



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.

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This was not the only food that was shared out from our otherwise simple home, where lunch or dinner almost invariably consisted of a single *dāl* or a vegetable curry to go with the *roṭīs*. But the beggars, of whom about four or five used to call at our door everyday, were always given a handful of flour each. This too was a job for us, the children, and taking out a handful from the pot of flour and pouring it into the cloth bag of the beggar, thoroughly soiling the hand with the flour in the process, used to be a pleasure in itself. Like the wife of the *gurudvārā* priest, the cleaning lady also came and collected her share of *roṭīs* and occasionally a small serving of curry or *dāl*. And it seemed as if food was flowing all day: mother considered it to be an unimaginably bad omen for the vessel of flour or the box of *roṭīs* to get completely empty. At night, when all food was exhausted, mother would make it a point to leave a small bit of *roṭī* in the box.

As we began to grow older, this flow of food began to ebb. The wife of the *gurudvārā* priest began to feel shy about going around collecting food: she preferred the *gurudvārā*'s share to be offered in money. The *roṭī* for the lady who cleaned the streets began to seem too expensive: it was replaced with a substantial increase in our share of her monthly wages, which of course remained much below the price of a *roṭī* a day even after the increase. The handful of flour for the beggars was substituted with a five or ten paisa bit, and later even this inconsequential bit of money came to be grudged, and the beggars more or less stopped coming. And as we began to get educated, and learnt about the new ways, the *roṭī* for the cow and the dog began to look like wanton waste of good food. And the insistence on keeping the pot flowing seemed like some silly superstition.

Times seem to have changed thus in the last thirty or forty years. What mother used to do was of course a highly abbreviated version of what Indians of a more affluent period would have done. She was not performing *pañcamahāyajña* as *Manu* would have prescribed it, nor taking out substantial shares for all, as the people of *Chengalpattu* did in the eighteenth century. Most Indians, as we shall see, had probably lost the prosperity and plenty essential for undertaking the kind of observance that encompasses the whole of creation in its generosity. Yet she was keeping the memory alive. And perhaps till very recently many of the Indians, though not the

relatively resourceful ones, were trying to somehow keep to at least the form of the discipline of sharing before eating that seems to be such an essential characteristic of being Indian. They were in no position to follow what they remembered to be the discipline. But they cherished the memory. The memory remained sacred.

The British break the discipline

Deprecating the Indian manners

Early European observers and British administrators in India repeatedly came across the Indian habit of offering food and hospitality to all those who happen to come to their door or the village, and they often wrote about it in rather deprecating terms. One of the better known among such observers is Abbe J.A. Dubois, the French missionary who arrived in India in 1792 and spent 31 years enjoying the fabled Indian hospitality in the villages of Mysore, pretending all the while to live as one amongst the villagers. The Abbe is revered as the first sociologist of India for his observations on what he calls the “Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies”. And while documenting the manners of the Indians, he writes extensively about the strict discipline that Indians followed in the matter of eating and sharing their food.

The Abbe writes about the elaborate ceremony associated with the meal of a gr̥hastha: about the scrupulous attention that the gr̥hastha paid to hygiene and piety in the matter of eating; about the way he took out shares for the gods, the ancestors and the bhūtas before beginning to eat; and about the way he desired to have as many guests as possible at mealtimes. He particularly notices the care that was exercised in feeding the dependents. “The remains of food”, says the Abbe, “are never put aside. . . , nor are they given to the servants. . . .to be a servant is no degradation. A servant generally eats with his master, and what he left could not be offered to the poor, . . . Rice that is to be given away to the poor. . . is boiled separately.”¹

The Abbe, of course, does not approve of any of this, and much of what he writes reads like an extended spoof on the ways of the

¹ Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, 3rd edition, Oxford 1906, p. 184.

