left at the mercy of the gods of rain alone?

Have you ensured that the cultivators have not exhausted their seed or food; and that, through your generosity, they are offered loans at the rate of one percent?

³² Mahā sabhā 5.77-80, p. 681.

PROTECTOR OF VĀRTĀ

O dear one, have you ensured that vārtā is being carried out well by men of honour and virtue? Because, happiness and prosperity in the world are founded in vārtā.

In the Vālmikīyarāmāyaṇa, when Bharata visits Śrīrāma in Citrakūṭa, Śrīrāma questions him about the state of affairs in Ayodhyā in the same vein as we have heard Nārada questioning Yudhiṣṭhira above. Śrīrāma asks:

कच्चिच्चैत्यशतैर्जुष्टः सुनिविष्टजनाकुलः ।
देवस्थानैः प्रपाभिश्च तटाकैश्चोपशोभितः ।
प्रहृष्टनरनारीकः समाजोत्सवशोभितः ।
सुकृष्टसीमापशुमान् हिंसाभिरभिवर्जितः ।
अदेवमातृको रम्यः श्वापदैः परिवर्जितः ।
परित्यक्तो भयैः सर्वैः खनिभिश्चोपशोभितः ।
विवर्जितो नरैः पापैर्मम पूर्वैः सुरक्षितः ।
कच्चिज्जनपदः स्फीतः सुखं वसति राघव ॥

*kacciccaityaśatairjuṣṭaḥ suniviṣṭajanākulaḥ
devasthānaiḥ prapābhiṣca taṭākaiścopaśobhitāḥ
prahrṣṭanaranārikāḥ samājotsavaśobhitāḥ
sukṛṣṭasīmāpaśumān himsābhirabhivarjitāḥ
adevamātrko ramyaḥ svāpadaīḥ parivarjitāḥ
parityakto bhayaīḥ sarvaiḥ khanibhiścopaśobhitāḥ
vivarjito naraīḥ pāpāirmama pūrvaiḥ surakṣitāḥ
kaccijjanapadaḥ sphītaḥ sukhāṁ vasati rāghava*³³

O Bharata of the raghukula, how is our janapada, Kośaladeśa? Kośaladeśa—which teems with people; which is adorned with numerous temples, fountains and tanks; where men and women are joyously contented; where there is a continuous glow of social festivity; where there is an abundance of healthy animals that are good at ploughing; where all violence is forbidden; where agriculture is not dependent upon the mercy of rain-gods; where natural beauty abounds and there are no beasts of prey; where there is no fear of any kind; where minerals and precious

³³ Rāmāyaṇa ayodhyā 100.43–46, p. 446.

stones are found in plenty; which deśa is completely free of all sin; and which has been carefully looked after by our ancestors—such Kośaladeśa of ours, does it continue to abound in plenty and prosperity?

And Śrīrāma follows up this intensely solicitous enquiry about the state of his people, with specific advice about the way Bharata ought to look after vārtā, and especially agriculture:

कच्चित् ते दयिताः सर्वे कृषिगोरक्षजीविनः ।
 वार्तायां संश्रितस्तात लोकोऽयं सुखमेधते ।
 तेषां गुप्तिपरीहारैः कच्चित् ते भरणं कृतम् ॥

*kaccit te dayitāḥ sarve kṛṣigorakṣajīvināḥ
 vārtāyām saṁśritastāta loko 'yaṁ sukhamedhate
 teṣāṁ guptiparīhāraiḥ kaccit te bharaṇam kṛtam*³⁴

Dear Bharata, have you ensured that all those engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry receive your special care and attention? This world attains happiness and prosperity only on the foundation of vārtā. Therefore, look after those who are engaged in vārtā, helping them attain the desirable and avoid the undesirable.

Protector of the times

It is well that the kings in India have been advised by their illustrious peers and by the august sages to arrange affairs such that vārtā is always protected, and to ensure that even the failure of rains and vitiation of seasons do not lead to want of livelihood for the people. Because, in the Indian understanding, the failure of rains and vitiation of seasons are also ultimately the responsibility of the king. Seasons and rains remain orderly in the reign of a righteous king, and during the reign of an unrighteous one even nature begins to deviate from its proper course. The king, according to the classical texts, is the cause of the times, *rājā kālasya kāraṇam*. Bhīṣma endeavours to make this precept unambiguously clear to Yūdhiṣṭhira early in the śāntiparvan:

³⁴ Rāmāyaṇa *ayodhyā* 100.47–48, p. 446.

कालो वा कारणं राज्ञो राजा वा कालकारणम् ।

इति ते संशयो मा भूद् राजा कालस्य कारणम् ॥

*kālo vā kāraṇam rājño rājā vā kākakāraṇam
iti te saṁśayo mā bhūd rājā kālasya kāraṇam*³⁵

Is the king responsible for the times, or are the times responsible for the king? You, Yudhiṣṭhira, should entertain no doubts about this: the king indeed is the cause of the times, it is he who gives rise to good or bad times.

