

Atithi Devo Bhava

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I

In common parlance the meaning of the sentence *atithi devo bhava* is wrongly taken to mean that the guest is equivalent to God. Surprisingly, this wrong interpretation of the sentence is even carried in the publicity media of the Government of India, particularly in the advertisements put up in the television on behalf of the Tourism Department of the Government. It is a pity that there exists no Sanskrit knowing person in the bureaucracy. It is true that Sanskrit is not the *rāṣṭra-bhāṣā* (the prime language of the country) of India, but it is one of the major languages recognized in the constitution of India. But, unfortunately, people often take pleasure in stating that Sanskrit is a dead language. I wonder why then the above mentioned sentence should be used in official communiqué of the Government which does not care for the correct meaning of the sentence. This projects a very dismal picture of the country to the outside world.

Atithi devo bhava is a simple sentence the meaning of which does not require profound knowledge of the language. The actual meaning of the sentence is being an illustrious guest. The word *bhava* does in no way carry a sense other than be or you become. It is derived from the verb (*kriyā*) 'bhu' in the imperative sense in the second person singular number: *bhu + lot + hi* makes *bhava*. The nominative is you (*tvam*). Thus the sentence bears the sense of somebody asking you to be or to become. There are many instances where such a sense is carried in well known statements like *āyusmān bhava* (you be endowed with long life), *ātmadīpo bhava* (be your own light) or *punarmuṣiko bhava* (you become a rat again). The first one is the usual form of blessings given by senior to a junior, the second one originates from a legend that this statement was made by Gautama Buddha to Ānanda, the closest associate of the former, and the third is the well known title of a story of the *Pañcatantra* where the sage is presented as making this statement.

However, it seems that there is a misconception about the meaning of the word *deva* in the sentence: *atithi devo bhava*. In Sanskrit, as in many other languages, the same word bears several meanings commensurate with the required sense. There is the well known Lexicon-cum thesaurus entitled the *Amarakośa* which contains various meanings of the same word in its section entitled *Nānārtha Varga* (the section dealing

with various meanings) the meanings differ sometimes because of the derivative sense, the conventional usage or in the light of the context of the use of the word. The word *deva* no doubt means god in view of the fact that gods are supposed to be involved in constant play of divine nature. The word *deva* is derived from the word '*div*', meaning divine play or game (*līlā*). But there are many other instances where the meaning of the word is extended in the general sense of a model, an ideal or the best of anything. In view of this the word *deva* in the sentence concerned means the illustrious, the modular, the ideal or the best. Even many personal names of mundane people have names with the suffix *deva*, for instance, Krishnadeva, Shankaradeva, Jñānadeva and Jayadeva, etc. In none of these cases the meaning is that the persons concerned are equivalent to Kṛṣṇa, Śaṅkara, Jñāna or Jaya. The meaning is that somebody has Kṛṣṇa as the ideal, Śaṅkara as the model, Jñāna or knowledge as the aim and the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* as the model.¹ That is why it is clear that *atithi devo bhava* means you be an illustrious or ideal or modular type of a guest.

It should be mentioned that there was a King of Mithila (Bihar) whose name was Nanyadeva, obviously meaning that he was, as claimed by him, unparalleled or the model or ideal for himself. His son had the name Daṇḍeva, meaning that he was an ideal ruler (*Daṇḍa*), moreover it is well known that the Sun-god has the epithet *Devadeva*, meaning that he was the model of gods.² Also, Lord Siva is known as Devadeva Mahādeva, meaning that Śiva is the great god who is regarded as the ideal for all other divinities. Here we find how the word *deva* has different shades of meaning depending upon the context or the technical sense concerned.

Another glaring example of the use of the word *deva* as prefix or suffix respectively bears altogether different meanings. The word *Devaguru* means the preceptor of the Gods and refers to Brhaspati, whereas the word *Gurudeva* means the illustrious teacher or preceptor and refers to the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Also, the word *deva* is used while addressing a person of high status like the king, the judge and other: in the case of the King it refers to him as illustrious or the best of the people (*narottama*), while in the case of the judge it means 'your honour'.

II

It should however be admitted that in the Indian cultural milieu the guest is considered to be equivalent to the God. This conception might have evolved from the Indian system of ritualistic worship (*pūjā*) of the God. There are two modes of worship, namely, the daily domestic worship (*nityapūjā* or *grhapūjā*) and periodic worship for a special purpose (*naimittika-pūjā*). In the former the God is worshipped as a member of the family, while in the other he is worshipped as an invited guest. It appears that the conception of the God as equivalent to the guest developed out of the latter mode of worship. However, in the above mentioned sentence, *atithi devo bhava*, the guest is perceived not as an invited guest but as somebody who comes

occasionally and unpredictably as a temporary visitor in the house. It seems that there was somewhere a reversal or re-imposition of the respective concepts about the guest being made and equivalent to the God.