Indians. The good Abbe was probably distracted by the usual prejudice of a foreigner against the ways of an alien people. He was also concerned that such adherence to strict discipline in matters of day-to-day living made the Indians look upon others, especially the Europeans, as uncouth barbarians, and rendered them immune to the blandishments of what to the Abbe seemed to be the infinitely superior civilization and religion of Europe. It was probably this strict and elaborate discipline that the Indian gṛhastha anchored in his civilization followed, that made the Abbe come to the despairing conclusion that Indians would rather be reduced to barbarism than accept the religion of the conquering Europeans. To the great discomfiture of his fellow christian missionaries, he asserts that, “Should the intercourse between individuals of both nations, by becoming more intimate and more friendly, produce a change in the religion and usage of the country, it will not be to turn Christians that they will forsake their own religion, but rather (which in my opinion is a thousand times worse than idolatry) to become mere atheists. . . .”²

Disrupting the polity

The early British administrators harboured similar civilizational antipathy towards the Indian ways. They, however, also had a more mundane objection to the Indian tradition of offering food and hospitality to all comers. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, in the traditional Indian polity that the British encountered here, the precept of caring for others before eating was not left to the whims of mere individuals, but was enshrined in concrete institutional forms. Most localities, thus, assigned specific and substantial shares of their produce to the maintenance of institutions that provided food, shelter and other hospitality to the seeker. A fairly large proportion of the production was thus committed to such institutions, and similar other functions. This put severe strains on the revenue that the British could extract from the lands that came under their control; and therefore the hospitality of the Indians came to be seen as a serious vice.

This, for the early British administrators, was such a serious problem that Richard Wellesely, the British governor-general at the time of the conquest of Mysore, while instructing the British resident

² Cited in the editor’s introduction to the above, p. xxvi.

at Mysore about the affairs of the newly conquered state, was compelled to specifically warn him about this aspect of the Indian polity. In the detailed instructions issued in 1799 and conveyed to the resident by the military secretary, the governor-general writes:³

“But though Hindoo princes are for the most part sufficiently frugal in their immediate personal expences, and though the same spirit of parsimony usually pervades all departments of their Governments, there is one kind of profusion which they are but too apt to practice to an extent that does not unfrequently involve their affairs in general embarrassment, namely the alienation of land in favour of individuals (most commonly Bramins) and of pagodas. His lordship observes that Purniah has already proposed, and obtained the sanction of the late commissioners in Mysore for every considerable endowment of the latter description. His lordship is aware that these are stated to fall very short of what they amounted to before the usurpation of Hyder Alli Khan, but he is also inclined to think that they are at least as liberal as the circumstances of the country will admit of. You must therefore be extremely careful how far you allow any augmentation of these establishments, or any other alienations of the sircar lands on whatever account. It will be proper that you should come to a very explicit understanding with Purniah on this head; letting him plainly know that no grants of the nature in question must ever be made without your approbation, and that there is no instance of mismanagement which would be more likely to alarm his lordship or to impress him with the necessity of enforcing the stipulations of the 4th article of the treaty of Seringapatam than any departure either open or secret from his lordship’s injunction in this particular.”

The 4th article of the treaty of Śrīraṅgaṇapaṭṭaṇam, referred to above, gave the British governor-general the right to issue regulations and ordinances for the internal management of any branch of the government of Mysore, or to bring it, as the terms of the treaty said, “under the direct management of the servants of the said Company Bahadur”.

³ Letter from W. Kirkpatrick, military secretary to the governor-general, to Col. Barry Close, British resident at Mysore, 4.9.1799, in *Wellesely Papers*, British Museum, Add Ms 13669. Extracts reproduced here are from papers kindly made available by Sri Dharampal.

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Bowing to such undisguised threats, Diwan Purniah – who was re-installed as the chief minister of the newly conquered state of Mysore, and who administered the state in the name of the king but on behalf of the British – brought down the resources assigned to what we have been calling the institutions of hospitality and learning from 2,33,954 to 56,993 controy pagodas, in the very first year of the new administration.⁴

The amount of 2,33,954 controy pagodas, which was assigned to temples, mathams and muslim institutions during the reign of Hyder Ali Khan was itself, as the British governor-general acknowledges, far below what would have been allowed under more traditional Indian arrangements, that prevailed before Hyder Ali Khan's accession to power.

