

CHAPTER TWO

Food, Water and Life

- Food and water in the Upanishad-s
- Food and water in the *Mahābhārata*
- Giving and sharing not ritual 'acts'
- The always-full cooking pot
- A portion for the unknown guest

In a culture where attention was paid to the body in as great a measure as to the mind and to the *ātman*, it was natural that *anna*, food, and *āpas*, water or *jala*, should have occupied a basic place. Side by side the exalted interest in the nature of the ultimate reality, and not in opposition to it, the *Upanishad*-s looked upon food as the primary condition of all life and thought. At no time did they disregard the material basis of life. In fact, they regarded food as an inseparable aspect of the ultimate reality. The *Mahābhārata* likewise placed the greatest emphasis on food as the foundation of everything.¹ Naturally, the production of food, and the knowledge of the factors involved in it, were highly regarded throughout. Food and water were considered as the highest gifts that one could give to others. *Āyurveda*, the ancient science of medicine, comprised an astonishingly detailed knowledge of the effect that various kinds of food and drinks produced on the human body and mind, and regarded the use of wholesome food and drink as primary factors in physical and intellectual well-being. The *Arthashāstra* state was the biggest agency for clearing vast areas of land and bringing it under the plough. The *Arthashāstra* sounds almost modern in its methods of supervision of agriculture and irrigation.

Food and water in the *Upanishad*-s

According to the *Taittirīya Upanishad*, from the uncreated Brahman came *ākāśa* space; from space, *vāyu* wind; from wind, *agni* fire; from fire, *āpas* water; from water, *prithvi* earth; from earth, *ośhadha* herbs and plants; from plants, *anna* food; from food, *puruṣa* human body.² Whatever lives on this earth, is born of food, is sustained by food, and at the end reverts to the earth which itself is born of food; of all the material things, food is thus the most superior; whoever worships Brahman in the aspect of food, obtains food always.³ The material body, made up of the nature of food and its *anna-maya*, sap, is suffused with *prāna*, vital breath, by virtue of which all beings, gods and men and beasts, live (*prāna-maya*).⁴ Distinct from these two, there is a subtler substance, the mind, with which the material body and vital breath are completely suffused (*mano-maya*).⁵ Distinct from these

three, there is a subtler substance, intelligence, with which the material body and vital breath and mind are completely suffused (*vijnāna-maya*).⁶ Distinct from the previous four, there is a subtler substance, pure bliss, with which the material body and vital breath and mind and intelligence are completely suffused (*ananda-maya*).⁷ And distinct from these five, but suffusing them completely, is the *ātman*, the Self, which is the same as Brahman.⁸ And Brahman is the ultimate reality.⁹ Thus, according to the *Taittirīya*, the material body in the aspect of food and sap is an integral part of the ultimate reality. It did not say that food and sap are all that there is to the ultimate reality. It proceeded to show that neither food, nor vital breath, nor mind, nor intelligence, is by itself the ultimate reality, but that each is an inseparable aspect of it.¹⁰ The *Taittirīya* then emphasises, by means of simple and brief exhortations, the utmost importance of food and water in which life originates and in which it is sustained.¹¹

अन्नं न निन्द्यात् । तद्ब्रतम् । प्राणो वा अन्नम् । शरीरमन्नादम् । प्राणे शरीरं प्रतिष्ठितम् । शरीरे प्राणः प्रतिष्ठितः । तदेतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितम् । स य एतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितं वेद प्रतिष्ठति । अन्नवानन्नादो भवति । महान् भवति प्रजया पशुभिर्ब्रह्मवर्चसेन । महान् कीर्त्या ।

*Do not denigrate food. Let that be the resolve. Life is because of food. The body consumes food. Life is established in the body. The body is established in life. Thus food is established in food. He who knows this, becomes established in that knowledge. And then he becomes full with food, with offspring, with cattle, with glory and with fame.*¹²

अन्नं न परिचक्षीत । तद् ब्रतम् । आपो वा अन्नम् । ज्योतिरन्नादम् । अप्सु ज्योतिः प्रतिष्ठितम् । ज्योतिष्यापः प्रतिष्ठिताः । तदेतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितम् । स य एतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितं वेद प्रतिष्ठति । अन्नवानन्नादो भवति । महान् भवति प्रजया पशुभिर्ब्रह्मवर्चसेन । महान्कीर्त्या ।

*Do not show indifference to food. Let that be the resolve. Water is food. Heat consumes water. Water is established in heat. Heat is established in water. Thus food is established in food. He who knows this, becomes established in that knowledge. And then he becomes full with food, with offspring, with cattle, with glory and with fame.*¹³