And Bhīṣma goes on to elaborate that while a righteous king rules the earth, the times turn to *ṛṭayuga*: seasons become salubrious, lands yield an abundance, and men and women all live long, healthy and happy lives. Conversely, the reign of an unrighteous king makes the times turn to *kaliyuga*, when rains become scanty, lands fail to support the crops, and men and women live sickly lives and die untimely deaths.

The sin of deprivation and hunger brought on the people by what are said to be natural causes also thus lies on the head of the king. The king, according to the Indian understanding, has the unconditional responsibility of ensuring that everyone within his domain of responsibility is well-fed and cared for; and failure to ensure freedom from hunger and want, for whatever reason, inevitably leads to an ignominious end to his reign. Utathya, in the context we have quoted earlier, sternly warns king Māṇdhātā that: hunger of large numbers would consume the king:

युक्ता यदा जानपदा भिक्षन्ते ब्राह्मणा इव ।

अभीक्षणं भिक्षुरूपेण राजानं घ्नन्ति तादृशाः ॥

*yuktā yadā jānapadā bhikṣante brāhmaṇā iva
abhikṣṇam bhikṣurūpeṇa rājānam ghnanti tādrśāḥ*³⁶

When the people of the country adopt the garb of beggars and go around begging like *brāhmaṇas*, then they certainly destroy the king.

³⁵ Mahā *sānti* 69.79, p. 4607.

³⁶ Mahā *sānti* 91.23, p. 4660.

Bhīṣma's and Utathya's descriptions, of the times brought on by the ascendance of an unrighteous king, are in fact similar to those of yugakṣaya, the state of decadence that the world reaches when the kaliyuga is far advanced. The condition of the world at such a time is narrated in graphic detail by ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya for the edification of Yudhiṣṭhira, in the vanaparvan, thus:

अट्टशूला जनपदाः शिवशूलाश्चतुष्पथाः ।
केशशूलाः स्त्रियश्चापि भविष्यन्ति युगक्षये ॥

*attasūlā janapadāḥ śivaśūlāścatuspathāḥ
keśasūlāḥ striyaścāpi bhaviṣyanti yugakṣaye*³⁷

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

युगान्ते हुतभुक् चापि सर्वतः प्रञ्चलिष्यति ।
पानीयं भोजनं चापि याचमानास्तदाध्वगाः ।
न लप्स्यन्ते निवासं च निरस्ताः पथि शेरते ॥

*yugānte hutabhuk cāpi sarvataḥ prañcaliṣyati
pānīyaṁ bhojanam cāpi yācamānāstadādhvagāḥ
na lapsyante nivāsam ca nirastāḥ pathi śerate*³⁸

When kaliyuga is about to end, an all consuming fire shall burn all around. The travellers who seek shall not receive even food, water or shelter; and, refused from all sides, they shall be seen lying around on the roads.

Such is the state of affairs, when the kaliyuga reaches its culmination; and such is the condition of the times when an unrighteous king begins to rule. The king as a great gṛhastha ought to ensure that such conditions do not arise, that large numbers do not move around looking for food and shelter, and the ordinary gṛhasthas do not reach such a state of deprivation and want that they refuse food and shelter to a seeker.

³⁷ Mahā vana 190.52, p. 1497.

³⁸ Mahā vana 190.83-84, p. 1499.

On the sword's edge

The role of the king in the Indian perception is indeed difficult. In return for the right to wield *ṣatra* and receive a severely restricted proportion of the produce, he is expected to take responsibility for the protection of *vārtā* and *dharma*, for the orderliness of the times and the seasons, and for the elimination of want of all kinds. He is in fact expected to merge his interest, his happiness, and probably his very self, with that of the people. As *Kauṭalya* puts it:

प्रजासुखे सुखं राज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम् ।

नात्मप्रियं हितं राज्ञः प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम् ॥

*prajāśukhe sukham rājñāḥ prajānām ca hite hitam
nātmapriyam hitam rājñāḥ prajānām tu priyam hitam*³⁹

Happiness of the people is the happiness of the king, their welfare is his welfare; what is good for the king is not what pleases him, but what pleases the people.

And in *Bhavabhūti's* renowned literary classic, the *Uttararāmacarita*, sage *Aṣṭāvakra* conveys sage *Vasiṣṭha's* advice to *Śrīrāma* on the discipline of the kings, thus:

युक्तः प्रजानामनुरञ्जने स्याः स्वस्माद्यशो यत्परमं धनं वः ॥

*yuktaḥ prajānāmanurañjane syāḥ
svasmādyāśo yatparamam dhanam vaḥ*⁴⁰

Apply yourself to ensuring the happiness of the people; because, for a king, the *yaśas*, virtue, arising from the happiness of the people is of far greater value than even the preservation of his own self.

To which, *Śrīrāma* replies:

स्नेहं दयां च सौख्यं च यदि वा जानकीमपि ।

आराधनाय लोकस्य मुञ्चतो नास्ति मे व्यथा ॥

³⁹ *Arthaśāstra* 1.19.43, p. 59.

⁴⁰ *Uttararāmacarita* 1.11, p. 10.