Polluting the minds

Such contempt for the ways of the Indians and vigorous exertions to limit the money spent on the institutions of hospitality had their impact. Most of the institutions of hospitality, like all other institutions of Indian polity, began to fall into disuse within a couple of decades of the onset of British rule in any area. Individual adherence to the discipline of sharing before eating of course continued till much later, but it seems that those of the Indians who came in closer contact with the Europeans had begun to imbibe the contempt that the Europeans felt for the ways of the Indians, so that already in 1829, William Bentinck, the then governor-general of the east-India company, could write:⁵

“Recent events, and the occurrences now passing under our eyes, still more clearly justify the persuasion, that whatever change would be beneficial for our native subjects, we may hope to see adopted, in part at least, at no distant period, if adequate means and motives be presented. I need scarcely mention the increasing demand which almost all who possess the means evince, for various articles of convenience and luxury purely European. It is, in many cases,

⁴ See, Major M. Wilks, *Report on the Interior Administration, Resources and Expenditure of the Government of Mysore*, Fort William, Calcutta 1805; reprint, Bangalore 1864, para 185, p. 34.

⁵ *Minute of William Bentinck, 30.5.1829*. Extracts reproduced here are from papers kindly made available by Sri Dharampal.

very remarkable. Even in the celebration of their most sacred festivals, a great change is said to be perceptible in Calcutta. Much of what used, in old times, to be distributed among beggars and Brahmins, is now, in many instances, devoted to the ostentatious entertainment of Europeans; and generally, the amount expended in useless alms is stated to have been greatly curtailed. . . .”

William Bentinck was probably overstating the case. Though the institutionalized sharing of the earlier Indian polity had largely been curbed by then, and though some of the highly resourceful Indians in Calcutta and also perhaps in Delhi and Agra, which by then had been under British domination for more than half a century, had indeed begun to hanker after the European ways, yet avoidance of what he calls useless alms could not have been too widespread: there were hardly many Indians who would have had the means and the temerity to engage in social intercourse with the Europeans or to covet their luxuries. William Bentinck in fact recorded his minute of May 1829, from which we have quoted above, partly to make a case for a greater presence in India of “intelligent and respectable Europeans” to enhance the possibilities of “a more general intercourse” with the “native subjects”.

Those of the Indians who came under the cultural sway of the Europeans, however, did find the hospitality of the Indians amongst one of the many evils of the Indian society that needed to be combated and eliminated: the fight against the evil formed part of their agenda of reform. Thus, the very first issue of Keshub Chandra Sen’s *Sulabh Samachar*, dated November 15, 1870, carried an article against the evil of giving alms. “Giving alms to beggars is not an act of kindness,” the article proclaimed, “because it is wrong to live on another’s charity.” And the article went on to suggest that incapacitated beggars should instead be trained to do “useful things for society.”⁶ This attitude of demanding work of those who do not have enough to eat has over time become a cliché amongst the relatively well-off Indians, especially among those who claim to have acquired a modern and rational consciousness.

⁶ Cited in David Kopf, *The Brahmosamaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton 1979, pp. 107-8.

Institutionalizing callousness

But, even after almost a hundred years of efforts by the British administrators and the Indian reformers to curb the Indian's disposition to share food before partaking of it oneself, the habit remained strong and widespread enough for the famine commission of 1880 to take it into account while deliberating on ways of providing efficient relief in situations of famine. The British administration in India and its revenues were by then fairly secure, and there was no further need for the urgent dismissiveness of a Wellesely or a Bentinck. The famine commissioners, therefore, could dispassionately weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the Indian disposition to look after others. However, the conclusions they arrived at were not much different: for them too this disposition was essentially an evil that could be countenanced in relatively normal times, but which had to be controlled if not entirely eliminated in times of real distress. Thus, in their report of July 7, 1880, the commissioners observe:⁷

“Native society in India is justly famous for its charity. It is owing to the profound sense which is felt by all classes of the religious duty of succouring, according to their means, the indigent and helpless who have claims on them as members of the family, the caste, or the town or village, that in ordinary times no State measures of relief are needed. Native charity, however, does not work according to the English pattern. It does not tend to organization or co-operation among those who bestow it; it consists too much in giving a small dole to numerous applicants rather than in providing completely for the wants of a few applicants. . . . Such charity is to be encouraged at the beginning of distress; . . . but when famine has once set in with severity it may become a serious evil unless it can be brought under some systematic control. . . . When once Government has taken the matter thoroughly in hand and provided relief in one shape or another for all who need it, and a proper inclosed place of residence for all casuals and beggars, street-begging and public distribution of alms to unknown applicants should be discouraged, and if possible entirely stopped.”

⁷ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, London 1880; reprint, Agricole, New Delhi 1989, para 187, pp. 60-1.

