



## EPILOGUE I

*annam̐ bahu kurvīta*

### India follows the Discipline

The discipline of having a plenty of food and sharing it in plenty before partaking of it oneself, that was taught by the ṛṣis and practised by the kings, tapasvins and the ordinary gṛhasthas of classical India, became an indelible part of our lore and polity. India, for long ages, from the ancient times up to almost the present, and in all her multifarious regions and cultures, continued to follow the discipline of sharing before eating, both in thought and practice. Literature from different regions continued to tell the stories of great sacrifices and great yajñas undertaken to assuage the hunger of all, and the kings throughout history continued to organize the polity around the central theme of producing and sharing in abundance.

#### *The tapas of Āputran*

Thus, Maṇimekalai, the Tamil Buddhist epic, tells the story of Āputran, who preferred to die of hunger rather than eat alone from the inexhaustible pot that he held in his hands.<sup>1</sup> Maṇimekalai is an epic from an age far removed from that of the vedas, upaniṣads and itihāsas. And unlike its great twin, Śilappadikāram, it is an intently sectarian epic: the author, Śattanār, consciously and persistently tries to distance himself from the vaidika tradition, from the people whom he contemptuously refers to as *nānmarai mākkal*,<sup>2</sup> the beasts of the four secrets, and by similar other epithets. Yet, Āputran of Maṇimekalai seems to have imbibed the discipline of

<sup>1</sup> Maṇimekalai, chapters 13–14, pp. 274–296.

<sup>2</sup> Maṇimekalai 13.69, p. 275.

sharing before eating so deeply that his tapas can be compared only with that of the uñchavṛtti brāhmaṇa and the dhārmika pigeon of the Mahābhārata.

Āputran, according to the story told in the epic, was the son of Śāli, the wife of a brāhmaṇa of Vārāṇasī. Śāli had left her husband's house in Vārāṇasī, and was on a pilgrimage to Kumārī, on the southern end of Bhāratavaraṣa. While she was on the road, her pregnancy came to term, and she was delivered of a child, a son, in the darkness of night, near a village in the deep south. Since she had nowhere to return, she abandoned the child in an isolated meadow and continued on her pilgrimage.

A cow heard the cries of the abandoned child. She came up to the child, comforted him by licking him with her tongue, and nursed him with her sweet milk. The cow thus protected and looked after the child for seven days. That is how he came to be known as Āputran, the son of a cow.

At the end of seven days, the child was sighted by a brāhmaṇa from a nearby village. The brāhmaṇa and his wife adopted the child as their own, and prayerfully announced the birth of a male heir. The child grew up amongst the brāhmaṇa kinsmen, and was duly trained in vaidika learning.

However, one day Āputran came into conflict with the brāhmaṇas of the village over a cow. Amidst the accusations and recriminations that followed, the events of his birth and abandonment were revealed by another brāhmaṇa who had heard the story from Śāli herself, whom he met while she was grieving for her son on the way back from her pilgrimage. The brāhmaṇa had heard the story, but had kept quiet till then.

Āputran left the home and the village of his adoptive parents, and went to the city of Madurai, renowned for its great wealth. He took shelter in the front courtyard of the temple of the goddess of learning, Cintādevī, which is another name for Sarasvatī. While living there, he used to take his begging bowl and visit the excellent and generous houses of that great southern city. Returning to the temple after collecting alms, he would call out to the blind, the deaf, the lame, the sick, and all those who had none else to look after them; he would lovingly feed them with what he had begged; and would himself eat only what was left after all the others had

had their fill. And then he, the protector of dharma, would sleep using the begging bowl as his pillow.

One day, late in the night, when Āputran was sleeping thus, there arrived some travellers, hungry and exhausted from a difficult journey. Āputran, who begged everyday for his own food, obviously had nothing to feed his guests at that odd hour. He was greatly distressed. And seeing him in such distress, the goddess Cintādevī herself appeared and gave him an inexhaustible bowl, saying that even if the whole land were to be famished, the bowl would never be exhausted, and that the hands of the receivers of food from that bowl might begin to hurt from the receiving, but the food in the bowl would never come to an end.

Āputran worshipfully received the bowl from the goddess, and fed the travellers who had arrived at his abode. From then onwards, he began to use the bowl to eliminate hunger all around. Men, animals and birds flocked around him, and their happy noises sounded like the chirping of birds on a fruit-laden tree. He assuaged the hunger of all.

