Tithi's *Atithi*: Insights from Katha Upanishad

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Abstract

The concepts of *tithi* and *atithi* are of paramount importance within the cultural framework of India, exerting a profound influence on both textual exegesis and social interactions. Rather than being perceived as mutually exclusive categories, they are construed as complementary entities. These concepts play an indispensable role in *anusthan* (ritual), *sanskar* (ordination), *dharma anusthan* (religious ritual), and *utsav* (festivals); each imbued with its own societal significance. The present investigation delves into the exploration of tithi (a lunar day) and atithi through the prism of interactions between Nachiketa and Yamraja from the Katha Upanishad, with the aim of elucidating their scriptural interpretations within socio-religious contexts and examining how individuals embody them in practical life scenarios. The analysis sheds light on the intricate interplay between mythological narratives and everyday practices, revealing how ancient philosophical concepts continue to shape contemporary cultural norms and behaviours in Indian society. Furthermore, the study highlights the enduring relevance of these ancient teachings as guiding principles for ethical conduct and spiritual growth in modern times, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between tradition and contemporary life.

Keywords: *Tithi*, *Atithi*, Katha Upanishad, Nachiketa, Yamraj, Vedic Philosophy, Mythological Narratives, Hospitality

1.0 Introduction

The paper engages in the discussion of the concepts of *tithi* and *atithi*[1] in five sections. The first section attempts to introduce the concepts of tithi and atithi in India's tradition, outlines the organisation of the study, and presents its purpose, justification along with a brief review of available literature; it lays down the methodological outline. The second section describes the astronomical understanding of tithi, the third section explores the concept of atithi. The fourth section dwells upon the notions of tithi and atithi in the context of their social, religious, and philosophical meanings and practices with reference to texts and rituals and festivals. The philosophical meaning of tithi and atithi is explored with reference to Katha Upanishad[2] while providing a critical insight into an understanding of binarity in India's tradition and philosophy. The fifth section concludes the study.

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2.0 Objectives

Main objectives of the study are to

(i)   understand the binary concepts of tithi and atithi   in a holistic perspective; and
(ii)   explore social, religious, astronomical, and philosophical meanings of the concepts of tithi and atithi in India's tradition.

3.0 Review of Literature

A few critical studies on tithi and athithi are available covering astrology, religions, philosophy, astronomy, etc. There are works in Sanskrit and their translations in English which provide contextual reference to the binary concepts. Primarily in the study of Hindu religion the concepts of tithi and atithi have drawn significant attention of several scholars who have highlighted the importance of tithi in determining auspicious times for rituals and ceremonies. Mostly, they were engaged in exploring their historical, cultural, astronomical, and philosophical significance.

Iyenagar (2016) traces its first reference in the legend of Manu's flood as narrated in *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa.* In the text the word *tithi* is used to allude to the Fish's promise to Manu to appear on a specific *tithi* in a specific samā (year). The verse reads:

sa yatithim tatsamām paridideśa tatithim samām nāvamupakalpyopāsām cakre ||
(see Iyengar 2016:39).

The Vedic classic *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* also uses the word *tithi* to allude to the dual character of *pourṇamāsī* (full moon day) and *amāvāsyā* (new moon day), and the associated *upavāsa* (ritual fasting) before the full moon and new moon sacrifices, respectively (Iyengar et.al. 2019).

Swami Nikhilanand (1949) has translated four Upanishadas including Katha Upanishad. It is evident that the concepts of tithi and atithi are not explicitly mentioned in the Katha Upanishad. They are indirectly mentioned with reference to *kala* (time), the importance of hospitality, and the concept of aithi as a symbol of divine. Presentation of atithi in the above three meanings are also discussed in the works of Keith (1928), Dandekar (1959) and Pingree (1978). Through the story of Nachiketa and Yamaraj Katha Upanishad focus on individual's journey towards self-realisation that indirectly connects the concepts of tithi and atithi.