Once the state came into the picture, the commissioners wanted the individuals with their spontaneous charitable impulses to simply get out of the way. And even their contributions to the relief effort of the state were unwelcome. Thus, the commissioners go on to recommend that:⁸

“Under the system of Government relief which recognises the responsibility of the State to provide for all who really require relief, there does not appear to be any reason for making an appeal to the public to aid the Government by their contributions. This is a relic surviving from a past state of things, and is unsuitable where efficient relief measures are carried out on a uniform plan designed to give security to the whole population, at the public cost, and on the responsibility of the Government. . . .”

Incidentally, the relief that the commissioners recommended consisted in providing a survival wage, “sufficient for the purposes of maintenance but not more”,⁹ in return for a day’s hard labour at specially organized work sites. For those whose health had deteriorated beyond the possibility of work, the commissioners recommended provision of “dole” after due examination by inspecting officers, and the dole was to be withdrawn as soon as a person, in the eyes of the inspecting officer, began to look fit enough for work. Even from women “who by national custom” were “unable to appear in public”, the commissioners expected work, in the form of spinning cotton for the state, in return for the dole of grains provided to them and their children.¹⁰

Such was the horror that the British administrators felt for the “gratuitous” giving out of food, which for the Indians is the very essence of being human. Giving food without demanding work in return seemed to somehow violate the British sense of ethics and morality: they insisted on elaborate controls on the distribution

⁸ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, above, para 188, p. 61.

⁹ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, above, para 111, p. 36. The imperative of providing a wage that does not exceed the requirements of bare survival is mentioned and discussed again and again in the report. See, especially, para 131, p. 43 and para 184, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, above, para 144, p. 47. The organization of work sites, etc., for the able-bodied is discussed in paras 126-136, pp. 41-5; and provision of gratuitous relief under the supervision of health inspectors, etc., in paras 137-46, pp. 45-8.

of food in times of great distress, even though they noticed “the reluctance which the people exhibit to accept public charity, and the eagerness with which at the earliest opportunity they recur to their own unaided labour for support, . . .”¹¹

The famine commissioners report of 1880 became the basis for the creation of an elaborate bureaucracy for the management of relief and distress, and the judgments and sensibilities of the British thus became institutionalized into state-controlled mechanisms of commanding the supply and distribution of food, that remain with us till today.

Scarcity takes the place of plenty

The Indian discipline of sharing was thus subjected, by the alien rulers and their Indian followers, to a concerted stream of ridicule, contempt and control that began with the coming of the British and did not abate till their departure. In time, the discipline began to weaken, and the will to flounder. But, it is not only the will to share food with others that came under stress during the British period, the capacity to share itself dwindled rapidly.

Decline in productivity of lands

The abundance of food began to turn into a state of acute scarcity within decades of the onset of British rule. As the British began to dismantle the elaborate arrangements of the Indian society and began to extract unprecedented amounts of revenue from the produce of lands, vast areas began to fall out of cultivation and the productivity of lands began to decline precipitously. In the Chengalpattu region where the lands had yielded at least 2.5 tons of paddy per hectare on the average in the 1760's, and where average yields according to the British administrative records had remained around that figure up to 1788 in spite of the devastating wars of the period, productivity had declined to a mere 630 kg per hectare by 1798.¹²

Lionel Place, the British collector of the district at that time, was in fact greatly worried about the decline in productivity and the

¹¹ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, above, para 108, p. 35.

¹² See, R. Ratnam, *Agricultural Development in Madras State prior to 1900*, Madras 1966, p. 11.

consequent difficulty of raising sufficiently large revenues from the land.¹³ He believed that part of the reason for the loss of productivity was to be found in the decrease in the availability of manure, resulting from a sharp decline in the number of sheep, which were being consumed in such large numbers by the Europeans as to “threaten an extermination of the breed”. He also felt that the proximity of the region to the fast expanding city of Madras was depriving the land of straw and dung. But perhaps the most important factor was that under the British dispensation, agriculture had become so un-remunerative that cultivators were loath to cultivate their lands; and Lionel Place often had to use force in order to make them take to the plough.¹⁴