अन्नं बहु कुर्वीत । तद् ब्रतम् । पृथिवी वा अन्नम् । आकाशोऽन्नादः । पृथिव्यामाकाशः प्रतिष्ठितः । आकाशे पृथिवी प्रतिष्ठिता । तदेतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितम् । स य एतदन्नमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितं वेद प्रतिष्ठति । अन्नवान्नादो भवति । महान् भवति प्रजया पशुभिर्ब्रह्मवर्चसेन । महान्कीर्त्या ।

*Grow more food. Let that be the resolve. Earth is food. Space is food. Earth is established in space. Space is established in earth. Thus food is established in food. He who knows this, becomes established in that knowledge. And then he becomes full with food, with offspring, with cattle, with glory and with fame.*¹⁴

न कंचन वसतौ प्रत्याचक्षीत । तद् व्रतम् । तस्माद्यया कया च विधया बहन्तं
प्राप्नुयात् । आराध्यस्मा अन्नमित्याचक्षते । एतद्वै मुखतोऽन्नं राद्धम् । मुखतोऽस्मा
अन्नं राध्यते । एतदै मध्यतोऽन्नं राद्धम् । मध्यतोऽस्मा अन्नतताऽस्मा । एतद्वा
अन्ततोऽन्नं राद्धम् । अन्ततोऽस्मा अन्नं राध्यते । य एवं वेद ।

*Do not treat a guest with indifference. Let that be the resolve. For that reason gather plenty of food by all means. Say to the guest, 'Food is ready.' The food that is prepared with the utmost attention and respect is requited in the same manner. The food that is prepared with little attention and respect is requited in the same manner. He who knows in this manner.*¹⁵

Not only was a knowledge of material elements as sources of food considered essential, but the effort to multiply food, and the habit of sharing it with others with an attitude of attention and respect was also considered important. Hence the exalted status accorded to a guest. According to the *Taittirīya*, just as 'mother is god', 'father is god', 'teacher is god', so also 'a guest is god' अतिथि देवो भव.¹⁶

There is in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* a series of discussions on the material basis of life, which are at once empirical and symbolical. The chief concern of this Upanishad was to demonstrate, from different angles, that the ultimate reality is a composite of material and spiritual elements in such a way that neither is comprehensible without the other. So, far from any gulf existing between the body and the mind, and between the mind and the spirit, they form a totality in which nothing can be separated from the rest and still remain intelligible.

The central concern of various discussions was the question, what is *that* in which everything else is established? The method was to point to a hierarchy of substances, one more general than the other, of which the ultimate basis was shown to be Brahman, which was inherent in them all, which was them all. This involved a close analysis of material reality. First of all, through the parable of Ushasti and the three priests¹⁷ it was maintained that, in a *yajña*, the god that is actually invoked is *prāna* life;

the god to whom the hymn is sung is the (*sūrya*) sun; and the god that is propitiated is *anna* food. For all beings originate in life; and life is sustained by heat and food; in their turn sustained by the other elements of Nature. Next, attention was turned from sacrificial rituals to the totality of Nature, to its gross as well as its subtle forms, such as earth, fire, space, sun, clouds, rain, water, the seasons, the four directions, animals, speech. It is these that must be worshipped with chants and songs.¹⁸ Next, in a higher movement, the outward *yajña*, sacrificial act, was replaced with inner meditation on the unity of nature and life.¹⁹ The meditation was to be on life, on the physical world, on man, on the sense organs, and on the mind, all in their relatedness. They were seen as enfolded within Brahman as the cosmic reality.

Next, in a movement of still higher refinement, the attempt was to prove that everything is permeated with an ultimate substance, on knowing which everything else becomes known.²⁰ Brahman, which is the same as the *ātman*, the Self, is that ultimate in which everything is established.²¹ Next, although everything is established in Brahman, everything was shown to be only of relative value in a hierarchy of generality.²² Each of the following was shown to be more general than the previous one and therefore 'superior'. The various forms of learning were collectively designated as *nāma*, 'name', *vāc*, speech, *manas*, mind, *samkalpa*, will, *chitta*, consciousness, *dhyāna*, meditation, *vijnāna*, understanding, *bala*, force, *anna*, food, *āpas*, water, *tejas*, heat, *ākāsha*, space, *smara*, memory, *āshā*, desire, *prāṇa*, life. Life as the most general substance was to be worshipped as Brahman. However, while Brahman is the Truth, the place of food as a constituent of the mind is not to be neglected. Uddalaka, in the course of instructing his son, Shvetaketu, as regards Brahman, did not neglect to tell him that the finest part of the food forms the mind; the middle part forms the flesh; and the grossest part is eliminated.²³ To demonstrate that the powers of the mind and its processes depend upon food, he asked his son to go without food for fifteen days, during which he could still sustain his life with water. At the end of that period, Shvetaketu was asked to recite the Veda, which he could not; for all his mental powers had become feeble. He was then asked to eat food, after which his mental strength slowly returned.²⁴ The same exercise was repeated in relation to water. According to the *Chāndogya*, the mind is a material substance and is nourished with food.

