**Editorial**

**Spirit of Sacrifice**

 In continuation of ‘Simple Living’ we discussed in our earlier issue, let us now spare a few thoughts on ‘Spirit of Sacrifice’, which strengthens the concept of Simple Living. Veda proclaims: न कर्मणा न प्रजया धनेन, त्यागेनैके अमृतत्वं-आनशुः-‘Some persons have attained immortality only through sacrifice, not through performance of prescribed rites, progeny or wealth.’ दानमेको कलौ युगे- ‘It is only Danam, ceremonial gift of prescribed articles to a suitable person at appropriate time and place, which can be performed properly in Kaliyuga and would bestow good fruits’, so say Sastras. Atmagunas, eight in number, include अकार्पण्य, munificence; common dharmas, ten in number, enunciated in Manusmriti, encompass अस्तेयम्, non-stealing, meaning non-covetousness beyond needs. Let us look at some classical instances of this self-denial from our ancient literature.

**The Mongoose in Mahabharata**

Mahabharata illustrates self-denial through a telling story. Yudhishthira was crowned king at Hastinapura after the horrifying Mahabharata war was over. Even after listening to a lengthy and enlightening discourse on various aspects of dharma from Bhishma, who was on his death-bed, Yudhishthira could not overcome the gnawing feeling of guilt of having been the cause of the destruction of Kauravas. He refused to perform royal duties and insisted on retiring to the forest for austerities. Sage Vyasa and Sri Krishna persuaded him strongly to desist from running away from his duty as king. They then asked him to perform Aswamedha yagna, which is capable of earning the forgiveness of Bhagavan for even heinous crimes and his grace for peace and prosperity. The yagna was conducted amidst great fanfare with strict adherence to Sastras. Golden bricks were used in the construction of sacrificial altar. Gandharvas sang and Apsaras danced. Huge gifts of cows and gold were given to brahmanas. All were very happy and showered praise on Yudhishthira.

At this stage a mongoose arrived suddenly on the scene. It had black eyes and one side of body, golden. It made a thundering sound, terrifying all those present and then said in human voice: “O kings, this yagna of yours is not equal in merit to the gift given by a small quantity of barley flour (sattu) by a charitable brahmana of Kurukshetra.” The brahmanas were all astonished to hear this. They however recognised that this was no ordinary mongoose and said: “This yagna has been completed without violating a single rule. Hence your statement is not clear. Please explain.”

**Unchavritti Brahmana**

The mongoose then started to recount the story of a brahmana with a smile. There was a brahmana in the holy land of Kurukshetra, who lived on उञ्छ, Uncha. (Foodgrains left over by farmers in fields and market places, gleaned like pigeons by a person for food for living are called Uncha; living on Uncha is called Unchavritti). He lived a very austere life along with his wife, son and daughter-in-law. He and his family consumed Uncha food once in six times, i.e. once in three days. If food was not available perchance on that day, he would wait for three more days. Once there was severe famine. Many were the days when the brahmana looked for foodgrains, but got none; he and his family went hungry for a long time. The emaciated brahmana ultimately obtained a small quantity of barley grains one day. They powdered that barley; after giving Ahutis in agni as required, they divided the small quantity of flour into four and sat down for consuming it. Just then a hungry brahmana guest came. The brahmana host, who was of pure mind, duly welcomed the guest and offered him his share of the flour. The guest consumed it quickly and appeared unsatisfied. When the host was beginning to worry as to what to do next, his wife offered her own share of the flour for the hungry guest. The brahmana said to her: “Protecting and nourishing one’s wife is the duty of even worms. Duties towards dharma, artha and kama, and service in the family and duty towards Pitrus are all under the care of the wife. Hence I cannot accept your offer.” His wife, however, insisted on parting with her share of the flour, saying that she was only as feeble, aged and shrunken as he was and that they both had equal responsibility. The host then offered his wife’s share also to the guest, who consumed it quickly; the guest however continued to remain hungry.

Now it was the son’s turn to offer his share of flour. He said:

अपत्यमस्ति ते पुंसस्-त्राणात् पुत्र इति स्मृतः ।

आत्मा पुत्रः स्मृतस्-तस्मात् त्राह्यात्मानम्-इहात्मना ॥ (६३)

“I am your son. The son is called ‘Putra’ as he protects the Purusha (father). He is also considered as the very Atma of father. Hence please protect yourself through your own Atma, i.e. myself.” The host brahmana was pleased with the sense of duty of his son; he accepted his share, which he gave to the guest. After consuming this third share, the guest still remained unsatisfied. The daughter-in-law of the host now offered her share of the flour, saying to him: “The son relieves his father of debt to Pitrus. Through sons and grandsons, humans attain to superior worlds.” The brahmana was very embarrassed and said to her: “You are a young woman, suffering from hunger and emaciated due to fasting for a long time. You have observed the best of dharmas. I must protect you, as you will surely please relatives through dedicated service.” His daughter-in-law persisted in her plea that she be not deprived of the merit that would accrue by giving the flour to the guest. Finally her share of the flour was also consumed by the guest.