Āputran's feeding of the hungry was so great that Indra, the king of gods, began to feel jealous. He appeared before Āputran in the form of a feeble old man, and offered to fulfil all his wishes. But Āputran laughed at him, saying: "This divine bowl removes all hunger, and brings happiness on faces racked with pain. Compared to this joy of giving, what can the king of gods offer me? Food to eat? Clothes to wear? Or, young maidens for company?"<sup>3</sup>

Thus scoffed at by Āputran, Indra resolved to bless the earth with a great plenty, so that there might be none anywhere in want of food, and thus none to receive food from the hands of Āputran. With Indra's blessings, it began to rain plentifully, the lands flourished, and people forgot what it was to be hungry. And, therefore none came to the temple courtyard anymore to partake of food from the divine vessel.

Āputran took his bowl, and went from town to town in search of hungry people, to whom he might offer food. But he could find none. People everywhere mocked at him: they had so little need of food from the divine bowl.

Then, some sailors, who had come from across the seas, told him that rains had failed in the land of Śāvaka, and people there were

<sup>3</sup> Maṇimekalai 14.44-48, p. 295.

dying of hunger. Āputran immediately joined them and embarked on the ship going to Śāvaka, which is probably the Java of today. On the way, weather turned bad, and the ship dropped anchor at the island of Maṇipallavam. Āputran got off the ship and began to wander around on the island. Later, in the dark of the night, the sailors, assuming that he had already boarded the ship, sailed away.

Āputran was left alone on that uninhabited island. He had his inexhaustible bowl with him, but there was none there with whom he could share his food; and without first giving food to others, how could he eat himself from that divine bowl? He said to himself, “This bowl was meant to nourish people, I cannot possibly nourish myself alone from it. The fruits of my tapas are indeed exhausted. What then is the good of carrying this bowl?”<sup>4</sup>

He dropped the bowl into the pure waters of a lake, called Gomuḁhī, and taking up the vow of fasting, gave up his life on the island of Maṇipallavam.

That divine bowl later came into the hands of Maṇimekalai, the heroine of the epic, and she too gained great fame as the assuager of the hunger of all. Āputran was reborn in the womb of a cow belonging to the king of Śāvaka, and ruled Śāvaka as the wise king Puṇyarājan.

Āputran obviously knew the terrible fate awaiting those who, even when blessed by the gods with an abundance, fail to share it with others, and eat alone. Left alone on an uninhabited island with the inexhaustible bowl in his hands, he chose to die rather than partake of the abundance of the bowl for himself alone.

### *The Yajña of Harṣavardhana*

The discipline of sharing was not merely enshrined in the literary epics of the period following the classical ages, it was also at the core of the polity and guided the practice of the kings. Amongst the great kings that have ruled India in this period, one of the most revered is Harṣavardhana, partly because we know the most about his reign, mainly from the detailed records of the Chinese scholar, Hiuen-Tsiang, who visited India during his time. And what is most widely known about Harṣavardhana is that every few years

<sup>4</sup> Maṇimekalai 14.87-90, p. 296.

he emptied his treasury and distributed all the accumulated riches of the empire amongst the people.

The biography of Hiuen-Tsiang compiled by his disciples, Śramaṇas Hwui Li and Yen-Tsung, narrates in minute detail the great yajña of Harṣavardhana that took place during the visit of Hiuen-Tsiang, which the revered scholar himself attended on the personal invitation of Harṣavardhana. And what Hiuen-Tsiang describes seems no different from the descriptions of the yajñas of the great kings of the classical times. Below, we reproduce the description of the yajña of Harṣavardhana, who is referred to here as Śilāditya-rāja, from a nineteenth century english translation of the Chinese work:<sup>5</sup>

“The Master of the Law [Hiuen-Tsiang], first taking leave of the priests from the Nālanda convent, having taken his books and images, on the 19th day, the conference being ended, paid his respects to the king [Śilāditya-rāja] with a view to his departure home.

“The king said: ‘Your disciple, succeeding to the royal authority, has been lord of India for thirty years and more: I have constantly regretted the small increase to my religious merit, resulting from a want of previous good deeds. In consequence of this I have accumulated every kind of treasure and precious substance in the kingdom of Prayāga, and between the banks of the two rivers, (i.e., the Jumnā and Ganges), I have established a great religious convocation every five years, to attend which all the Śramans and Brahmans of the five Indies are invited, and besides these the poor and the orphans and the destitute; on this occasion during seventy-five days the great distribution of alms called the Mokṣa is attended to; I have completed five of these assemblies and am now about to celebrate the sixth: why does not the Master delay his departure till then, and so, by witnessing the spectacle, rejoice with us?’

“The Master answered, ‘Bodhisattva by meritorious conduct and by wisdom prepared himself (*for enlightenment*); the wise man having obtained the fruit (*of his conduct*), does not forget the root (*of his happiness*); if your Majesty does not grudge his treasure for the good of others, how can Hiuen-Tsiang grudge a short delay (*in his departure*). I ask leave, therefore, to accompany your Majesty to your journey.’