The *Bṛihad-āranyaka Upanishad*, even before it entered upon a discussion as to the nature of the one most general reality of which every material and mental thing is only a transformation, emphasised the central

importance of life, and therefore of food.²⁵ And it is with that theme that it ends.²⁶ Here, as in the *Chāndogya*, the method was:

- a. to demonstrate the unity of all forms of life, because all beings, the gods, the humans, and the beasts, are suffused with life and the essence of food;
- b. to demonstrate the unity of body and mind, with life as their common support.

Looking upon life and food as practically synonymous, this *Upanishad* speaks of food as being of seven kinds.²⁷ The first kind is common food all living beings consume. The second and third kinds of food are meant for the gods, by way of sacrificial offerings. The next three are in the nature of speech, mind, and life. Milk as the seventh kind of food is reserved for animals as their very first and most tender food, which is the reason why, in their infancy, humans and animals are sustained by milk.²⁸ The living universe is permeated with speech, mind, and life.²⁹ That in all human perceptions, the mind is the central agency is proved by the common expression, ‘My mind was elsewhere, therefore I did not see; my mind was elsewhere, therefore I did not hear’.³⁰ Actually, desire, will, doubt, faith, lack of faith, comprehension, lack of comprehension, intelligence, and fear are the results of the workings of the mind.³¹ Similarly, all sound is speech, and it is speech that expresses what is unexpressed.³² Expression, however, is not speech; rather, speech is that expression which makes expression possible.³³ And all movement is life.³⁴

The *Bṛihad-āraṇyaka Upanishad* divides all forms of existence into three primary categories of speech, mind, and life.³⁵ The physical world is assigned to *speech*, the space to the *mind*, and the heavens to *life*. Speech is the *R̥g-Veda*; the mind is the *Yajur-Veda*; and life is the *Sama-Veda*. Speech is the gods; the mind is the manes; and life is humanity. Speech is mother, the mind is father, and life is offspring. Whatever is knowledge, is speech; whatever is the subject of inquiry, is mind; and whatever is mystery, is life. For life is mystery.³⁶

The *Kaushītaki Upanishad* was given almost entirely to demonstrating the pre-eminence of life (*prāṇa*) and to equating it with Brahman. This was sought to be achieved by establishing, as in the *Chāndogya* and the *Bṛihad-āraṇyaka*, a hierarchy of generality within which the sense organs, the faculties, the will and the mind, make up the complex of the physical body and the personality, with life as the most general substance permeating them

all. Towards that end some evident facts were stated first.³⁷ Smell is sensed by the nose: form is sensed by the eyes: sound is heard by the ears: food is tasted by the tongue: physical acts are done by the hands: pleasure and pain are experienced by the body; sexual union is achieved by the sexual organs: walking is done by the two feet: all the objects of the senses and of knowledge and of desire are experienced by the faculty of comprehension (*prajñā*). The relative generality of various faculties was established next.³⁸ Seeing is more general than speech, hearing is more general than seeing, the mind is more general than hearing, and life is more general than the mind. These propositions were stated to be a matter of empirical experience. That the faculty of seeing is more general than speech is demonstrated by the fact that seeing is the proof of what is spoken. That hearing is more general than seeing is illustrated by the fact that whereas the seeing can be often illusory, the hearing is only of the sound that actually is. That the mind is more general than hearing is proved by the fact that the perception of sound is possible only when the mind is attentive. That life is more general than the mind is demonstrated by the fact that where there is no life, there is no mind. The next step was to show that physical life is not a thing qualitatively apart from mental life and that there is no gulf between them that is unbridgeable.³⁹ The method by which this was demonstrated was empirical as well as deductive. The conclusions were:

- a. that which is life, is also *prajñā*, comprehension; what is called comprehension, that is also life: the two inseparably reside in the body;⁴⁰
- b. it is only in conjunction with *prajñā* that the faculties and the sense organs make the material world sensible;⁴¹
- c. the material world, the world that is sensed, and the mental world form a composite whole;⁴² and
- d. *prāṇa* is the final ground of them all. That is the *ātman*, and that is the Brahman.⁴³