There is not much information available on the yield and production of lands in different parts of India during the nineteenth century. But, on the basis of scattered reports from various regions, most economic historians seem to conclude that the yield of lands in India continued to either decline or stagnate at a low level throughout the century. From around 1890 statistical information on agriculture began to be collected regularly. Experts have indulged in many debates about the extent to which the data collected for this period can be relied upon; but the data, as they are, show a continuing decline. Thus Indian agriculture seems to have suffered a decline throughout the long period extending from late eighteenth century up to the time of independence in 1947. At the end of this period, the average yield of paddy in India was around one ton per hectare, of wheat around 700 kg per hectare, and of coarse grains much below that figure.¹⁵

Decline in availability of food

Though there was some increase in the area under cultivation during this period, from the level it had been reduced to by the early nineteenth century, it was hardly enough to offset the effects of decline in yields and the increase in population. Availability of food per capita therefore came down. The decline was seen most

¹³ See, Lionel Place, *Report on the Settlement for Fustlis 1202-4*, dated 6.10.1795, Tamilnadu State Archives, *Chengalpattu District Records*, vol. 492, para 25.

¹⁴ See, Letter of Lionel Place to the Madras Board of Revenue, dated 22.1.1797, Tamilnadu State Archives, *Proceedings of the Board of Revenue*, 25.1.1797, vol. 172.

¹⁵ See, J.K. Bajaj, *Green Revolution in the Historical Perspective*, PPST Bulletin, Madras, Nov. 1982, p. 104.

visibly and tragically in the unending series of famines that stalked some part of India or the other from the very beginning of British rule to its end.

The famine commission of 1880 estimated “the ordinary out-turn of food” for what was called “British India” to be around 51 million tons, on a food crop area of around 66 million hectares, for a population of 181 million heads.¹⁶ Productivity had thus declined to less than 800 kg per hectare; and production of food per capita had come down to around 280 kg per year, from around 5.5 tons per household in the Chengalpattu of eighteenth century. The Chengalpattu household, according to the estimates of Lionel Place, the collector quoted above, comprised of between 4 to 5 persons each.¹⁷ Eighteenth century Chengalpattu thus produced around a ton of food per capita per year.

From the 51 million tons of estimated gross produce in 1880, the famine commission allow about 3 million tons as cattle-feed, make the usual allowance for seed and wastage, and provide about 5 million tons of surplus for difficult years, leaving only around 38 million tons for direct human consumption. Average consumption per capita was thus estimated to be around 210 kg per year, which, according to the calculation of the commission, was just sufficient to keep the Indian population above the famine level: throughout the report the commission assume that in a famine-stricken region it would be necessary to ensure the availability of a ton of food for every five, or at most six, people.

Estimates of production of food in the 1890's, when the first systematic data were collected, turned out to be much less than 280 kg per capita estimated by the famine commission, and was reported to be around 200 kg.¹⁸ Around the time of independence the production per capita had declined further. In the early fifties, for which fairly reliable data are available, total production of food-grains in India was around 53 million tons for a population of 360

¹⁶ *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, above, para 156, p. 50.

¹⁷ See, Lionel Place, *Report on the Settlement of Jaghira for Fustis 1205-7*, dated 6.6.1799, Tamilnadu State Archives, *Board's Miscellaneous Volumes*, Chengalpattu, vol.45, para 326, p. 300.

¹⁸ See, George Blyn, *Agricultural Trends in India: 1891-1947*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 1966.

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million heads, giving an average production of food of around 150 kg per capita per year.¹⁹

Independent India fails to reverse the decline

The years immediately before and following independence were particularly bad in terms of production and productivity of food. The situation began to somewhat improve almost immediately afterwards. By the early 1960's production of foodgrains per capita had increased to around 180 kg per year, and by the 1970's to around 190 kg per capita per year. Today, we produce around 180 million tons of foodgrains for a population of around 900 millions, implying an average of 200 kg per capita per year.

Thus after about half a century of efforts to undo the effects of the British rule, production of food per capita remains at about one-fifth of what it was in the eighteenth century Chengalpattu, and about the same as the estimates made a hundred years ago, in 1890.

Of the gross production of about 200 kg of foodgrains per capita per year, allowance has to be made for seed and wastage, even if it is assumed that little need be fed to the animals. Taking into account these deductions, it is estimated that the amount of foodgrains available for direct human consumption in 1990 was around 180 kg per capita per year, which is no better than what the famine commission of 1880 had estimated to be the bare minimum to avoid starvation deaths, and is lower than almost anywhere else in the world.

