Analysis of Yaksha Prasna: 123 Questions from a Tree Spirit

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This is (Yaksha Prasna) posted in Tamil as well.

The world’s longest epic Mahabharata has 18 books called Parvas. Among them, Vana Parva is the Book of the Forest. It has got many interesting anecdotes. The most interesting and informative anecdote is the questions of a spirit residing in a tree. The spirits that occupy trees, groves, forests, water sources are known as Yakshas. His female counterpart is Yakshini or Yakshi. Prasna means question. Tamil Sangam poets called them as Anangu in Tamil.

One day a Brahmin lost his fire making (drilling wood) wood at Dvaitavana forest. It was caught in the antlers of a deer. When the deer ran away, the Brahmin sought the help of the five Pandava brothers. When they went in search of it, Dharma or Yudhithra, the eldest of the five, felt very thirsty. He asked his brothers to look for water. When they saw water birds at a distance, they found out that it was a lake. Nakula was sent to fetch some water.

When Nakula approached the lake a voice came from the sky. It warned him not to touch the water without answering his questions. Actually the voice came from a crane who was none else than a tree spirit known as Yaksha in Sanskrit. Nakula ignored Yaksha’s warning and drank the water. Immediately he collapsed on the spot. Yudhistra sent Sahadeva, Arjuna and Bhima and all met the same fate. When Yudhistra came and saw them, the Yaksha warned him as well. But Yudhistra said that he would answer the questions.
The Yaksha asked him 123 interesting questions and Yudhistra answered all of them to the satisfaction of the Yaksha. Then all ended well. Here in this post, I will analyse his answers. Since it is a long article, I will divide it into 2 or 3 parts.

The questions in Sanskrit come in fours in each sloka (verse). Answers also follow it in the same way. I will give you some samples and then take individual questions:

**The Yaksha said,**

1. What causes the sun to rise? and
2. What are its companions?
3. What makes it set? and
4. What is it founded?

**Yudhistra said:**

1a. Brahman makes the sun rise, and the
2a. Gods are its companions
3a. The Law (Dharma) makes it sets, and on
4a. Truth is it founded.

5. By what does one become learned?
   By learning one becomes learned.
6. By what one attains to great things?
   By austerities one attains to great things
7. By what does one have a second/companion?
   One has a second in perseverance.
8. By what does one get insight?
One gets insight by attending on one’s elders.

Following elders or great men is a repeated theme in Hinduism. I have already written about it in the post ‘Satsnagtv Nissangatvam’ (Post No 754 posted on 21st December in this blog).

9. What is the divine nature of the Brahmins?
Vedic study is their divine nature.

10. What is their Law, like that of the strict?
Austerity is their law, of the strict type.

11. What is their human nature?
Mortality is their human nature.

12. What is their vice as of those without strictness?
Distraction (from Vedic study) is their vice.

References to Brahmins and their studies come in three or four questions. In the Vedic days Brahminhood was not a birth right. Kshatriyas like Viswamitra and Janaka became Brahmins by their studies and practices. The same thing is insisted here.

13. What is the human nature of the (warrior caste) Kshatriyas?
Weaponry is their divine Law (Dharma).

14. What is their Law, like that of the strict?
Sacrifice their law.

15. What is their human nature?
Fear is their human nature.
16. What is their vice as of those without strictness?
Desertion their vice.

17. Which is one sacrificial chant?
Breath is the sacrificial chant.

18. Which is the one sacrificial formula?
Mind is the sacrificial formula

19. What cuts down the sacrifice?
Speech alone cuts down the sacrifice.

20. What does the sacrifice does not exceed?
Sacrifice does not exceed speech.
Certain answers are philosophical. We can’t take them literally.

21. What is the best of the dropping?
Rain is the best of the dropping.

Indra, the God of Rain is praised in the Vedas from the very beginning. India is an agricultural country. Tamil Veda Tirukkural places rain next to God. It is the second chapter next to Prayer.

Bhagavad Gita says From food come forth beings; from rain food is produced (Gita 3-14)

Tirukkural (12) says, “All food is produced because of rain, which itself is food again”.

If there is no rain, there won’t be any festivals for Gods, says Valluvar in couplet 18. This is an indirect reference to Indra Festival, celebrated on a grand scale in Tamil Nadu 2000 years ago. One Chola king cancelled the festival due to drought. In the very next couplet (19), he says there won’t be Dhanam
(charity) and Tapas (penance). He used two Sanskrit words which are repeated in the same order in Ramayana and Mahabharata innumerable times. Bhagavad Gita which is part of Mahabharata also has these words in many places. Avvaiyar, most famous Tamil poetess, also used it.