The *Aitareya* further illustrates the fact that in all these earlier *Upanishad*-s the concept of Brahman as the ultimate reality arose from a close reflection on the material world. One cannot be understood without the other. Beginning with a picturesque account of creation, this *Upanishad* spoke of hunger and thirst being created along with the gods and man. Each god was assigned a place in the human body. Fire, in the mouth as the

faculty of speech; wind, in the nostrils as the vital breath; the sun, in the eyes as the faculty of sight; the four directions, in the ears as the faculty of hearing; vegetation, in the skin as the faculty of touch; the moon, in the heart; water, in the sexual organs; and death, in the navel.⁴⁴ Hunger and thirst were similarly connected with the body.⁴⁵ To sustain Creation and to appease hunger and thirst, food was created out of the five primary elements.⁴⁶ Food is the substance that can be consumed neither by speech, nor by the nose, nor by the eyes, nor by the ears, nor by the skin, nor by the mind, nor by the sexual organs.⁴⁷ If food could be so consumed by any of these sense organs, then man would appease his hunger by talking about food, or by smelling it, or by looking at it, or by hearing about it, or by touching it, or by thinking about it.⁴⁸ It is only through the mouth that food is taken, and life is sustained through food.⁴⁹ Life is Brahman. This Upanishad also states: *hr̥daya*, the heart; *manas*, mind; *samjñā*, awareness; *ajñānam*, the capacity to order, and *viññānam*, to analyse, and *prajñānam*, to comprehend; *medhā*, memory; *drishti*, insight; *dhriti*, preserverance; *manishā*, reflection; *jūti*, impulse; *samkalpa*, the will; *kratu*, purpose; *asu*, life; *kāma*, desire; and *vasha*, control; all are permeated with Brahman, the ultimate reality in which everything is upheld.⁵⁰

The upanishadic emphasis on prāṇa is the emphasis on energy. And energy, while it flows in many channels, is indivisible. The control of the mind is not something distinct from the control of the physical body. And the physical body, like the mind, is to be nourished with wholesome food.

Food and water in the Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* likewise attaches the utmost importance to food and to its sharing.⁵¹

अन्नं वै प्रथमं द्रव्यमन्नं श्रीश्च परा मता ।

अन्नात् प्राणः प्रभवति तेजो वीर्यं बलं तथा ।। अनुशासन ६६.५९ ।

*Food is the primary substance. Food is considered as the manifestation of all well-being. It is through food that the life force and its radiance and its strength are nourished.*⁵²

अन्नं ह्यमृतमित्याह पुराकल्पे प्रजापतिः ।

अन्नं भुवं दिवं खं च सर्वमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितम् ।।

The universe with all that lives and moves in it is sustained by food. The Primeval Being has described food as nectar.⁵³

अन्नमूर्जस्करं लोके प्राणाश्चान्ने प्रतिष्ठिताः ।

अन्नेन धार्यते सर्वं विश्वं जगदिदं प्रभो ॥ अनुशासन ६३.७ ॥

अन्नाद् भवन्ति वै प्राणाः प्रत्यक्षं नात्र संशयः ॥ अनुशासन ६३.८ ॥

Life is possible only through food, and it is food that sustains the whole world.⁵⁴ That life is possible only through food is evident and there is no doubting it.⁵⁵

अन्नं प्रजापते रूपमन्नं प्रजननं स्मृतम् ।

सर्वभूतमयं चान्नं जीवश्चान्नमयः स्मृतः ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ॥

Food is a manifestation of the Primeval Being. Food is the source of creation. Food is suffused with all creation; and all living beings are suffused with food.⁵⁶

अन्नाद्धि प्रसवं यान्ति रतिरन्नाद्धि भारत ।

धर्मार्थावन्नतो विद्धि रोगनाशं तथान्तः ॥ अनुशासन ६३.३० ॥

Offspring is born through food; sexual pleasure is possible because of food; social and material prosperity are achieved through food; and it is through food that disease is overcome.⁵⁷

अन्नप्रणाशे भिद्यन्ते शरीरं पञ्च धातवः ।

बलं बलवतोऽपीह प्रणश्यत्यन्नहानितः ॥ अनुशासन ६३.३२ ॥

The absence of food makes the five principal elements of the body disintegrate; and with the loss of food, the strength of even the strongest is lost.⁵⁸