Indian consumption is among the lowest

On a rough reckoning, consumption of staple foods—cereals, pulses, edible roots, flesh and fish—adds up to around 300 kg per capita per year in most countries of the world.²⁰ Of this about 100 kg consists of flesh and fish in Europe and other parts of the world inhabited by people of European stock. In Asia and Africa, consumption of flesh and fish is much less, around 30 kg per capita per year on the average, and grains and roots therefore make up

¹⁹ See, J. K. Bajaj, above, p. 104.

²⁰ Figures on food availability in different countries of the world here and in the discussion below are taken from the data compiled by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations for 1990.

the rest. And in those parts of Africa where edible roots constitute a major part of the staple basket, the total staple consumption is in fact much higher: Nigeria, the most populous country of Africa consumes about 420 kg per capita per year of staple foods, of which about 320 kg comprises of edible roots.

Foodgrains, cereals and pulses together, constitute almost the whole of the staple food of the Indians. There is little flesh or fish consumed in India, and there is also not much consumption of starchy roots, which constitute a fairly large proportion of the staple food in much of Africa and parts of Europe. Average consumption of flesh and fish in India for 1990 was estimated to be 7.5 kg per capita per year, and if we also count about 20.5 kg per capita per year of potatoes, total staple consumption would amount to a little above 200 kg.

Average Indian consumption of staple foods thus falls below the ordinary standards of the world by at least one third. There are only a few countries in the world outside the Indian sub-continent, where average staple consumption is at this level. Countries like Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia in Africa, and Guatemala, Haiti and Peru in Central and South America are perhaps the only ones – except a couple others that we mention below – where staple consumption happens to be as low as ours; most of these countries are known to have been in great political stress for long periods. And, in many of these countries low availability of what we have called staple foods is often alleviated by a rather large availability of some other food, which happens to be more or less staple there. Thus, diets in Sudan and Somalia are supplemented by large quantities of milk, amounting to 116 kg per capita per year in Sudan and 226 kg in Somalia; and in other countries of Africa as also in Central and South America large quantities of plantains, bananas and other fruit often make substantially large contributions to the staple basket.

Countries functioning with a reasonable level of stability seem to be almost always able to provide for a consumption level near the norm of 300 kg per capita per year, even if it involves undertaking large scale imports of food. The only exceptions to this rule outside the Indian sub-continent seem to be Thailand in Asia and Kenya in Africa, both of which have a level of staple consumption as low as ours, and both of which seem to have persisted with the ways that came to govern the public life during the times of British domination.

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Within the Indian sub-continent, Nepal with average staple consumption of around 260 kg per capita per year seems not too badly off, and Bangladesh with average annual staple consumption of 230 kg per capita is at least better than us. In Sri Lanka, staple consumption of around 200 kg per capita per year is to an extent supplemented by the availability of almost 70 kg of coconuts per capita per year. Only Pakistan and Afghanistan have a staple consumption lower than ours in the sub-continent.

The situation of India, and some of our neighbours on the sub-continent, is thus extraordinary. We are living at an average level of consumption that would be unacceptable anywhere else in the world, and which is no better than the level of famine diets recommended by the British administrators of the late nineteenth century.

And there is little food for the animal

This is the situation with respect to the food available for direct human consumption. When we take into account the total supply of foodgrains and roots for both direct and indirect consumption, the Indian situation, in comparison with the rest of the world, seems to be even worse. As we have seen, the supply of foodgrains and edible roots together in India amounts to only about 230 kg per capita per year, of which 210 kg constitute direct human food – which is almost the whole of the available supply after allowance is made for seed and waste – thus leaving nothing for the animals. In most other countries a considerable amount is often produced or imported for the cattle: the average supply of foodgrains and roots in the world is nearly twice the amount of foodgrains and roots used for direct human consumption; much of the other half is fed to the animals. The average supply of foodgrains and roots in Europe for both direct and indirect consumption adds up to around 700 kg per capita per year. The figure for the United States of America is around 900 kg – which incidentally is nearly the same as the production in the Chengalpattu of eighteenth century – and China has a supply of about 450 kg per capita per year.