<sup>5</sup> Hiuen-Tsiang, pp. 183-7.

“The king hearing this was delighted, and on the twenty-first day he went forward, conducting him to the kingdom of Po-lo-ye-kia (Prayāga), and proceeded to the great-distribution arena. This was bounded on the north by Ganges (*King-kia*), and on the south by the Jumnā (*Yen-mu-na*). These two rivers coming from the north-west and flowing eastward, unite their streams in this kingdom.

“On the west of the place of junction of the two rivers there is a great plain some fourteen or fifteen *li* in circuit. It is flat and even like a mirror. From days of old the various kings have frequented this spot for the purpose of practising charity: and hence the name given to it, the ‘*Arena of Charitable Offerings*.’ There is a tradition which says that it is more advantageous to give one mite in charity in this place than a thousand in any other place: and therefore from old times this place has been held in honour.

“The king directed them to portion out on this space a square enclosure for distributing the charitable offerings, enclosed by a bamboo hedge 1000 paces each side, and in the middle to erect many scores of thatched buildings in which to deposit all the treasures (*intended for distribution*); to wit, gold, silver, fine pearls, red glass, the precious substance called the *Ti-tsing-chu* (the Indranīla pearl), the *Ta-tsing-chu* (the Mahānīla pearl), & c. He constructed, moreover, by the side of these, several hundred store-houses (*long buildings*) in which to place the silk and cotton garments, the gold and silver money, and so on.

“Outside the enclosing hedge, he caused to be made places for partaking of food. In front of the various depositories for treasure, he, moreover, erected some hundred or so long buildings arranged like the marketplaces of our capital, in which some thousand people might sit down for rest.

“Some time before these preparations the king had summoned by decree, through the five Indies, the Śramans, heretics, Nirgranthas, the poor, the orphans, and the solitary (*bereaved*), to come together to the Arena of Charity, to receive the prepared gifts.

“As the Master of the Law had not yet returned from the assembly at Kanyākubja, he now hastened to the place of the distribution of charity. The kings of eighteen kingdoms, moreover, followed in the suite of the royal monarch with a like purpose. Arrived at the spot they found a body of people amounting to 500,000, or so, already arrived.

“Śilāditya-rāja pitched his tent on the north bank of the Ganges. The king of South India, *Tu-lu-po-pa-cha* (Dhruvabāṭṭa or Dhruvabhāṭa), located himself on the west of the junction of the rivers. Kumāra-rāja occupied the south side of the river Jumnā, by the side of a flowering grove. All the recipients of bounty occupied the ground to the west of the position of Dhruvabāṭṭa-rāja.

“On the morrow morning, the military followers of Śilāditya-rāja, and of Kumāra-rāja, embarked in ships, and the attendants of Dhruvabāṭṭa-rāja mounted their elephants, and so, arranged in an imposing order, they proceeded to the place of the appointed assembly. The kings of the eighteen countries joined the cortège according to arrangement.

“On the first day of the first period, they installed the image of Buddha within one of the thatched buildings on the field of charity. They then distributed precious articles of the first quality, and clothing of the same character, and offered exquisite meats, whilst they scattered flowers to the sound of music. At the close of the day they retired to their tents.

“The second day they installed the image of Āditya-deva, and distributed precious things and clothing in charity, to half the amount of the previous day.

“The third day they installed the image of Īśvara-deva, and distributed gifts as on the day before.

“On the fourth day they gave gifts to 10,000 of the religious community, arranged in a hundred ranks. Each received 100 pieces of gold, one pearl, one cotton garment, various drinks and meats; flowers and perfumes. After the distribution they retired.

“The fifth arrangement was the bestowal of gifts to the Brahmans, which lasted for twenty days.

“The sixth turn related to the heretics, which lasted ten days.

“The next occasion was the bestowal of alms on those who came from distant spots to ask for charity: this lasted for ten days.

“The eighth distribution was to the poor and the orphans and destitute, which occupied a month.

“By this time the accumulation of five years was exhausted. Except the horses, elephants, and military accoutrements which were necessary for maintaining order and protecting the royal estate, nothing remained. Besides these the king freely gave away his gems and goods, his clothing and necklaces, ear-rings, bracelets, chaplets,

neck-jewel and bright head-jewel, all these he freely gave without stint.

“All being given away, he begged from his sister an ordinary second-hand garment, and having put it on he paid worship to the Buddhas of the ten regions, and as he exulted with joy with his hands closed in adoration, he said: ‘In amassing all this wealth and treasure I ever feared that it was not safely stored in a strong place; but now having bestowed this treasure in the field of religious merit, I can safely say it is well bestowed. Oh that I (*Śilāditya*) may in all my future births ever thus religiously give in charity to mankind my stores of wealth, and thus complete in myself the ten independent powers (*daśabalas*) [of a Buddha].’”