It should also be mentioned that in the Indian mind there is a belief that God appears often in the guise of the guest (*atithi*), a poor man (*daridra Nārāyaṇa*) or *bhikhārī-Śaṅkara* (Śiva as a beggar). All these concepts with unknown cross-references got mixed up at some point of time to give rise to the concept of the guest in general as equivalent to God.³

The word *atithi* in the sentence under discussion undoubtedly refers to the temporary and unpredicted guests who come to the house occasionally without stretching the duration of their stay too long to become stagnated and to give the feeling of being a burden. The word *atithi* means one who stays only for a *tithi* or a single day. This implies his temporary status, and he symbolizes non-stagnation, mobility and adventure. This will be evident from our discussion in the next section of this essay.

III

The sentence *atithi devo bhava* occurs in the parting advice of the preceptor (*ācārya*) to the students who had completed education and learning under his tutelage in the *gurukula* system of education. The parting advice is known as the *Ācāryopadeśa* which is found in the *Āraṇyaka* part of the *Ṛgveda*, and it is repeatedly found in many other Vedic texts of the *Upaniṣadik* type.⁴ The advice-giving ceremony is known as the *samāvartana* (almost similar to the current Convocation Address given in the Indian Universities to the fresh graduates and other degree holders). The pass out students are known as the *snātakas* (graduates) who are supposed to have completed the first stage of their life known as the *brahmacaryāśrama*. The students afterwards are supposed to enter into the next stage of youth pursuing a life of a house holder after adopting avocation or a profession. Interestingly, the content of the advice given by the preceptor to the students is pertinent to the avocation or profession concerned with the arts or *śilpa* or *kalā*. We will analyze the relevant portions of the advice in order to understand how intimately the various precepts are aptly relevant to the profession of art. We will scan the advice in different sections in order to understand the pertinents of the relationship.

A. The four peers of the profession of art

The preceptor gives the following advice in this respect:

Mātr̥ devo bhava/ Pitṛ̥ devo bhava/ Ācārya devo bhava/ Atithi devo bhava

Be creative, protective and sustaining like an ideal mother. Be an illustrious father to maintain the legacy and linear linkage of the family. Be a modular teacher combining

profound knowledge of the subject and its practical applicability. Be an ideal guest who is unpredictably mobile and is non stagnant.

It seems that the students who are the prospective artists should be ever creative maintaining linkage with the legacy and should have not only a firm grasp of his trade but should also have good communication skill and an ability to combine the theoretical knowledge with the practical know-how. He should not remain stagnated to a particular point of style, idiom or predilection, but should always be experimental, innovative and non repetitive.

B. The terreverte of the profession of art

*Satyam Brūyāt/ Priyam Brūyāt/ Ma Brūyāt Satyamapriyama/ Priyañcāpi
Asatyam Mā Brūyāt*

Always express the Truth. Always make your expression pleasant. Do not expose the truth if it is unpleasant. Even if something is pleasant or entertaining but untruth do not ever express that.

The artist should always remain faithful to the truth, but never at the cost of making things unpleasant. In other words, he has a very difficult task of maintaining the rationale between the truth and the pleasant. He has always to be with the truth but never at the cost of making things unpleasant. This advice is very crucial in understanding the Indian concept of the role of the artist in the society. Being a responsible member of the society he has an obligation to the society. He cannot deviate from the Truth, but, at the same time, he cannot afford to regale or entertain the society with absurdities and dreams which are not true. They say that the artists have a liberty to express whatever they like but this is entirely a wrong conception as is very clearly made home by the preceptor to the prospective artist-students.⁵

C. Guidelines for the prospective artist

Yāni anavadyāni karmāṇi tāni tvayā sevītānin/ No itarāni/ Svādhyāt Mā Pramada

Whatever is good you should follow or pursue that only. Never the others. Do not deviate from the Tradition.

Under the above category the prospective artist has been advised to be always with the Truth, and not to sacrifice it at the cost of making things pleasant and entertaining. Here the prospective artist is given a guidance to determine the criteria of the Truth. It says that whatever is considered to be good for everybody is the hallmark of the truth, and not the others. It is difficult to find out what is good and what is not so.⁶ The determinant obviously is the conscience of the prospective artist concerned. This conscience is an amalgam of the totality of the prospective artist's inheritance, environment, tutelage, and obviously his genetic syndrome.