Total supply of foodgrains in India is thus less than half of what would be required if we were to feed our animal population the way animals are fed in the rest of the world. Since we produce so little of food, we leave almost no foodgrains for our population of around 270 million heads of cattle and buffaloes. Europe feeds 170

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million tons of foodgrains – which is near our total production of foodgrains – and 54 million tons of edible roots to its cattle population of only 124 million heads. And China feeds 63 million tons of foodgrains and 60 million tons of roots to about 100 million heads of cattle and buffaloes and 300 million heads of pigs.

Production of foodgrains in India is thus at a level that leaves both our people and our animals hungry.

Scarcity and callousness have become the norm

The figures for availability of food in India clearly point towards widespread hunger of people and animals in India. And every available statistical indicator confirms the prevalence of hunger. Thus, according to generally accepted statistics, 40 percent of the Indian people do not have access to the bare minimum number of calories required for survival, 63 percent of children under the age of five are malnourished and 88 percent of pregnant women suffer from anemia.²¹

But one does not need to look at figures to see the hunger that prevails. In every city and town of India one can see cows and dogs roaming the streets searching for bits of food amongst heaps of dirt. And, in the larger cities, one can see an occasional child or even an adult competing with the cows and dogs for a share of the edible waste. But nowadays there is hardly anything edible in the waste from Indian households; and the cows are often content with filling their bellies with mere paper and plastic, the dogs howl through the night in hunger, and the human children and adults stand and lie on the streets crazed by sheer starvation.

A journey through any part of India in the great railway trains, that criss-cross the country heralding the arrival of modernity here, brings one in even closer contact with hunger and starvation. Young children, with their eyes glimmering with the sharp intellect of early age, sweep the floors of the trains to earn a bellyful, and fight with the passengers, with the waiters and with each other for the right to the left-overs of food. Their less adventurous and less energetic brothers wait on the platforms silently watching the passengers eat,

²¹ See, for example, United Nations Development Programme: *Human Development Report 1994*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994, pp. 151 and 165.

and almost cry with gratitude for the gift of a single slice of dry bread or a stale roti or idli.

The scenes of hunger and starvation become even grimmer as one heads towards the great pilgrimage centres of India, the roads to which, as we have seen, used to be dotted with chatrams where bells were rung at midnight to invite the laggard seeker to come and receive his food, and where orphaned children of the passers-by were provided shelter, food, education and care till they were ready to face the world on their own. The persisting image that the pilgrim centres and the trains leading to them now leave on the mind is that of immense hunger and starvation. One of the most unfortunate images that comes to mind is that of a child of five soothing a younger child of two with a rubber nipple at the end of an empty bottle of milk on the main street of the great city of Tirupati, where a vast stream of pilgrims converges everyday.

The statistical figures and the day-to-day images on the streets all speak of a great hunger stalking the lands of India. But, we insist that we have sufficient food for ourselves. The economists and the policy planners have been claiming such sufficiency of food in India at least since the early seventies. They have now begun to claim that the food available in India is not only sufficient, it is a little too much for our needs, and we should make efforts to export some food and shift some of the foodgrain lands to more exportable cash-crops.

The claim of sufficiency is based on the fact that the food that we produce cannot all be sold within the country at economic prices. There is no dearth of food, it is said, for those who can afford to buy; and those who cannot buy probably do not deserve to be fed. Lack of foodgrains for the animals is explained through a similar argument: Those who feed good food to the animals, it is said, also eat their flesh; we do not rear animals for economic exploitation, so we do not need to allocate foodgrains for them. Thus we condone both the scarcity and the hunger.

But, the essence of the Indian position on food, and perhaps the position of all societies on the question of food, is that all those who are born deserve to eat. Others would perhaps expect some economic returns from the feeding, Indians believe that feeding is its own reward. But perhaps no society in the world believes that people or animals can be left to starve if they cannot be put to use. Healthy animals and healthy men are useful in themselves.

STRAYING FROM THE DISCIPLINE

We, who as a people, used to be so scrupulous about caring for all creation, have become callous about the hunger and starvation of people and animals. We know of the hunger around us, and we fail to care. We, all of us together, all the resourceful people of India, bear this terrible sin in common.

The sin must be expiated

But we cannot continue to live in sin. No nation with such a sin on its head can possibly come into itself without first expiating it.