प्राणा ह्यन्नं मनुष्याणां तस्माज्जन्तुश्च जायते ।

अन्ने प्रतिष्ठितो लोकस्तस्मादन्नं प्रशस्यते ॥ अनुशासन ११२.११ ॥

Food is man's life; and it is through food that the living beings are born. The whole world is based upon food. And, therefore, food is regarded as the highest.⁵⁹

The *Mahābhārata* simultaneously speaks of *jala*, water, as an essential basis of life; and generally the two are spoken together, *anna* and *jala*, food and water.⁶⁰ Therefore, *anna-dāna* and *jala-dāna*, the giving of food and water alike, are regarded as the greatest of all sharing in life,

dāna.⁶¹ The *Mahābhārata* dwells upon this throughout. Stated in brief, its teaching is:

अन्नं प्राणा नराणां हि सर्वमन्ने प्रतिष्ठितम् ।

अन्नदः पशुमान् पुत्रो धनवान् भोगवानपि ।। अनुशासन ६३.२५ ।।

प्राणवांश्चापि भवति रूपवांश्च तथा नृप ।

अन्नदः प्राणदो लोके सर्वदः प्रोच्यते तु सः ।। अनुशासन ६३.२६ ।।

Because life is sustained by food, and food is life, to give food to others is like giving life to them; and whoever gives food is known verily as the giver of life.⁶²

Therefore:

अन्नेन सदृशं दानं न भूतं न भविष्यति ।

तस्मादन्नं विशेषेण दातुमिच्छन्ति मानवाः ।। अनुशासन ६३.६ ।।

There was not in the past, nor will there be in the future, a sharing comparable to the sharing of food. Therefore, mostly it is the gift of food that people wish to give.⁶³

प्रत्यक्षं प्रीतिजननं भोक्तुर्दातुर्भवत्युत ।

सर्वाण्यन्यानि दानानि परोक्षफलवन्त्युत ।। अनुशासन ६३.२९ ।।

The giving of food is one giving that brings visible satisfaction both to the giver and the one to whom it is given. The results of all other giving are invisible.⁶⁴

अध्वश्रान्ताय विप्राय क्षुधितायान्नकाङ्क्षणे ।

देशकालाभियाताय दीयते पाण्डुनन्दन ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२८ ।।

According to time and place, food should be offered to the one who is tired after a long journey and is hungry and thirsty.⁶⁵

यस्तु पांसुलपादश्च दूराध्वश्रमकर्षितः ।

क्षुत्पिपासाश्रमश्रान्त आर्तः खिन्नगतिर्दिजः ।।

पृच्छन् वै ह्यन्नदातारं गृहमभ्येत्य याचयेत् ।

तं पूजयेत् तु यत्नेन सोऽतिथिः स्वर्गसंक्रमः ।।

तस्मिंस्तुष्टे नरश्रेष्ठ तुष्टाः स्युः सर्वदेवताः ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२८ ।।

Should a brāhmaṇa, who is weak with hunger and thirst, his feet tired from a long journey, come to one's home and ask for food, he should

*be honoured. Such a guest is an occasion for heaven, and all gods are satisfied when he is satisfied.*⁶⁶

The same is the case with *jala-dāna*, sharing water.⁶⁷ Because it is evident that:

पानीयं परमं लोके जीवानां जीवनं स्मृतम् ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

अभिः सर्वाणि भूतानि जीवन्ति प्रभवन्ति च ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

*Water is considered in the world as the very life of the living beings.⁶⁸ All living beings can live because of water and are sustained by it.*⁶⁹

प्रणश्यत्यम्बुपानेन बुभुक्षा च युधिष्ठिर ।

तृषितस्य न चान्नेन पिपासाभिप्रणश्यति ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

*Yudhishtira, hunger can be assuaged by drinking water, but thirst cannot be assuaged by eating food.*⁷⁰

Therefore:

तस्मात् सर्वेषु दानेषु तोयदानं विशिष्यते ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

*Of all givings, the giving of water is a thing apart.*⁷¹

पानीयस्य प्रदानेन तृपतिर्भवति पाण्डव ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

*When water is offered, there comes complete satisfaction.*⁷²

तस्मात् तोयं सदा देयं तृषितेभ्यो विजानता ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२७ ।।

*For that reason, knowing this, one should always offer water to the thirsty.*⁷³

चाण्डालोऽप्यतिथिः प्राप्तो देशकालेऽन्नकाङ्क्षया ।

अभ्युद्गम्यो गृहस्थेन पूजनीयश्च सर्वदा ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२९ ।।

*In accordance with time and place, if the lowliest of low arrives as a guest, the householder should welcome him too.*⁷⁴