Studies on *Pachangas* deal with the concept of tithi in the sense of astrology and Hindu rituals. Kennedy et al. (1965) has studied Hindu calendar in a historical perspective with reference to Al-Bīrūnī' and Fuller (1980) with reference to the calendar prevalent in Tamil Nadu. Mishra (2020) has studied the relations between festivals and calendars as mentioned in Hindu scriptures. Bokde et. al. (2024) have studied Vedic calendar system based on lunisolar tradition and have attempted to convert Gregorian calendar to Vedic calendar as per the Panchang and the tithis. Tithi according to lunisolar system is computed based on a 12-degree divergence in longitude between the sun and moon beginning with either conjunction or opposition between the two. Bhujle & Vahia (2006) have made a critical study of tithi formulation based on *Sûrya-Siddhânta*[3.]

The conventional approach to calculating tithis was established approximately 500 A.D. when the calendar was standardised through the publication of *Sûrya-Siddhânta* (Bhujle & Vahia 2006:1).

Calculation of tithi along with its conceptualisation was an absorbing engagement in Indian astronomy as is evident from the works of Iyengar (2016), Das (1930), Pingree (1963 &1978), Poddar (2017) and Abhayankar (1947). The religious aspect of astronomical knowledge is critically argued in Abhayanakr (1947), for the basis of Hindu astronomy lay on the religious aspirations of the Hindus**.** A similar argument reflects in the work of Thibaut (1879) in the latter half of the nineteenth century where he underscores the role of tihi in astronomical and astrological traditions of India. Bhujle and Vahia (2006) have presented a mathematical formulation of tithi calculation and applied the formulation to determine the tithi of Gudi Padwa. Mythological study on the basis of stories and the role of tithi in determining the auspicious time of festivals have been studied by Wilkins (1903), Sharma (2019), and Somayaji (1985) respectively. Sharma (2019) has underscored the determination and significance of tithi in Hindu festivals. Kane (1958) has also examined connection of tithi with the position of the Moon and its role in determining auspicious times for Hindu rituals and ceremonies.

In contrast, atithi, signifying an untimely guest, has been studied by scholars like Dandekar (1959), Das (2013), and Keith (1928) with focus on spirituality. Their study is based on Hindu scriptures focusing on the tradition of Hindu hospitality and ethics. A divine connotation associated with atithi, illustrating the moral obligation to treat guests with reverence, is underscored by them. Keith (1928) has critically examined the philosophical implications of the concepts of tithi and atithi on Hindu worldview. However, critics argue that this concept has been oversimplified, neglecting its complex historical and cultural contexts (Brockington 1996). Furthermore, feminist scholars have challenged the patriarchal undertones inherent in traditional interpretations of atithi; and in doing so they have advocated for a more nuanced understanding (Narayanan 2013). There are also criticisms on selective nature of translation studies of the Sanskrit texts and a misunderstanding of the text. For example, J. Eggeling (1882)[4] in this translation of *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa,* the verse on Manu's flood, has omitted the notion of atithi (Iyaengar 2016:39). Iyengar et al. (2019:3, fn.10) also point to misunderstanding of the text in the works of Keith.

Despite several studies, research gaps remain in the available literature. One of the gaps is a synergic presentation of astronomical, philosophical and socio-cultural dimensions of the concepts of tithi and atithi from a multi-disciplinary perspective. The present paper attempts such a synergic engagement.

4.0 Methodology

 The study adopts mixed methods. It is based on both empirical foundation and theoretical background. The author having exposure to the pluralistic pan-Indian culture, gained empirical grounding on cultural dimensions related to the time. Observation and interaction, therefore, have been the primary source of information for this research. Belonging to the culture and making it a source of information creates doubt about value neutrality in a study. The author is quite cautious in this regard and applies scientific methods of presentation and analysis to overcome any possible bias.

In this study the author adopted hermeneutics and comparative methods of presentation and analysis. Hermeneutics approach was used to interpret the classical text Katha Upanishad and cite commonly used texts to understand meanings in social and scriptural contexts. Within this methodological approach, the article seeks to review, dissect and re-examine the concepts of *tithi* and *atithi*. Applying comparative approach, the article

juxtaposes distinctive insights of the concepts like *Tithi* and *Atithi* over spatio-temporality. Focus is laid on how they have been composed, reconciled, and re-established in a multifarious religio-cultural framework over time.