We shall be liberated from the sin only when we begin to take the classical injunction of *annam bahu kurvīta* seriously, and begin to grow a great abundance of food again. We have so far not taken to the task with proper application. It is true that during the last fifty years, productivity of foodgrains has improved sufficiently to lift the national average to about 2 tons per hectare. But this average is quite below what was achieved in the eighteenth century in a relatively difficult and dry coastal terrain like that of Chengalpattu, and it is far below the level of productivity today in almost any other region of the world. And, in any case, all increase in productivity has taken place on about 30 percent of the Indian lands, which have high resources of capital and modern technology and which produce for the market. The remaining about 70 percent of the lands, large parts of which lie in the fertile plains of the bounteous Indian rivers, continue in the state of deprivation and neglect to which they were reduced during the British rule, and continue to produce barely one indifferent crop a year.

With care and application these lands can produce the abundance that classical India cherished, and in the process can enliven large numbers of Indians who have been forced into economic idleness because of the idleness of the lands. Much is said about the growing population of India that has made it difficult for the lands to feed them all. But India is a country endowed with rare natural abundance. Unlike almost any other major region of the world, India is a country, where more than half of the geographical area is potentially cultivable, where almost every major geographical region is traversed by a great perennial river, and where the climate is so fecund that crops can grow throughout the year in almost every part. And, notwithstanding her density of population,

THE SIN MUST BE EXPIATED

arable land per capita in India is still twice that in China and only marginally less than that in Europe.

The sin of scarcity shall be wiped off the face of India only when the idle lands begin to be looked after with care and attention once again, and the bounty that nature has bestowed upon India is converted into an abundance of food. We have of course been paying some attention to the lands and agriculture. But so far our concern has been to somehow achieve an average growth of around 2.5 percent per year in the total production of foodgrains to keep pace with the growth in population. We have not attempted to reach a level of growth that would remove the scarcity of the last two centuries, and make India a country of plenty. Achieving such plenty would probably require re-orienting all our resources and all our thinking towards the land. And once the Indian lands begin to yield a plenty, and the blocked *vārtā* of the Indian people begins to flow again, other attributes of prosperity, which we have been trying so hard to acquire, will also arrive in abundant measure.

We should begin to pay attention to the lands and to the fulfilling of the inviolable discipline of *annam bahu kurvīta*. But we cannot continue to be indifferent to the hunger around us until the abundance arrives. Because, as classical India has taught with such insistence, hungry men and animals exhaust all virtue of a people. Such a nation is forsaken by the *devas*, and no great effort can possibly be undertaken by a nation that has been so forsaken. In fact, not only the nation in the abstract, but every individual *gṛhastha* bears the sin of hunger around him. We have been instructed, in the authoritative injunctions of the *vedas*, that anyone who eats without sharing, eats in sin, *kevalāgho bhavati kevalādi*.

Therefore, even before we begin to undertake the great task of bringing the abundance back to the Indian lands, we have to bring ourselves back to the inviolable discipline of sharing. We have to make a national resolve to care for the hunger of our people and animals. There is not enough food in the country to fully assuage the hunger of all; but, even in times of great scarcity, a virtuous *gṛhastha* and a disciplined nation would share the little they have with the hungry. We have to begin such sharing immediately, if the task of achieving an abundance is to succeed.

To us, Indians, sharing of food comes naturally. We do not have to be taught how to share, how to perform *annadāna*. Because,

STRAYING FROM THE DISCIPLINE

we have been taught the greatness of *anna* and of *annadāna* by our ancestors, and we have practised the discipline of growing and sharing in abundance for ages. For such a nation to obliterate the memory of a mere two centuries of scarcity and error is a simple matter. Let us recall the inviolable discipline of sharing that defines the essence of being Indian. Let a great *annadāna* begin again through the whole of this sanctified land. Let a stream of *anna* begin to flow through every locality of the country. The abundance will surely arrive in the wake of such *annadāna*.

May we have the strength of mind and body to be Indians again, and fulfil the *vrata* of growing and sharing a plenty.

निकामेनिकामे नः पर्जन्यो वर्षतु ।
फलिन्यो न ओषधयः पच्यन्ताम् ।
योगक्षेमो नः कल्पताम् ॥

स्वस्ति प्रजाभ्यः परिपालयन्ताम् ।
न्याय्येन मार्गेण महीं महीशाः ।
गोब्राह्मणेभ्यः शुभमस्तु नित्यम् ।
लोकास्समस्तास्सुखिनो भवन्तु ॥