D. The mode of presentation of the Art

Śraddhayā deyam/Aśraddhayā adeyam/Śriyā deyam hr̥yā deyam dhiyā deyam bhiyā deyam

Present everything with conviction and confidence. Never give anything with a sense of diffidence and never be unfaithful to the presentation of the art. Give with decency, with humility, with full consciousness, and with an apprehension of being inadequate in the presentation.

The prospective artist has been advised by the preceptor to be always positive in approach and he has been advised not to be haughty and irresponsible of whatever he has to present in his art.

All these four segments of the preceptor's advice are very pertinent even today in the life of a practicing artists who adopt art as their profession. However, it should be admitted that the advice of the receptor is also very much relevant to many other professions even of the contemporary period. We have analyzed the basic principles contained in the advice of the preceptor in order to understand how relevant they were in the profession of art in the ancient period, as they are also today in the contemporary world. In fact, the advice of the preceptor is the essence of the Indian philosophy of art education. It should be mentioned that the so called texts known as the *śilpāsāstras* do not say much about art education. They refer to the techniques of art, the iconography and iconology, art appreciation, the criteria of good art or bad art. But they hardly say anything particularly pertinent to art education. That is why the *Ācāryopadeśa* of the *Ṛgveda* is a valuable document for the understanding of the philosophy of art education which, unfortunately, has not yet been properly highlighted by the art historians.⁷

In the context of the above discussion the sentence *atithi devo bhava* assumes unusual importance because it indirectly refers to the pivot of the profession of art which every practicing artists of India should take a note of. The artist is a constant seeker and, never a chooser. He should not get himself encored to one port of his voyage, but should always be a seeker of novelty, creativity, innovations, new experiments in order that the horizons of art get ever extended. This is verily the quintessence of the concept of modernity in art which envisages the discovery of new lines of mobility. The artist should have no blind commitment to any faith, fetish, bigotry or to any dubious institution of the vested interests. He should be always a leader, and not a follower, this is the true import of the advice of the preceptor (*eṣo ācāryopadeśaḥ*).

Endnotes

1. The word *Jaya* has a technical sense as is known from the well known verse recited before the reading of the *Mahābhārata* or the *Purāṇas* which is as follows:

*Nārāyaṇam namaskṛtya nīrancaivoa narottamam/
Devīm sarasvatīm vyasam tato jayamudīrayet//*

The *Jaya* (*Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*) should be read after salutation to and paying homage to God Nārāyaṇa, the people, the king, the goddess Sarasvatī and Vyāsa (the composer of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*). It is pertinent also to mention that there is an important Vedic text known as the *Jayākhya Samhitā* which primarily deals with the Epic and Purāṇic narratives.

2. This epithet is found for Sūrya is found in the *Ādityahṛdaya Mantra*, which was recited by Rāma, as advised by Śiva. This *mantra* appears in the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrating the preparatory stages before Rāma could go for fighting against Rāvaṇa for victory.
3. This point has been elaborately discussed by me in my paper entitled 'God as the Image of Man', presented at an International Seminar organized by the British Arts Council of London, to celebrate the Festival of India in 1982 in London. The Paper was to be published under the editorship of Dr. T.S. Maxwell, but, unfortunately, that has not been published as yet.
4. Our reference to the text of the advice is from a small piece entitled 'Ācāryopadeśaḥ' in the book called *Sanskrit-Pāṭhamālā* published by the Board of Secondary Education of West Bengal, Calcutta for the recommended Sanskrit Text for the Matriculation examination, 1955. Here mention is made of the *Āraṇyakaupadeśa* of the *Ṛgveda* as the source of the text.
5. It should be mentioned that the rider about the maintenance of pleasant presentation of art was a must for any form of art in the traditional Indian culture. The artists may claim to be liberalized, but they should always remember that there is a difference between liberty and license. No society gives a free license to the artist for doing whatever he likes. I have elaborately discussed this matter in my article entitled 'Of Liberty and License in Art', *Calcutta Review*, New series, 1980.
6. It is pertinent to note that in the *mantra* of the ritual of daily *Sandhyā-Āhnikā*, as contained in the *Yajurveda*, a vow (*śapatha*) is taken by the performer to say that *Yobaḥ śivatamo rasaḥ tasya bhājatehana uśatiriva mātraḥ*, meaning that we would care for whatever is good just like the mother caring for her progeny.
7. To do justice to this aspect of educational philosophy of Indian culture one should investigate deep into the various sections of the Epics, particularly *Anuśāsana-Parva* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* sections, various *Purāṇas*, *Kāvya*s and texts of the *Vāstu* and *Śilpa*.