It was indeed Dharma himself, who had come in the guise of the brahmana guest. He now revealed his identity, praised the host’s sense of charity and said that his fame was being sung in the courts of Devas, who were highly pleased. He said: “When a man is keen on giving charity to the right person at the right time, he engages in the best observance of dharma. When king Rantideva had nothing to give, he gifted just water and this helped him ascend to heaven. King Sibi, who gave away flesh from his own body, attained to the world of the meritorious. King Nriga gifted thousands of cows to brahmanas. But by giving away one cow, which had been given earlier to someone and had joined the herd without his knowledge, Nriga fell into hell. The fruit you have obtained by giving away this flour is higher than that reaped from many Rajasuya and Aswamedha yagnas with large gifts of wealth. You have conquered the undiminishing Brahmaloka and redeemed all your Pitrus by this act of charity of this little flour.” There was a shower of flowers from the heavens. Gandharvas sang. Brahmarishis arrived from Brahmaloka to have his darshan. The brahmana with his family ascended the vimana which came from heaven and vanished.

The mongoose, which happened to watch all this from nearby, smelled the few grains of flour on the ground and rolled there. Its head and one side of the body, which came into contact with the left over flour grains, turned instantly into gold. It thought that if the austerity and charity of the brahmana could render one side of its body into gold, it should be possible to turn the other side also into gold through contact with places of yagna. It visited many yagnasalas and ultimately tried in the just concluded Aswamedha yagna of Yudhishthira, but to no avail. Nowhere could it succeed in getting the other side of its body turned into gold. That is why it said that this yagna was not equal in merit to the charity of the little flour by the brahmana in Kurukshetra. After explaining this background, the mongoose vanished. Sage Vyasa concludes this story with the statement that freedom from ill-will towards any creature, contentment, virtuous and straightforward conduct, austerity, control of mind and sense organs, truth, and charity of objects gathered through rightfully acquired wealth – each of these qualities is indeed equivalent to huge yagnas.

**Past history of Mongoose**

Sage Jaimini has authored his own Mahabharata, said to be even more extensive than that of sage Vyasa, which itself has a lakh of verses. It is only Asvamedhika Parva of Jaiminiya Mahabharata which is available now. Here sage Jaimini mentions the story of the mongoose in its previous birth as part of the narration of Mahabharata to king Janamejaya. Once sage Jamadagni got a cow from Swarga for helping him in Sraadha. The sage kept the cow’s milk in a new vessel. The milk was contaminated by Krodha, anger, which came in the form of a snake. Krodha did so in order to put the sage to test and see what he would do with the poisoned milk. The sage knew that it was Krodha and not a snake, who had come; he showed no trace of anger. Then Krodha felt defeated and insecure and was afraid of the sage. He appeared in human form and said to the sage with joined palms: “O best among Bhrigus, I am conquered by you; you have falsified the popular notion that the Bhrigus are highly short-tempered. I acknowledge my defeat. I tried to occupy a place in you, the very embodiment of forgiveness. I am afraid of you, the very personification of austerity. Have mercy on me.” Jamadagni said to Krodha: “Have no fear. I have no anger for you. But you have wronged my Pitrus, for whom the milk was kept. You approach and inform them.” Krodha came to be cursed later by the Pitrus that he would turn into a mongoose. He begged for their pardon. They said to him that he would be free from the curse at the very moment when he would narrate the story of the Unchavritti brahmana in the royal court of Yudhishthira in the presence of Sri Krishna. Krodha, turned mongoose, then visited many places where yagnas were held and finally arrived at the Aswamedha yagna of Yudhishthira.

This illustrative story enlightens us by depicting Krodha, anger as a poisonous serpent, which would spoil the milk, which is peace of mind. A self-controlled person not only conquers anger, but also helps his society by punishing anger when it arises.