Almost every aspect of this description of the great distribution that Harṣavardhana undertook every five years recalls to memory the descriptions of the great yajñas of the kings of classical antiquity. Like them, Harṣavardhana chooses yajña grounds at a sacred place outside his capital: his choice is Prayāga on the greatly sanctified confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā, which by his time had come to be known as the “Arena of Charity”. Like them he invites all people to his yajña and sends urgent summons “through the five Indies” inviting “the Śramans, heretics, Nirgranthas, the poor, the orphans, and the solitary (*bereaved*), to come together to the Arena of Charity, to receive the prepared gifts.” Like the classical kings he makes arrangements for the stay and feeding of great multitudes. And, after all this preparation, when he proceeds to the yajña grounds, he, like the great kings of the classical ages, is accompanied by all the great kings of India: eighteen of them follow him. And finally, as the yajña proceeds, the feeding and the giving continues unendingly, till all have been satiated and all the riches of the empire have been exhausted.

Thus did the kings of historical times emulate the discipline followed by the kings of classical antiquity. Thus did India follow the discipline of sharing. The fact that this description of the great yajña of Harṣavardhana, that reads so much like the yajñas of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, is provided by a Chinese scholar and a great teacher of Buddhism, who is referred to by his disciples as the Master of the Law and who refers to the non-Buddhist people he encounters as the heretics, makes it especially impressive.



## THE CHATRAMS OF THANJAVUR

### *The Chatrams of Thanjavur*

The kings and the people of India, it seems, continued to follow the discipline of sharing up to the recent times. The accounts of early British administrators, from the late-eighteenth century onwards, repeatedly mention the institutions of hospitality and sharing that they found flourishing throughout India, from Kedaranath in the north, to Jaipur and Udaipur in the west, to Puri in the east, and to Thanjavur and Ramesvaram in the deep south. These institutions are a matter of concern to the British, especially because they find a substantial part of the public revenues committed to the running of such institutions. The British administrators are under pressure to curtail the expenditure on these institutions and to abrogate the resources thus freed to the revenues of the British state. That is why they keep fretting about these institutions for almost half a century, and in the process leave a record of how strongly the discipline of sharing had been institutionalized in the traditional Indian polity, and how vigorously these institutions functioned till they were uprooted by the alien rulers.

One of the more detailed accounts of the way such institutions were run comes from Thanjavur. A large part of the coastal lands and port-duties in Thanjavur, it seems, was assigned to chatrams and mathams, the institutions of hospitality and learning prevalent in the Tamil lands, which were managed by the queens of the royal household. The British who, after annexing Thanjavur in 1799, were engaged in recording and resuming the revenues assigned for different functions and individuals, undertook an enquiry into the circumstances under which the coastal lands and revenues from the ports had come to be assigned to the queens. In response to such enquiry the Raja of Thanjavur, Sarafjee Maharaja, wrote a letter to the British resident apprising him in detail of the functioning of the chatrams and the importance he attached to these institutions. The letter, in its graphic detail, constitutes an important document of the times. Sarafjee Maharaja writes:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Letter of the Raja of Thanjavur to Benjamin Torin, resident at Thanjavur, dated 20.1.1801, Tamilnadu State Archives, *Proceedings of the Board of Revenue*, 2.2.1801, vol. 271C, pp. 1151-7. The proceedings record an english translation of the letter. We have retained the spellings and punctuation of the original. We are indebted

## INDIA FOLLOWS THE DISCIPLINE

“From the first of my ancestors regular Grants, with the seal attached to them were made of the Lands whether in Servamanium or Serotrium, which were assigned to Individuals for charitable purposes; except when Chetrum or other donations for charitable uses have been given to the Queens of the royal family. In these cases grants have not been made: The reason appears to be that the reigning Rajah was very certain that none of his own ministers, or those of his Sons or successors, would require to see the grants by which the Queens possessed the Land which had been assigned to them for charitable purposes, and consequently these possessions have always been held by perwamy alone.

“The ground along the Sea shore where these charitable institutions are the most numerous, is of a very inferior quality. But it is also the road to Ramiseram and forty thousand persons from all parts of India from Banaras, Oude, Delhe, Arungabad and Poona pass and repass every year; for the accommodation of these travellers principally, the Chetrams have been established, and to each of them a Pagoda, Choultries, and Schools are annexed; I will now explain to you the nature and extent of the Charities dispensed by them – all travellers from the Bramin to the Pariar inclusive, Pilgrims of every description, including Jogues, Jungums, Ateets and Byragies are fed with boiled Rice, those who do not chuse to eat the boiled Rice receive it unboiled with spices & c, these distributions continue till midnight when a bell is rung and proclamation made requiring all those who have not been fed to appear and take the Rice prepared for them.