Precisely, data sources belong to primary and secondary fields. In addition to observation and participation, classical texts are also primary source in this study. Secondary data are some works cited or referred to in contexts. In view of the approaches adopted, the paper is primarily a qualitative study. The theoretical background underlies India's tradition of holistic understanding of a phenomenon; *tithi* and *atithi* are considered as the reality of a complete whole.

5.0   Concepts of Tithi and Atithi

Human perception of the notion of time has both objective and subjective expressions in scientific and cultural engagements. Astronomy engages with it objectively by scientific study of the position of sun, moon, planets, and stars. However, cultural perception marks a diverse scope imbued in theological, ethical, social, and philosophical discourses. These two perspectives–scientific and cultural–are not representations of exclusivity in the traditions in India; they are syncretised into an integrated whole[5]. Even the term of expression of time reveals the syncretism of science and culture. One of such terms used to represent a unit measure of time is tithi (Iyengar et al. 2019:1). In common parlance, a tithi is a lunar day calculated as the 30th part of the synodic month and refers to the 'time taken by the Moon in increasing its distance from the Sun by 12 degrees' (Bhujle &Vahia 2006:2). The day assumes the name tithi when imbued with cultural meanings. Tithi in fact is a concept, but not a mere expression of a unit of time in India's tradition; it is conceptualised in terms of time, values, ethics, morality, astronomy, astrology, divine symbol, journey towards self-realisation, and so on by Mishra (2020a).

One of the basic features of Indian tradition which can be observed is binarity. The binarity is a mental construct as (Lévi-Strauss 1963) would argue. Before, such a construct emerges in mind, it can be argued, the mind encounters opposite images around. The early human, before the evolution of mental faculty to perceive binarity, must have observed natural phenomena like day (bright) and night (dark), heat and cold, high and low, etc. No doubt, binarity has got a crucial place in later stages of cultural evolution in all communities including the tribes (Behera 2018). The binarity is very much evident in cultural tradition of India. Needless to say, the *tithi* has its binairty in the *atithi* in Indian culture, when the latter is defined as 'one's arrival with no prior information.

The concepts of tithi and atithi are of paramount importance within the cultural framework of India, exerting a profound influence on both textual exegesis and social interactions. Interestingly, rather than being perceived as mutually exclusive categories, they are construed as complementary entities. These concepts play an indispensable role in various rituals such as *anusthan* (ritual), *sanskar* (rites), *dharma anusthan* (religious ritual), and *utsav* (festival), each imbued with its own societal and philosophical significance.

The binarity does not connote exclusivity and separated entities as they appear, but a complementarity in perceiving a reality as a whole. Day and night are two apparently distinct phenomena. But they are perceived in relation to the Sun, a holistic reality in its absence and presence. Life and death are not two different stages, but a continuity of the cosmic reality of life cycle of birth and death cycle. A phenomenon is not a reality in itself, it exists in relation to its opposite and together they make a meaning in cultural and philosophical domains. In fact a phenomenon carries meaning in different domains of the Indian knowledge system. The

phenomenon of tithi has astronomical, astrological, cultural, religious, and philosophical meanings (Iyengar et.al. 2019). This is also another way of holistic understanding of India's tradition.