**King Dilipa in Raghuvamsam**

Raghuvamsam, the celebrated Mahakavya of Kalidasa, dwells in detail of the spirit of self-denial of King Dilipa of the Ikshvaku dynasty, the great-great-grand father of Sri Rama. The description of his virtues and moral rectitude indicate to us Kalidasa's admiration of the great king. ज्ञाने मौनं क्षमा शक्तौ त्यागे श्लाघाविपर्ययः। गुणा गुणानुबन्धित्वात्तस्य सप्रसवा इव॥ १-२२ Though he is aware of others' misdeeds he is tongue-tied; though capable enough to retaliate, he is patient; while being munificent, he abhors praise; thus his attributes like awareness, capability and munificence coexist in him along with mutually contradictory attributes like silence, patience and indifference, as though they all are children of the same mother [1-22]. The childless king decides upon going to his family Purohita, the great sage Vasishtha and consulting him as to the cause of the misery and the means of relief. He journeys with his queen Sudakshina to the hermitage. The royal couple reaches the hermitage in the evening where they are warmly welcomed and assigned a hut for the night's rest with a few deer-skins for beds. Vasishtha discloses to them the real cause of their childless condition. Dilipa, during one of his trips to Swarga, ignored Kamadhenu’s presence there completely en route on his return; he failed to circumambulate and prostrate to her; Kamadhenu cursed him to be childless. Vasishtha directs them to repent for his past misdeed and propitiate the celestial cow Nandini, daughter of Kamadhenu, who alone, he says, has the power to fulfil their longing for son. Nandini is in Vasishtha’s ashram.

The royal couple king Dilipa and his queen, act on the sage’s advice immediately; they assiduously serve the cow and take every possible care of her. The king regularly takes her out to the pasturage in the mountain-dales, and in the evening both husband and wife make her comfortable. For twentyone days everything goes on without interruption. But on the twentysecond day while the cow is grazing on the greensward on the margin of a stream, with the king admiring the mountain scenery, all of a sudden there issues a lion who pounces on the cow. The horrified king puts a hasty arrow to his bow to kill the brute, but finds his hand stuck fast, as it were, to the bow-stock; this makes him stand aghast and helpless. To increase his dismay the lion begins to speak in human voice saying that he is one of the servants of Shiva set on guard in that part of the mountain where he has the privilege of devouring any animal that comes within his reach.

Dilipa finds that a struggle is useless. After protracted debate with the lion, he finds no way of saving the cow, who belongs to sage Vasishtha and is now under his care. He finally implores the lion to accept his own body as the price of the cow's release. The lion consents; when the king, with unflinching courage, bends down to become prey of the lion, the illusion vanishes; the lion disappears. The holy cow says:

भक्त्या गुरौ मय्यनुकम्पया च प्रीतास्मि ते पुत्र वरं वृणीष्व।
न केवलानां पयसां प्रसूतिमवेहि मां कामदुघां प्रसन्नाम्॥ २-६३

"I am gladdened by your reverence towards your Guru, and the compassion you have shown on me; oh, son, do not take me just as a milk producing cow, but know me as a granter of any desired object when pleased... as such, you may seek a boon from me... “[2- 63]. Nandini grants the king’s long-cherished desire. Now with the permission of sage Vasishtha, the couple partake of Nandini’s milk in the ashram and return to their capital. In due time queen Sudakshina gives birth to a glorious son who is named Raghu. Raghu’s son is Aja; Aja’s son Dasaratha; Dasarsatha’s son is Sri Rama.

 **Sacrifice alters Destiny**

A story of Sri Krishna and Arjuna appeared in a recent issue of Kalyan (Hindi) magazine (of Gita Press, Gorakhpur). When they were out on a walk, they found a brahmana beggar; Arjuna took pity and handed him a bundle of gold coins; Krishna smiled mysteriously. The brahmana gave the bundle to his wife, who kept it in an open pot. At night a thief stole it away. The brahmana had no option but to beg again. Arjuna, who was surprised on seeing the brahmana begging again, handed him a valuable ruby stone. The brahmana, on his way home, left the gem on a rock on the bank of a river and went for drinking water from the river. During that time, a fish, which came there, mistook the gem for an eatable and gulped it. The brahmana thought he was destined to continue to beg.

Arjuna and Krishna were again surprised at seeing the brahmana beg again. Arjuna concluded that he was indeed destined to suffer. Krishna, on his part, handed two paisa coins to the brahmana. Arjuna was amused. Krishna asked him to follow the brahmana and observe what would happen. The brahmana noticed that a fish was feeling miserable and flapping in a fisherman’s net. He took pity and gave the two paisa coins to the fisherman and had the fish deposited in his kamandalu. There the fish flapped and threw up ruby gem, which it had earlier gulped. The brahmana shouted in joy, ‘Got it, got it’. At that very moment, the thief, who had earlier stolen the bundle of old coins, happened to pass by and listen to the cry of the brahmana. He thought the brahmana had recognized him. He fell at his feet and returned the gold coins. The brahmana went back home extremely happy. Arjuna recounted to Krishna what he had seen. Krishna concluded: “Meritorious deed alters even destiny. When the brahmana initially wished to enjoy his possession all by himself, destiny played its part; but when he showed compassion on the fish, destiny was overruled.”