“The travellers who may be unable to proceed on their journey are fed as long as they remain at the Chetrum.

“In each Chetrum a teacher to each of the four vedums is appointed, and a Schoolmaster, and Doctors, skillfull in the cure of diseases, swellings, and the poison of reptiles; all the orphans of strangers, who may come to the Chetrum are placed under the care of the Schoolmaster – they are also fed three times a day, and once in four days, they are annointed with oil – they receive medicine when they require it, cloths also are given to them and the utmost attention paid to them. They are instructed in the sciences to which they may express a preference, and after having obtained a

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to Sri Dharampal for acquainting us with this and similar material concerning eighteenth century India.

## THE CHATRAMS OF THANJAVUR

competent knowledge of them the expences of their marriage are defrayed.

“Travellers who fall sick at the Chetrum or before their arrival, receive medicines, and the diet proper for them, and are attended with respect and kindness until their recovery.

“The obsequies of those who die during their residence at the Chetrum are performed according to the rites of their cast.

“Milk is provided for infants; pregnant women are entertained with kindness; and if they happen to be delivered at the Chetrum, their expences are defrayed, medicines are given to them and they are permitted to remain in the Chetrum three months after their delivery.

“Those who apply to the Chetrum and state their inability to defray the expence of receiving the Braminical thread, of their marriage, or of the performance of ceremonies, subsequent to their father’s death, receive a sum of money proportionate to the occasion.

“As the land annexed to these Chetrum is in general very poor, it happens frequently from a deficiency of rain, that they do not produce sufficient for the expences; when this is the case my anxiety to prevent any diminution of these excellent charities, which I consider as the most honorable appendage of my dignity, has always induced me to send to them from the Circar both grain and money sufficient to make up the deficiency. After Mr. Harris was appointed to the management of that Soubah, he must remember that I applied to him for a considerable quantity of paddy at different times for the use of the Chetrum.

“These Chetrum are not of recent foundation, the Chetrum of Munmalegoody and some others were founded by my ancestor Pretausbing above forty years ago, and have continued to distribute their Charities ever since. My father, the late Tuljagee Rajah, twenty five or thirty years ago founded the Chetrum of Minmushall, Salutchenah Capoor, and Rajyamul—none of these Chetrum were founded in the Reign of Ameersing or by me since my accession—although these Charitable institutions did not originate with me, I consider them as attached to my house, and essential to my reputation and happiness. The Tanjore country is celebrated over all the world for its Charities, it is called Dherm Raje, and I consider the reputation which reverts upon me through all countries from the appellation, as the most honorable distinction

of my Rank. The Revenues appropriated to the support of these Charities by my Ancestors, and my Father Tuljagee Rajah, have never been included in the public Revenue of the Country. They invariably cherished and supported the Charities; It is my earnest wish to do the same. The superintendence of them has always descended from the elder to the younger Queen. It has remained in the hands of the Senior until her death, and then descended to the wife of the reigning Rajah; I have a perfect confidence that this custom of my ancestors will not be deviated from, and that I shall not suffer the disgrace of seeing it abolished in my Reign.

“The perwangys issued by Pretaupsing and Tuljagee Rajahs previous to the capture of the Fort cannot be found. After the capture of the Fort the Nabob plundered the palace, and carried off all the records in the dufter, from this circumstance no records prior to that date remain. After the Restoration of the Fort, the late Tulljagee Rajah issued a new perwangees for all the ancient Charitable institutions as well as for those established by himself. These are in my possession.

“There is a regular Grant also for Chetoobaba Chetrum.<sup>7</sup>

“What can I write more.”

After having read the description of Harṣavardhana’s yajña recorded by Hiuen-Tsiang, it does not perhaps surprise any more to know that not only the broad concepts but also many of the specific phrases of this letter of the Raja of Thanjavur seem to belong to the vedas and itihāsas. Even in the relatively powerless tone of the letter, he sounds almost like Yudhiṣṭhira at the beginning of his exile, willing to forego all the privileges of kingship, but not the honour of feeding and providing for others.