अभ्यागतं श्रान्तमनुव्रजन्ति

देवाश्च सर्वे पितरोऽग्नयश्च ।

तस्मिन् द्विजे पूजिते पूजिताः स्यु-

गति निराशाः पितरो व्रजन्ति ।। आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२९ ।।

*With a guest come all the gods and the manes. If a guest is honoured, so are they; if he goes away disappointed, they go away disappointed too.*⁷⁵

The *Mahābhārata* elaborates on how the blessings of this life and of the next attend upon the person who, according to time and place and his own capacity, readily gifts food to others.⁷⁶ Even more detailed are the injunctions as regards the gift of water, chiefly by constructing ponds, wells and reservoirs.⁷⁷

Earth and trees being inseparable from food and water, the *Mahābhārata* finally enjoins upon the people, *bhumi-dana* and *vrksa-dana*, the giving of fertile land and the planting of trees, as steps towards sustenance and plenty for all.⁷⁸

भूमौ जायन्ति पुरुषा भूमौ निष्ठां व्रजन्ति च ।

चतुर्विधो हि लोकोऽयं योऽयं भूमिगुणात्मकः ॥ अनुशासन ६२.४९ ॥

*Human beings are born on the earth, and to the Earth they return. All species of life are suffused with the attributes and energy of the Earth.*⁷⁹

एषा माता पिता चैव जगतः पृथिवीपते ।

नानया सदृशं भूतं किञ्चिदस्ति जनाधिप ॥ अनुशासन ६२.५० ॥

*To the world, the Earth is like mother and father. There is no other material reality like the Earth.*⁸⁰

Neither is there a greater sharing and giving than the sharing and giving of land, with its resources—food, water and vegetation.

न हि भूमिप्रदानेन दानमन्यद् विशिष्यते ॥ अनुशासन ६२.६५ ॥

The *Mahābhārata*⁸¹ says this repeatedly.

In the voice of Krishna, the *Mahābhārata* therefore says:

दानान्यन्यानि हीयन्ते कालेन कुरुपुङ्गव ।

भूमिदानस्य पुण्यस्य क्षयो नैवोपपद्यते ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३१ ॥

*The merit earned by other kinds of giving exhausts itself by the passage of time; but the merit earned by giving and sharing land is ever inexhaustible.*⁸²

न हि भूमिप्रदानाद् वै दानमन्यद् विशिष्यते ।

न चापि भूमिहरणात् पापमन्यद् विशिष्यते ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३१ ॥

*There is no greater giving than the giving of land; and there is no greater wrong than possessing land by force.*⁸³

आश्रुत्य भूमिदानं तु दत्त्वा यो वा हरेत् पुनः ।

स बद्धो वारुणैः पाशैः क्षिप्यते पूयशोणिते ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३२ ॥

*Whoever possesses by force the land gifted either by him or by another, is destined for the darkest of all hells.*⁸⁴

The meanings here are clear and straightforward. ‘Heaven’ and ‘hell’ are not *places* one goes to after death, depending upon one’s acts. They are what one creates for one’s self and for the other on *this* earth, and lives *in* heaven or hell, or both.

In all that Krishna pronounces upon the inexhaustible *punya*, merit, earned by giving and sharing, food and water and fertile land, the *brāhmaṇa* is a most favoured person.⁸⁵ It is very easy to misinterpret this, although not altogether without reason; especially in the light of the social history of Indian society. The subject of the *Mahābhārata*’s clearest position on social arrangements and social wealth is examined later in this book.⁸⁶ Here it will suffice to say that *brāhmaṇa* as a social calling within the fourfold division of labour was to devote himself to the pursuit of knowledge and teaching, and was excluded from making money; and, therefore, persons of that calling were to be especially supported by the king and the people. That support was the only means of their sustenance. Therefore, it had to be respectful, not grudging. Hence the very great emphasis upon giving to a *brāhmaṇa*, and earning thereby a special merit. But that emphasis was neither ever absolute nor unrelated to what a *brāhmaṇa* as a person was expected to be.