22. What is the best of the falling?
Seed is the best of the falling.

23. What is the best of the standing?
Cows are the best of the standing.

Cows are adored throughout Vedic and Tamil literature. Brahmins and cows will be used to denote all human beings and entire animal kingdom (Go Brahmanebya). Tamil Veda Tirukkural also followed it in many places (Kural 560 and 1066).

24. What is the best of the speaking?
A son is the best of the speaking.

25. Who breathes, experiences the objects of the senses, is intelligent, honoured in the world, and respected by all creatures—yet is not alive?
He who makes no offering to the five, to wit gods, guests, dependents, ancestors and himself, may breathe, but is not alive.

In couplet 46 Tiruvaluvar insists this Pancha Yagna concept.

26. What is heavier than earth?
Mother has more weight than earth.
Mata, Pita Guru, Deivam (Mother, Father, Teacher and God) is the order followed by the Hindus for thousands of years. Answers to Q 26 and 27 make it crystal clear.

‘Mathru Devo Bhava’, says the Vedas.

To understand, Yudhistira’s answer one must understand the respect given to mother and earth in India. Even before the ancient Greeks called mother earth Gaia, Hindus praised her as Bhumā Devī (Madame/Goddess Earth). Earth is used as a simile for patience throughout Indian literature. Tamil Veda Tirukkural 151 also used this. But mother is greater than the earth.

Hindus recite certain Slokas/hymns called Morning Prayers every morning. The first few hymns ask for pardon for putting our feet on her (Mother Earth).

27. What is higher than sky or heaven?
Father is higher than sky/heaven.

28. What is faster than wind?
Mind is faster than the wind.

The Hindu concept of Mind and Time are entirely different from the western concepts. I have explained it in the two part article Hindu Predictions about Future. Hindus believed that they can do Inter Galactic Travel by the power of mind. The Western World has not explored the Mind Power yet. We believe in Great Eight Powers of Mind called Ashta Ma Siddhi. The western science has not come even closer to us in this field. We are far advanced in it.

29. What are more numerous than men (in some grass)?
Worries are more numerous than men or grass.

30. What does not close the eyes when asleep?
A fish does not close the eyes when asleep.
31. What does not stir when born?
An egg does not stir when born.

32. What has no heart?
A rock has no heart.

33. What grows by speeding along?
A river grows by speeding along.

34. Who is the friend of the traveller?
Education or skills is the friend of the traveller.
It is a very practical advice. The learning is an asset for a person travelling abroad.

**Wife is Friend, Philosopher & Guide**

35. Who is the friend at home?
The wife is the friend at home.
Wife is praised as a Friend, Philosopher and Guide and in two or three answers in the Yaksha Prasna.

**Quotes from Katha Sarit Sagar on Women and Wife**

(Please read my post The Largest Story Collection in the World)

Chaste women are, like Siva, are able to create, preserve and destroy this world (Story of King Ratnadhipati)
Nothing in these three worlds is unattainable by chaste women (Story of Water-genius)

Humility is an unfailing characteristic of good women (Story of Vihitasena)

Women of good family ever worship their husbands with chaste and resolute behaviour and never think of any other man, for to virtuous wives the husband is the highest deity (Story of Saktimati)

To woman of a good family a husband is God (Story of Muktaphalaketu and Padmavati)

A good looking husband, even though poor, is to be preferred to an ugly one, though he be an emperor over the whole earth (Story of Mrgankadatta and Sasankavati)

Daughters are better than sons, and produce happiness in this world and the next. Why do kings care so much about those sons that hanker after their kingdom, and eat on their fathers like crabs?

(Story of ascetic who conquered anger)

By marrying a wife, and performing in his house offerings to the Mane, sacrifices to the gods and hospitality to the guests use their property to object the three objects of life; the stage of the householder is the most useful one (Story of Siva and Madhava)
36. Who is the friend of the sick?
The physician/ doctor is the friend of the sick man.

37. Who is the friend of the dying (moribund)?
Charity is the friend of the moribund.
Sangam Tamil literature and the Hindu epics repeat in many places that only charity will take anyone to heaven (See Purananuru 141 and 134).

38. What travels alone?
The travels alone.

39. What once born is born again?
The moon is reborn

40. What is the cure for snow?
Fire is the cure of snow

41. Which is the vessel that can contain everything?
The earth is the vessel that can contain everything.

Continued in Part 2

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