Like the kings of classical India, the Raja of Thanjavur insists that the charitable institutions are an extension of his household: “I consider them as attached to my house, and essential to my

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<sup>7</sup> This and the other four chatrams mentioned in this letter lie on the coastal road from Pattukottai to Ramesvaram. All the five are identifiable even today, though almost every one of these is in ruins. Munmalegoody refers to what is known as Draupadambalpuram Chatram at Manamerkudi; Minmushall refers to Rajakumarambalpuram Chatram at Minamesal; Salutchenah Capoor refers to Sulakshanambalpuram Chatram at Ammani Chatram; Rajyamul to Mohanambalpuram Chatram at Raja Matham and Chetoobaba Chetrum to the Setubava Chatram at the place of the same name.

reputation and happiness.” In times of scarcity, when the lands attached to the institutions do not produce enough, he provides for these from his own resources: “...my anxiety to prevent any diminution of these excellent charities, which I consider as the most honorable appendage of my dignity, has always induced me to send to them from the Circar both grain and money sufficient to make up the deficiency.” Like the kings of classical antiquity, he insists that it is the running of these institutions of hospitality and learning that entitles his country to be called *dharmarājya*, the land where *dharma* rules, which appellation he values the most: “The Tanjore country is celebrated over all the world for its Charities, it is called *Dherm Raje*, and I consider the reputation which reverts upon me through all countries from the appellation, as the most honorable distinction of my Rank.” Like them, he is fully convinced that the reputation, dignity, distinction and happiness of being a *rājā*, all flow from the opportunity to give food and look after others that the position offers.

The description of feeding and caring at the *chatrams* that the Raja provides is strongly reminiscent of the feeding and caring that used to take place at *Indraprastha* when *Yudhiṣṭhira* ruled there, and which *Draupadī* recalls so nostalgically in her conversation with *Satyabhāmā*. And, when the Raja of *Thanjavur* speaks of the bells that were rung at the *chatrams* at midnight inviting all those who might have remained un-fed to come and take “the Rice prepared for them”, one cannot but be reminded of the feasting that took place in *Yudhiṣṭhira*’s *rājasūyayajña*, where drums heralding the feeding kept sounding continuously.

And, the Raja was writing this letter less than two hundred years ago, in January 1801.

### *Chengalpattu: The polity of sharing*

But the specific institutions of hospitality, that the Raja of *Thanjavur* was trying almost desperately to save, were not the only expressions of the discipline of sharing practised in India then. It seems that the entire polity of eighteenth century India was organized around the principle of sharing. Growing an abundance on the lands and sharing it widely, such as to effectively provide for all the households and institutions associated with the locality and

the region, seems to have formed the basic premise, and also the major instrument, of political, economic and moral organization of the period.

We happen to know in detail about the way such polity of sharing operated in practice in the late eighteenth century, in the region around Madras. This region, referred to as the *Jaghire* in the early British records and later constituted as the Chengalpattu district, was one of the first parts of the country to come under British subjugation. And the British, being new to the governance of India, tried to investigate how the region was being administered till then before beginning to set up their own detailed administrative structures here. The investigations involved an intensive survey, undertaken from 1767 to 1774, of all aspects of life in some two thousand localities of the region. The records of this survey, of which both the original accounts in Tamil and their English summaries have fortuitously been preserved, present a fascinating picture of the functioning of a polity organized around the principle of sharing.<sup>8</sup>

At the time of the harvest, every locality of the region, it seems, undertook an elaborate exercise in sharing. The survey records list about a hundred distinct services and institutions for which shares were taken out from the produce of different localities, and on an average each of the localities took out shares for about thirty of these. The beneficiaries of such sharing, of course, included temples, mathams, chatrams, scholars, teachers, musicians and dancers; but these also included economic services like irrigation and the measurement of corn, and administrative services like registry and militia. Some of these institutions and services were entirely local: the village temple, or the barber and the washerman, functioned for and received shares from a single locality or at most a neighbouring group of two or three; others, like the great temples, the high scholars and the more important of the militia leaders, some of whom received shares from hundreds of localities in the

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<sup>8</sup> Information about the eighteenth century polity of Chengalpattu is based on work in progress at the Centre for Policy Studies, Madras. Summary records of the survey in English are available in the Tamilnadu State Archives at Madras, and the original accounts in Tamil are lodged in the Department of Palm-leaf Manuscripts, Tamil University, Thanjavur.

region, obviously functioned at a level that extended far beyond the locality.

According to the survey records, the shares were taken out at four different stages of harvesting. The first sharing was done before threshing of the harvest, and the second after threshing but before measurement of the grain. These two shares were together called the *svatantram*, and as is obvious, what was given out as *svatantram* was not even counted as part of the harvest. For every bundle of the crop harvested, certain pre-determined fractions of a bundle were set aside for the various recipients of the *svatantram* shares, and similarly for every *kalam* of grain measured, a certain number of *marakkāls* and *paḍis* were taken out for them.<sup>9</sup> The measured harvest thus consisted of what was left after the *svatantram* shares had already been given out.

