

THE INNER MEANING OF THE BRAHMANIC GRACE BEFORE MEALS

The orthodox Hindus, such as Brahmin recite certain *mantras* and perform certain rites before and after meals. The rites are more or less regularly observed today though among the less orthodox section of our community the mantras have very often to shift for themselves. Young India now and then speculates on the significance of the rites, with conclusions flattering to itself if a little humiliating to its ancient forefathers. In those primitive times our Rishis dwelt in forests and sprinkled water round the food placed before them as a sort of safeguard against the intrusion of ants and other vermin which abounded in such places as a matter of course. Our present custom is therefore an interesting survival of an old usage which had a meaning once but which has lost it with the march of so called civilization. Such theories sometimes advanced in jest and sometimes in earnest are no doubt ingenious but not warranted by the real conception which underlies the usage. Let us consider its true significance in the present article.

Eating is not, in the view of our ancient sages, simple catering to the physical comforts of man. It is a *sacrifice*, a *yajna* to the deities presiding over the vital functions. These deities are five in number and are known as *Prana*, *Apana*, *Vyana*, *Udana*, and *Samana*. *Pranadevata* symbolises the breath of life. His seat is in the heart and the lungs, and he superintends the process of circulation and respiration.

Apana devata presides over the life-wind in the body which goes downwards and out at the anus. His seat is the anus. He regulates the functions of the excretory organs such as the bladder and the intestines as is evidenced by the current explanation of the term *apana*. *Vayudeva* is a sort of *factotum* to the other gods and discharges the minor functions that pertain to vitality. All parts of the body come within the sphere of his activity, *Udana devata* manages the several sensory organs. He presides over the vital air that rises up the throat and enters the head.

Samanadevata has his seat in the cavity of the navel and controls the process of digestion. The agencies employed for the proper discharge of these several functions are commonly known as the five vital *airs*; but a more correct conception would seem to have been that they were so many forces controlling the several functions of life, that they were all one in their ultimate essence and variously designated only in virtue of the various vital functions discharged. These forces are supposed to be directed and controlled by the several gods above mentioned and the preliminary rites performed before meals symbolise the sacrifice offered to these deities in gratitude for the benefits conferred and in anticipation of those in store. It is not, at the same time to be forgotten, that these gods are only servants of a Higher Will whose breath hath set all this machinery in motion.

Eating, being thus a sacrifice at the outset, has to be done in its proper form. Purity of person is insisted on as a necessary preliminary. This is the reason why the orthodox Hindus, especially Brahmins sit to their meals after a bath and a fresh change of clothes. All sacred

THE INNER MEANING OF THE BRAHMANIC GRACE BEFORE MEALS

rites commence with the Achamana and water is sipped thrice accompanied by the recitation of the holy names of God. A temporary altar is raised to place the sacrificial food on. This is done by simply smearing the ground clean and tracing on a certain portion of it a mandala in the form of a square in the case of a Brahmin, a triangle for a Kshatrya, a circle for Vaisya, and a semicircle for a Sudra. This is the purification of the sacrificial ground. Thus says Apastamba: “He may eat sitting on ground which has been purified (by the application of cow-dung and the like)” – Dharma sutras 1-5-17. Then a sacrificial vessel is placed on the consecrated spot. Madhavacharya says in his commentary on the Parasarasmriti that a gold, silver or bronze vessel is fit for the purpose or a lotus leaf. Apastamba says (Dharma Sutra 1-5-17) that a vessel made of metal becomes pure by being scoured with ashes and the like, a wooden vessel by being scraped. The Brahmin generally uses a plantain leaf for the purpose. Then freshly prepared food is brought and placed on it.

Apastamba and other writers on Dharma go into details over the characteristics of acceptable and forbidden food. Apastamba says that food that has stood for a night and food that has turned sour should not be eaten and likewise all intoxicating drinks are forbidden. It might be noted that in Apastamba’s time Brahmins were flesh-eaters and so he gives minute rules as to what flesh was prohibited and what not.

The food thus placed is then purified. Water is sprinkled over it while Gayatri preceded by the Vyahritis is mentally recited. It is as follows:-

“Salutation to the Supreme being who pervades earth, air and heaven! We meditate on the adorable light of the Divine source of life. May He stimulate our understanding. Then water is sprinkled round the food and the Lord is implored to bless the food and endow it with the essence of life. Oh Lord, thou source of all life, impart thy impulse.” Then a few drops of clarified butter are poured over it. Again water is sprinkled round the food with the following mantra. “With *rita* do I besprinkle *Satya* all round.” This mantra is slightly varied in the night thus “With *Satya* do I besprinkle the *rita* all round. Food and water are here alternately regarded as *Satya* and *rita*. Vidyaranya thus distinguishes them. *Satya* he defines as truth-speaking and *rita* as discernment of truth by the mind. (*vide* Taittiriya Aranyaka Dr. Rajandra Lal Mitra’s Edition, p. 880). Loyalty to truth in mind, word, and deed is the highest Indian conception of duty and the greatest praise that can be accorded to food and water, the nourishers of life is to regard them as symbols of Truth. The idea seems to be that food and water sustain life and the life thus sustained is to be dedicated to the service of Truth.

Then comes the sipping of a small quantity of water. The fingers of the left hand are placed in contact with the leaf of the vessel on which the food has been served the practice in all Grihya sacrifices being to place the fingers of the left hand in contact with the sacrificial vessel whenever oblations are offered. Then a few drops of water are poured in the right palm and sipped while the mantra is being recited. This means. “Oh ambrosia water, thou art the mattress.”

We have already remarked that the preliminary rite before meals is a sacrifice offered to the several gods in charge of the functions of life and that these gods, though regarded as

distinct beings, in reality represent the several capacities of the one Deity presiding over life. This deity is invoked by this mantra to respond to the invitations of the sacrifice and accept the seat of water now offered, before receiving the oblations. This cushion-seat of water beautifully symbolises the life-sustaining property of water. Vidyananda thus comments on this mantra Vide (*Taitt. Aranyaka p, 853, Rajendra Lal Mitra's Edition*).

“Just as a cloth is spread over a cushion on which a man sleeps, so this water forms the coverlet for the Prana-Devata. Similarly the white Yajur Veda ascribes to this deity a dress of water.” One of the first acts of homage paid to gods as well as guests is the offering of a seat and the one offered to the god of life is fitly represented as a seat of water.

Then come the oblations to the god. A small quantity of the food is taken with the fingers and swallowed without being tasted, as it symbolises the oblation sent down to the Deity who resides inside. This act is repeated five times, each representing an oblation to a particular aspect of the Prana Devata. The first morsel is offered with the mantra “This oblation I offer to the god presiding over the life-breath.” Similarly the other four gods are propitiated in order. The full text of the mantra is this Vide 34th Anuvaka 10th Parapathaka Taittiriya Aranyaka.

“With faith in Vaidik observances and to attached Prana I offer this ambrosial food as oblation to Prana-devata. May this be well offered! Oh, oblation! be propitious and enter into me for the satisfaction of my physical craving.” When the five oblations have been thus offered, the concluding portion of the preceding mantra is recited. This means “may my soul be attached to the Supreme Lord, that I may thus attain Eternal bliss.” As this concluding mantra is recited a little water is poured over the left fingers and they are placed over the heart to symbolise the union of the Jivatman with Paramatman.

After the meals are over, a little water is once more sipped just before getting up while the following mantra is recited:- “Oh thou immortal water, thou art the covering,” i.e., may this water cover the food I have taken in and preserve it from putrefying.

A. VYDIK.