Giving and sharing not ritual ‘acts’

What is of utmost importance is the fact that the *Mahābhārata* gives a radically different meaning to *dāna*, not as ‘alms giving’ or ‘charity’ as ritual acts, but sharing what one has been given, in the awareness that one’s life is connected with other beings.⁸⁷ Hospitality is an expression of that awareness, and not just ‘a rule of etiquette’. If the awareness of one’s human bond with others is absent in one’s actual conduct, then everything one may possess is *vriṭha*, useless. In the voice of Krishna, the *Mahābhārata* strongly says:

साङ्गोपाङ्गास्तु यो वेदान् पठतीह दिने दिने ।

न चातिथिं पूजयति वृथा भवति स द्विजः ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२९ ॥

*If he diligently, day after day, keeps studying the Veda but does not show utmost respect to the guest, then the life of such a brāhmaṇa is in vain.*⁸⁸

पाकयज्ञमहायज्ञैः सोमसंस्थाभिरेव च ।

ये यजन्ति न चार्चन्ति गृहेष्वतिथिमागतम् ॥

तेषां यशोऽभिकामानां दत्तमिष्टं च यद् भवेत् ।

वृथा भवति तत् सर्वमाशया हि तया हतम् ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३२९ ॥

Those who perform various sacrificial-rites, but do not with respect and care attend upon the guest who comes to their homes, then that which they do to earn a good name goes in vain. The guest's disappointment destroys it all.⁸⁹

Therefore:

देशं कालं च पात्रं च स्वशक्तिं च निरीक्ष्य च ॥

अल्पं समं महद् वापि कुर्यादातिथ्यमाप्तवान् ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३० ॥

Considering 'time', 'place', 'the person concerned', and 'one's capacity', one should give to the guest in ways small, or middling, or generous.⁹⁰

Lest the mention of the word pātra, or 'the person concerned', in this context, was interpreted as the freedom to weigh a guest in the scale of 'deservedness', and then decide the scale of one's welcome to him or her, the *Mahābhārata* quickly dispelled that notion by saying:

हितः प्रियो वा द्वेष्यो वा मूर्खः पण्डित एव वा ।

प्राप्तो यो वैश्वदेवान्ते सोऽतिथिः स्वर्गसंक्रमः ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३० ॥

Whether he wishes one good or ill, whether he is learned or a fool, the guest who comes is verily a way to heaven.⁹¹

क्षुत्पिपासाश्रमार्ताय देशकालागताय च ।

सत्कृत्यान्नं प्रदातव्यं यज्ञस्य फलमिच्छता ॥ आश्वमेधिक पृ. ६३३० ॥

If one wishes to reap the fruits of ritual rites, then let one attend upon a guest who arrives hungry, thirsty and tired, and offer him food with the utmost respect.⁹²

Through another story,⁹³ the *Mahābhārata* teaches that:

अरावप्युचितं कार्यमातिथ्यं गृहमागते ।

छेत्तुमप्यागते छायां नोपसंहरते द्रुमः ॥ शान्ति १४६.५ ॥

Should one's enemy arrive at one's doorstep, one should, and with respect too, attend upon him. A tree does not withdraw its cooling shade even from the one who has come to cut it.⁹⁴

The always-full cooking pot

The *Mahābhārata* shows that where there is concern for the sustenance of others, and not for one's own alone, and where there is love in giving, there, the cooking pot is never empty, however adverse the circumstances.⁹⁵

On losing the game of dice to the Kauravas, their first cousins, a game that was played fraudulently, Yudhishtira and his four younger brothers and their wife Draupadi are exiled from the realm for thirteen years as a pre-condition of losing the game. Suddenly they are bereft even of the means of sustenance. A great many brāhmanas express their desire to follow them into exile. Deeply touched, Yudhishtira dissuades them from doing so. 'Now I have no means of sustaining even my family, much less of offering the least hospitality to you who will be my guests', he says to them. And he speaks of his deepest anxiety on that account. 'No, you do not have to worry. We will take care of our needs ourselves, and will come with you, and will engage you in conversations that will delight you', they say to him. 'Yes, I always take delight in the company of scholars', Yudhishtira replies; 'but even so, being reduced so very greatly in my circumstances is for me a matter of shame.' And he recalls the obligations of a householder in offering food to those who come to him.

संविभागो हि भूतानां सर्वेषामेव दृश्यते ।

तथैवापचमानेभ्यः प्रदेयं गृहमेधिना ॥ वन २.५३ ॥

*In the food eaten by a householder, there is a share each for the gods of the universe, for one's ancestors, and for all living beings.*⁹⁶

तृणानि भूमिरुदकं वाक् चतुर्थी च सूनृता ।

सतामेतानि गेहेषु नोच्छिद्यन्ते कदाचन ॥ वन २.५४ ॥

देयमार्तस्य शयनं स्थितश्रान्तस्य चासनम् ।

तशषितस्य च पानीयं क्षुधितस्य च भोजनम् ॥ वन २.५५ ॥

*In the house of a good human being, four things are never absent: a proper seat, a place to sit, water to drink, and courteous speech. A bed for the ill; a seat for the tired; water for the thirsty; and food for the hungry.*⁹⁷