The third and fourth sharing was done from the threshed and measured grain. The third share was taken out from the whole of the measured produce, while the fourth was deducted from the revenue part of the produce alone. These two shares, called *merai*, seem to have constituted a different set of rights from those established by the *svatantram*. The *svatantram* shares in a locality were generally given out to institutions and functionaries concerned essentially with the locality. The *merai* shares on the other hand were generally drawn for beneficiaries who performed functions and held interests that transcended the locality. The larger temples, the great scholars, the district level administrative officers and the representatives of regional political authority received shares usually in the form of *merai*, and not *svatantram*. The locality temple, the resident astronomer, the school teacher, the doctor, the barber, the washerman and others, received *svatantram*. Administrative and political functionaries of the locality, like the *kaṇakkuppillai*, the village registrar, the *pālayakkārar*, the militia leader, and the *kāṇiyāṭcikkārar*, the leading inhabitants, received both *svatantram* and *merai*. The artificers of a locality also often received shares of both types.

<sup>9</sup> Grain in the region was measured in volume measures: *paḍi* is the basic volume unit; 8 *paḍis* constitute a *marakkāl* and 12 *marakkāls* a *kalam* in Chengalpattu. A *paḍi* of Chengalpattu of that period held about 1.3 kg of paddy. See, *Tables of Weights and Measures & c. and Correct Batty Tables made use of at the Different Ports of East Indies*, London 1778; also *Madras Almanac*, Madras 1795.

This sharing was not merely nominal. On the average about 30 percent of the produce of a locality was taken out through such sharing, and the shares of different services and institutions were such as would provide for their proper maintenance and upkeep. The sharing arrangement in its elaboration in fact seems akin to the budgeting mechanism of a state: through such sharing the locality allocated resources for different functions essential to itself, as well as provided for the larger polity of the region around it. But such budgeting through sharing created a very special kind of polity. In this polity, the locality within itself was indeed the state that arranged and provided for all its internal cultural, political, economic and administrative functions; and at levels of polity beyond itself, the locality was not only the basic constituent unit, but also the constituting authority as it were. By setting aside shares for the trans-locality institutions and services, the localities together both provided for and created the larger levels of polity.

Besides the sharing of the produce of the lands, through the svatantram and merai deductions, there was another kind of sharing practised widely in eighteenth century Chengalpattu. This consisted in assignment of revenue from specified parts of the cultivated lands of a locality to essentially the same set of institutions and services which received shares from the produce. Such assignments, called *mānyams*, were very common, and almost a quarter of the cultivated lands in the region were classified as *mānyam* lands. But since about one-third of the produce of a locality was already taken out as shares of different institutions and individuals, the fraction of the produce that the lands paid as revenue could not have been very significant, and therefore, unlike the share in the produce, this share in the revenue of the lands perhaps was of no great economic value to the recipient.

The *mānyam* arrangement was probably designed for quite another kind of sharing: to have a share in the right to receive revenue after all is to have a share in the sovereignty. And sharing of sovereignty among many was a cherished ideal of the classical Indian polity. Rāmarājya for the Indians is always the period when rājakulas, the sharers of sovereignty, blossom and flourish. Through the *mānyam* arrangements, the Chengalpattu polity, it seems, conferred a share of sovereignty upon a surprisingly large number of institutions and households in the region.



## PRODUCING THE PLENTY

These arrangements of sharing, of the produce and the revenue, in fact covered all institutions of the polity and all households, except those of the direct producers of wealth – the cultivators, the traders and the weavers. These bearers of the *vārtā*, and especially the cultivators, of course, provided for themselves as well as for all the others, and thus were sovereign in themselves. This is how the classical ideas of sharing and providing for all were incorporated into a functioning polity.

### *Producing the plenty to share*

Such generous sharing could have been practised only in a polity that produced in plenty. And the Chengalpattu survey records indeed offer a picture of abundant agricultural prosperity. From the data available in the survey, it is possible to estimate production for some 200,000 *kāṇis* of land, which together produced more than 20,00,000 *kalam*s of paddy and other grains for about 46,000 households. A *kāṇi* measured about half a hectare of land and a *kalam* about 125 kilograms of paddy or other grains. The total produce of the land thus amounted to about 5.5 tons of foodgrains per household per year, which represents a very high level of prosperity, not merely by the Indian standards of today – which unfortunately happen to be abysmally low – but also by the standards of the most prosperous in the world.

