

**R**ECENTLY, I joined a five-day long course for learning some special breathing exercises and meditation techniques. Predictably, we were subjected to a good deal of pop philosophy on how to develop a positive attitude towards life. A large part of the course left me unmoved. However, the most uplifting experience came unexpectedly through two special lunch sessions scheduled towards the end of the course.

On the final weekend of the programme, we were all asked to bring packed lunches from home since we were to have full day sessions on both days. I expected nothing special and thought this would be a typical lunch break where each one of us would open our respective boxes, break into smaller groups of three or four, and chit-chat informally over our food. However, what came to pass was not only an enriching experience; those lunch sessions also provided me with a valuable glimpse of the kind of society I would like to live in and of the rudimentary principles on which it can be built.

To begin with, the thirty odd participants were all asked to sit in a big circle on mattresses spread across the floor. The first surprise came when we were told that no one should speak during the entire lunch period. We were expected to observe total silence and concentrate on enjoying the taste and texture of our food. Each of us was to open our respective lunch packs, take as much as we wanted and then pass the dishes on to the person on the right, without uttering a single word or even using sign language. No one had to ask for anything. The food kept coming before us. Thus, we sat in meditative silence, but at the same time, we were made deeply aware of sharing and companionship. Most people went out of their way to be considerate and took each dish in moderate quantities, and yet we ate plentifully.

## MY VISION FOR THE FUTURE

# When Giving and Receiving Become One

○ Madhu Kishwar

On the first day, many, like myself, had not come prepared for this kind of sharing, so we had taken our usual plain, normal food. Only some people had brought specially prepared dishes in large quantities. Even so, our lunch became a big feast, with an enormous variety of cuisine springing silent but colourful surprises.

We enjoyed the experience so much that on the next day, everyone came with an even greater array of foods, in still larger quantities. Since most people had brought two or three food items each - including puries, pulavs, desserts - we had nearly eighty varieties of dishes going between us. It was fun to experience both a sense of abundance, affection and mutual sharing, whereby distinctions between “mine” and “yours” seemed to disappear. For

example, when I passed the dishes around to the person sitting next to me, I was not offering that person “my food,” but “our collective food.” Each of us had contributed to this common pool in whatever quantity or quality we voluntarily chose; there was no expectation, no overt pressure to conform to any set norm; and yet, everyone seemed to have brought generously.

Why was this whole exercise such an inspiration to me? Most of the time one only hears platitudes about the virtues of sharing. This lunch provided a small but concrete example of the benefits of sharing:

➤ Each one of us enjoyed a greater diversity, abundance and quality of food through this process than we would have if each were to have eaten

### Share Your Visions

In the last issue of MANUSHI we started a new column: *My Vision For the Future*. Unfortunately, we got very few responses. Those that came, tended to deal with very immediate and elementary challenges facing us today such as providing education to girls, improving the garbage clearance in our cities. It seems we were not able to effectively communicate the very idea behind this column:

- To go beyond ordinary mundane expectations and dream big. In short, we would like to attempt grand visions.
- To think far ahead and project likely scenarios for the future. These could be either negative or positive, funny or serious, inspiring or frightening.

We hope many more readers will share their dreams, visions, fantasies or even fears of the future through this column.

from our own individual lunch boxes. In other words, we all gained by sharing - both in material and emotional terms.

➤ It became evident that sharing comes easily when there is a relatively plentiful supply. When there is an actual scarcity of food, altruistic feelings are perhaps harder to sustain.

➤ I also saw how sharing comes fairly naturally and graciously when everyone is assured that things will reach them without their having to rush to claim their share. Compare our lunch to the lavish dinners hosted at wedding parties, where even in middle and upper class environments, people literally stampede to get at the food. Here, the rules of the game -take what you need and pass it on -ensured that no one would have to grab at or even reach out for anything. And yet, each received a continuous supply of food.

➤ In this process, giving and receiving became one and the same. No one felt that he or she was sacrificing or neglecting his or her own interests when offering to others. Each of us got as much as we wanted. Most of us, therefore, were vigilant to ensure that we didn't take greedily.

➤ Even though there were large differences in the income levels and living standards among the various participants, this sharing created a sense of solidarity and egalitarianism. Even while differences in income and status remained intact, they faded somewhere into the distant background. People were not judged by how much food and wealth they had stacked up at home but by how joyously and generously they

participated in this collective endeavour.

This was the best living example I had seen of the principle "From each according to his/her capacity, to each according to his/her need." It worked so well because:

⇒ The whole exercise encouraged voluntarism. Everyone was free to decide what quantity and quality of food they wanted to bring to this common pool. But this voluntarism was bound together through an astutely conceived *system* and well thought out rules which were easy to follow, efficient and even aesthetically gratifying (you took as much you needed and passed on the rest). It is this *system*, rather than individual generosity, which ensured smooth circulation and distribution.

⇒ The person who introduced us to the rules of the whole operation also adhered to the same rules. As the referee of the game, she claimed no special privileges. She too brought a similar lunch pack and sat and ate silently with all of us rather than act the policeman.