चक्षुर्दद्यान्मनोदद्याद् वाचं दद्यात् सुभाषिताम् ।

उत्थाय चासनं दद्यादेष धर्मः सनातनः ।

प्रत्युत्थायाभिगमनं कुर्यान्न्यायेन चार्चनम् ॥ वन २.५६ ॥

*Receive the visitor with courtesy; and with equal courtesy bid him farewell: look at him with kindly eyes; have for him kind thoughts; greet him with pleasant speech, and offer him a place to sit—these are the abiding dharma of a householder.*⁹⁸

The worry that he will not be able to fulfill these obligations, is the anxiety and sorrow of Yudhishtira, which he now mentions to his preceptor, the sage Dhaumya; that he can neither leave them nor does he have the means to offer them his hospitality: ‘What do I do in these circumstances?’⁹⁹

After giving his deep thought to Yudhishtira’s situation, Dhaumya offers the following advice. ‘At the beginning of creation, when the living beings suffered from hunger, the Sun-god *Sūrya* drew with his heat the water on earth, which the Moon converted through the clouds into the rains, which in turn produced on earth, vegetation, and from vegetation, food. Combined with the rays of the Moon, the Sun created six different kinds of *rasa*, sap, in the plants, which is food for the living beings.’¹⁰⁰

एवं भानुमयं ह्यन्नं भूतानां प्राणधारणम् ।

पितृषु सर्वभूतानां तस्मात् तं शरणं ब्रज ॥ वन ३.९ ॥

*The food that sustains life is thus in the aspect of the Sun, who is father to all beings. Appeal to the Sun for help therefore.*¹⁰¹

And that is what Yudhishtira did. Invoking the Sun¹⁰², he ends with this prayer:

त्वं ममापन्नकामस्य सर्वातिथ्यं चिकीर्षतः ।

अन्नमन्नपते दातुमभितः श्रद्धयार्हसि ॥ वन ३.६७ ॥

*So that I may be able to offer food to all those who come to me, grant me the gift of food.*¹⁰³

The Sun appears in the human form and gives him a copper cooking-pot; which, the Sun grants a boon, will never remain empty during the coming days of adversity and trial. Yudhishtira would eat only after he had fed others; and Draupadi would eat the last; and no sooner would she finish eating than the cooking-pot would be full again.¹⁰⁴

A portion for the unknown guest

Equally important with the act of giving, is the *attitude*, the *feeling*, with which the food and water are offered. The word *dāna* does not mean ‘charity’ or ‘alms-giving’. Its meanings are: ‘*sharing*’, ‘*communicating*’, ‘*imparting*’, ‘*paying back*’ (as in a debt), ‘*restoring*’, ‘*adding to*’. The *Mahābhārata* places equal emphasis the attitude of respect, and on the feeling of affection, with which food and water are to be offered. The feelings of affection, and not just the materiality of the food, ‘add’ and ‘restore’.

अमृतं मनसः प्रीतिं सद्यस्तृप्तिं ददाति च ।

मनो ग्लपयते तीव्रं विषं गन्धेन सर्वशः ।। अनुशासन ९८.१८ ।।

*What creates feelings of friendship, affection, and a deep mental satisfaction, is nectar, amritam: what creates in the mind strong repulsion, is poison, visha.*¹⁰⁵

The Āyurveda speaks of four *dosha*, defects, in the cooked food. The *kāla-dosha*, the food that has been kept for too long, and has turned stale, the *rasa-dosha*, the food that has lost its flavour and taste, the *samsarga-dosha*, the food that has been touched with unclean hands, or in which some insect has fallen. But the worst defect is *bhava-dosha*, the food that is offered will ill grace, without feelings of affection. Such food is not food; it is poison.

It has been assumed, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the main concerns of Indian culture were otherworldly.¹⁰⁶ To the *Upanishad*-s, and to the *Mahābhārata*, there was no conflict between material facts and spiritual perspectives. The joy of philosophy was never considered incompatible with the pleasures of culinary art. It is true that there grew up also taboos and practices as regards eating food, which became enormously complicated, often to the point of insanity. But they are not to be found either in the *Upanishad*-s or in the *Mahābhārata*. But however complicated they grew to be, and however ludicrous the forms that they took, many of the practices displayed nevertheless the belief that the act of eating is not a solitary affair; one’s life is linked with the life of others. Eating is not complete until the food that one eats has been shared with others. One portion of the food one eats is to be set apart, if only symbolically, for the gods of the universe, which are the elements of Nature. Another portion is to be set apart for one’s forefathers. And one portion of the food one eats is to be kept—for the *unknown guest*.¹⁰⁷