Average productivity of cultivated lands in the region at that period was, however, not very high. The overall average of 10 *kalam*s per *kāṇi*, or about 2.5 tons per hectare, is indeed somewhat higher than the average productivity in India today, which remains below 2 tons per hectare. But, the lands in India are known to have produced a great abundance. Inscriptions from the Thanjavur region in Tamilnadu from 900 to 1200 A.D. speak of lands paying revenue of the order of 100 *kalam*s per *veli* and sometimes even 120 *kalam*s per *veli*. A *veli* of Thanjavur equalled 5 *kāṇis* of Chengalpattu; the *kalam* of Thanjavur was relatively small, and is usually estimated to be around half of the Chengalpattu *kalam*. Most historians estimate the rate of tax during that period at no more than 25 percent of the gross produce, but going by the injunctions of the classical texts the tax rate is more likely to have been one-sixth of the produce. The production was thus between 600 to 720 *kalam*s per *veli*

by the Thanjavur measure, or between 60 to 72 kalams per kāṇi by the Chengalpattu measure, which amounts to around 15 to 18 tons per hectare.<sup>10</sup>

There are also a few inscriptions of this period from regions contiguous to Thanjavur that record not the revenue, but the actual gross produce of the lands. For example an inscription of around 1100 A.D. records that lands in a village of South Arcot produced around 580 kalams per veli, or about 14.5 tons of paddy per hectare. Another inscription of 1325 A.D. from Ramanathapuram records as high a production as 800 kalams per veli, or 20 tons per hectare, of paddy.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly high levels of productivity were reported by early British observers from many parts of the country. Thus, for productivity of foodgrains in the region around Allahabad, an European observer in 1803 reported a value of 111 bushels a year per acre, amounting to about 7.5 tons per hectare;<sup>12</sup> and for paddy in Coimbatore, a British administrator reported yields of 13.0 tons per hectare in 1807.<sup>13</sup>

The relatively better lands in the eighteenth century Chengalpattu also showed a level of productivity which was much higher than the region's average of 10 kalams per kāṇi, or 2.5 tons per hectare. Best of the lands in the region produced as much as 35 kalams to a kāṇi, or about 9 tons per hectare. And, average productivity for 63 localities of relatively intense agriculture, which produced more than 5000 kalams of grains each, and accounted for one-sixth of the total cultivation and about a third of the total produce, amounted to 18 kalams per kāṇi, or 4.5 tons per hectare.

Thus did India follow the discipline of producing a plenty and of sharing it in plenty. Indians, it seems, sustained the discipline and until very recently lived up to the classical injunctions: *annam bahū kurvīta. tadvrataṃ*. And, *na kāmāna vasataṃ pratyācakṣīta. tadvrataṃ*.

<sup>10</sup> Taking the rate of revenue at 25%, and reducing the kalam to the smallest measure that might be supported by historical evidence, the estimate of productivity can be reduced to between 4 to 5 tons per hectare. See, for instance, L.B. Alaev in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 1, Delhi 1984, pp. 231-2.

<sup>11</sup> L.B. Alaev, above, p. 232.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Tenant, *Indian Recreations*, 1803; cited in the *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 4 no. 8, July 1804, p. 323.

<sup>13</sup> See, R. Ratnam, *Agricultural Development in Madras State prior to 1900*, Madras 1966, p. 87.



## EPILOGUE II

### *aṭṭasūlā janapadāḥ*

### Straying from the Discipline

#### *The memory abides*

Not so long ago, when mother would sit down to prepare roṭīs, we, the children of the house, gathered around the hearth and watched. She would take the first ball of dough, touch it with a little ghee, and give it to one of us, to run into the street, find a cow and put the ball of dough in her mouth. Only then would mother put the griddle on the fire; and next she would take a rather small bit of dough, dip it in ghee, wipe the griddle with it, and leave it on the side, to be offered to the ants or the crows later. The next full ball of dough was rolled into a roṭī and put onto the griddle. But this first roṭī mother would cook only on one side, touch it with a little mustard oil, and then it was the turn of another one of us to run and offer it to a dog. The next two roṭīs were cooked and kept aside for the gurudvārā along with a bowl of the day's vegetable curry or dāl. Later, the wife of the gurudvārā priest would come and collect her share. She collected such offerings from perhaps forty houses, and that would have probably sufficed for her family as well as the occasional guest who sought shelter in the gurudvārā.

We were young then, and our appetite used to be sharp. But howsoever hungry we might have been, we had to wait for mother to take out the share of the cow, the crow, the dog and the gurudvārā, before being served. And, in spite of the gnawing feeling of hunger in our stomachs, it somehow felt good to wait. The touch of the warm and wet tongue of the cow as she slurped the ball of dough out of our young hands felt distinctly like a blessing. Offering a specially cooked roṭī to a stray dog filled us with a satisfying feeling of warmth. And when the wife of the gurudvārā priest came to collect her share, the food and the house seemed to have been sanctified.