PROVIDER OF THE UNPROVIDED

*sneham dayām ca saukhyam ca yadi vā jānakīmapi
ārāadhanāya lokasya muñcato nāsti me vyathā*⁴¹

If I have to deprive myself of all love, compassion and comfort, and even if I have to give up Jānakī, my wife, in order to please the people, it shall give me no pain.

Such is the living demanded of the kings in classical India. Bhīṣma, in a short and extraordinarily intense chapter of anuśāsanaparvan, summarizes the hard discipline of the kings thus:

रौद्रं कर्म क्षत्रियस्य सततं तात वर्तते ।

तस्य वैतानिकं कर्म दानं चैवैह पावनम् ॥

*raudram karma kṣatriyasya satatam tāta vartate
tasya vaitānikam karma dānam caiveha pāvanam*⁴²

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

वृद्धबालधनं रक्ष्यमन्धस्य कृपणस्य च ।

न स्वातपूर्वं कुर्वीत न रुदन्ती धनं हरेत् ।

हतं कृपणवित्तं हि राष्ट्रं हन्ति नृपश्रियम् ।

दद्याच्च महतो भोगान् क्षुद्भयं प्रयुदेत् सताम् ।

येषां स्वादूनि भोज्यानि समवेक्ष्यन्ति बालकाः ।

नाश्रन्ति विधिवत् तानि किं नु पापतरं ततः ।

यदि ते तादृशो राष्ट्रे विद्वान् सीदेत् क्षुधा द्विजः ।

भ्रूणहत्यां च गच्छेथाः कृत्वा पापमिवोत्तमम् ।

धिकं तस्य जीवितं राज्ञो राष्ट्रे यस्यावसीदति ।

द्विजोऽन्यो वा मनुष्योऽपि शिबिराह वचो यथा ।

यस्य स्म विषये राज्ञः स्नातकः सीदति क्षुधा ।

अवृद्धिमेति तद्राष्ट्रं विन्दते सहराजकम् ।

क्रोशन्त्यो यस्य वै राष्ट्रादिभ्रयन्ते तरसा स्त्रियः ।

क्रोशतां पतिपुत्राणां मृतोऽसौ न च जीवति ॥

⁴¹ Uttararāmacarita 1.12, p. 10.

⁴² Mahā anuśāsana 61.4, p. 5661.

*vr̥ddhabāladhanam raksyamandhasya kṛpaṇasya ca
na khātapūrvam kurvīta na rudantī dhanam haret
hr̥tam kṛpaṇavittam hi rāṣṭram hanti nṛpaśriyam
dadyācca mahato bhogān ksudbhayam pranudet satām
yeṣām svādūni bhojyāni samaveksyanti bālakāḥ
nāśnanti vidhivat tāni kim nu pāpataram tataḥ
yadi te tādr̥ṣo rāṣṭre vidvān sīdet kṣudhā dvijah
bhrūṇahatyām ca gacchethāḥ kṛtvā pāpamivottamam
dhik tasya jīvitam rājño rāṣṭre yasyāvasīdati
dviḥjo'nyo vā manuṣyo'pi śibirāha vaco yathā
yasya sma viṣaye rājñah snātakāḥ sīdati kṣudhā
avr̥ddhimeti tadrāṣṭram vindate saharājakam
krośantyo yasya vai rāṣṭrāddhriyante tarasā striyah
krośatām patiputrāṇām mṛto'sau na ca jīvati⁴³*

The king must protect the wealth of the old, the young, the blind and the poor. And he must not take away anything from the helpless women, nor from the cultivators whose crops are grown on waters from wells that they have dug with their own effort.

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

When young children eagerly watch the delicious meals of others, and are not offered the same food with all ceremony and care, what indeed can be a sin greater than that?

O king, if even one learned brāhmaṇa in your country suffers from the pangs of hunger, then you shall suffer the fate of those who have committed the sin of killing a child in the womb, or worse. As rājā Śibi has said, if there be a king in whose kingdom a twice-born or any one else is found suffering from hunger, then the life of such a king is indeed forfeit.

A king in whose kingdom even one snātaka, one person formally equipped in the learning of his discipline, suffers

⁴³ Mahā anuśāsana 61.25-31, pp. 5662-3.

from hunger, that rāṣṭra stops prospering and the kingdom is lost to others.

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

And, Bhīṣma adds:

अरक्षितारं हर्तारं विलोसारमनायकम् ।
 तं वै राजकलिं हन्युः प्रजाः सन्नह्य निर्वृणाम् ।
 अहं वो रक्षितेत्युक्त्वा यो न रक्षति भूमिपः ।
 स संहत्य निहन्तव्यः श्वेव सोन्माद आतुरः ॥

*araksitāraṁ hartāraṁ viloptāramanāyakam
 taṁ vai rājakalim hanyuh prajāḥ sannahya nirghṛṇam
 aham vo raksitetyuktva yo na raksati bhūmipah
 sa samhatya nihantavyaḥ śveva sonmāda āturaḥ*⁴⁴

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

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

⁴⁴ Mahā anusāsana 61.32–33, pp. 5663.