⇒ The advantages of the system were instantly visible to all, rather

than requiring the participants to be hypnotised by some ideological *mantras* promising some unperceived moral benefit or future heaven.

In short, this was a live demonstration of the fact that sentiments of sharing and altruism can be easily promoted as societal goals - and are not merely individual qualities found in a few and special "saintly" types - if we evolve efficiently functioning systems, with workable rules that are easy to follow and also promote greater dignity.

The India I dream of would cultivate precisely such a culture of sharing - as opposed to the "socialist patterns" of enforced egalitarianism. "Socialist societies" proved such a disaster because:

○ They relied exclusively on the coercive instruments of the state to reduce the gaps between the rich and the poor, whereby those in government arrogated to themselves the power to impose punitive measures and a great deal of violence for the supposed promotion of equality.

○ Wealth generation it-self came to be treated as a crime, with state functionaries assuming vast arbitrary powers to obstruct the economic initiative of people. In the end, the whole society became impoverished, except for the extortionist bureaucracy. Such enforced poverty destroys rather than promotes a culture of sharing.

○ The atmosphere of coercion bred fear and demoralisation so that people felt more and more insecure about the resources available to them,



and even the safety of their lives. It demeaned whole societies.

### Deep Roots in Our Past

The culture of sharing, as symbolized by the lunch experience I described, is not a far away Utopian dream; it has deep roots in our past history. The institution of *langar* in *gurudwaras*, for instance, represents precisely such sharing, and on a much grander scale. Even today, every farmer family in Punjab, rich or poor, carries its own harvested crops to its home or to the market only after first offering a certain proportion to the local *gurudwara*. Similarly, the urban Sikhs regularly contribute a certain proportion of their cash income to the local *gurudwara* from their monthly incomes. This regular voluntary flow of resources supports the *langar* and other altruistic activities, including short-term free shelter for the needy in every *gurudwara*. The *langar* is open to all — rich and poor alike - as *guru ka prasad*, rather than as demeaning charity for the poor alone. Even the richest of the rich feel honoured to sit in *pangat* with all and sundry to partake of the *langar*. No one needs to feel obligated or ashamed to claim a share in the *langar* because providing it is seen as an inherent duty of the *gurudwara*, not an act of condescending crumb throwing.

In the 20th century, severe distortions have come into this institution, because the *gurudwara* has been taken over by politicians. Even so, the system has ensured that no one need stay hungry anywhere in the vicinity of a *gurudwara*. Most of our temples also used to perform such functions as an integral part of their being until the colonial state took away

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\* For a detailed analysis see *Annam Baku Kurvita, Recollecting the Indian Discipline of Growing and Sharing Food in Plenty*, Centre for Policy Studies, Madras, 1999.

their lands and brought them under bureaucratic control.\*

The food security system provided by the *gurudwaras* is superior to anything that modern welfare states have evolved. It ensures that each person contributes to it voluntarily without threat of punishment of any kind (in contrast to what happens with taxation systems in modern states) and feels honored by the act of giving. The recipient is also saved the humiliation of proving that he or she is indigent before qualifying for *guru ka langar* - unlike what happens in welfare states.

Those who think people would become lazy and parasitic if they could take all of their basic needs for granted would do well to look at the example of the Sikh community in Punjab. The *langar* and shelter provided by *gurudwaras* has certainly not made Sikhs shirk work. In fact, they are the most industrious and self-respecting

among our people. Their enterprise and hard work has made Punjab the granary of India, rather than a begging bowl like Bihar, where such institutions are lacking.

I will be able to hold my head high as an Indian only when our society makes a collective resolve to provide all the basic necessities of life to each citizen - absolutely unconditionally - simply because they exist. These include wholesome food, decent shelter, adequate clothing and quality education up to a certain level. This effort should not be left to a faceless, heartless bureaucracy, but should be undertaken by the institutions of civil society. Only when people can move out of the insecurity trap and feel nurtured by the society they live in, can real human potential blossom - in art, science, philosophy and even the spirit of altruism. □

*Available with Manushi*

### ANNAM BAHU KURVITA

*Recollecting the Indian Discipline  
of Growing and Sharing Food in Plenty*

By Dr. J.K. Bajaj and Mandayam Doddamane Srinivas

Centre for Policy Studies, Madras, 1996

Indians today consume one third less of staple foods compared to the people in almost any other part of the world, and cattle and animals in India get almost no grains or roots at all. Yet we have chosen to believe that we have acquired self sufficiency in food.

India was never so callous about scarcity and hunger. Growing an abundance of food *annabahulya* and sharing it in plenty *annadana*, have always constituted the essence of *dharmik* living for us. *Annabahulya* and *annadana* are in fact at the foundation of *dharma*; all else, even the search for *moksa* is supposed to be built on this foundation.

This book is a recollection of this eroding Indian tradition of abundance and sharing. Based on a whole range of traditional texts —the *srutis*, *itihasas*, *puranas*, and *dharmasastras*, the book presents a compelling glimpse of the intensity with which Indians have thought about *annabahulya* and *annadana*. And, in the process it offers a fresh understanding of the essence of Indian civilization.

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