5.1 *Understanding Tithi*

Tithi is an important component of *Panchanga*[6], a traditional calendar in Vedic Astrology, and a medium used for predicting the *tithi*s of Hindu festivals (Bhujle & Vahia 2006), and a measurement of time (Iyaengar 2016:39 and Bhujle & Vahia 2006). There are 30 *tithi*s in a lunar month, divided into two phases, namely, **Shukla Paksha** (waxing Moon). This is the period of a fortnight from the new moon (*Amavasya*) to the full moon (*Purnima*). The other phases are called **Krishna Paksha** (waning Moon) and consists of the period another fortnight of the lunar month from the full moon to the next new moon (Bokde et al. 2024). Each *tithi* varies slightly in duration because it depends on the Moon's movement relative to the Sun. From a calendrical perspective, a *tithi* commences on one day and concludes on the subsequent day. Nevertheless, the duration of the *tithi* frequently changes due to the non-linear nature of apparent motions (Sewell and Dikshit 1896:3). A *tithi*'s duration can fall entirely within the boundaries of a single solar day. At times, the Moon can persist in the same *tithi* for up to 2 days, including one entire solar day and portions of another (Bokde et al. 2024 and Bhujle & Vahia 2006:4).That is why, it is observed, a festival is celebrated either of the days.

There is a debate that the word tithi has 'evolved as a transformation of the word *stithi* to connote a particular shape or phase of moon', the phase pointing to a particular position of the Sun and the Moon (Iyengar et al. 2019:3). In all the cases, tithi or stithi connote to the position of the Sun and Moon, and length of tithi constantly alters since 'the motions the Sun and Moon keep varying in speed. (Bhujle & Vahia 2006:2).

There are 12 lunar months in a year, with each lunar month consisting of approximately **29.5 days**. This makes the lunar year about **354 days** long, which is approximately 11 days shorter than the solar year. There are 12 solar months in a year and the duration of a solar month is approximately **30.44 days**, making the solar year roughly **365.25 days** (Szücs-Csillik & Bădocan 2022). To reconcile the difference between the solar and lunar years, the Indian calendar has devised *adhika maas* and *kashaya maas*[7].

1. *Adhik Maas* (Leap Month):

- Approximately every 32.5 months, an extra month known as **Adhik Maas** (also called **Purushottam Maas**) is added to the lunar calendar to synchronise it with the solar year.
- This month is inserted to ensure that the lunar months align with the seasons, which are governed by the solar year (Abhayankar 1947:99).

2. *Kshaya Maas* (Skipped Month):

- In rare cases, when two successive new moons occur within a solar month, one lunar month is omitted, which is known as **Kshaya Maas**.
- This is an infrequent phenomenon and helps maintain the balance between the solar and lunar calendars (Abhyankar 1947).

Several Indian festivals are based on the solar calendar. In India *Makar Sankranti* is celebrated on the tithi that marks the Sun's entry into Capricorn. Similarly, *Baisakhi* in

Punjab, *Pana Sankranit* in Odisha, *Bohag Bihu* in Assam fall on Sankaranti tithi based on solar calendar.   Festivals like *Diwali* fall on the new moon day and festivals like *Buddha Purnima*, *Raksha Bandhan, Guru Purnima,* etc. fall on the full moon day; both tithis are based on lunar calendar[8].   Lunisolar connection is described critically in Bokde et al. (2024) and Freed & Freed (1964:68-80).

5.2   *Who is an Atithi?*

In contemporary terminology, an *atithi* refers to an individual who arrives at our residence wit hout prior notice or after notifying the host.Currently, individuals perceive a person as a guest who only visits on specific occasions such as festivities and celebrations.

Upon examining the definitions of the term atithi as presented *in* our *Dharmaśāstras* and other literature, it becomes evident that the idea has undergone significant changes over time.

> *yasya na jñāyate   nāma na ca <u>gotram</u> na ca <u>sthitiḥ</u> |*
> *akasmāt gṛhamāyāti so'tithiḥ procyate budhaiḥ ||*

(*Śabda Kalpadrumah*, part.1, p.26 ; as cited in Sarika 2022)

The above verse states that an individual, who appears at an unexpected time without revealing his (her) personal information such as, name or family status, is addressed as an atithi in Indian culture.

> *tithi parvotsavāḥ sarve tyaktā yena mahātmanā|*
> *so'tithiḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ śeṣānabhyāgatān viduḥ ||*

(*Yamasaṃhitā;* as cited in Sarika 2022).

In the above verse in *Yamasaṃhitā*, a distinction is made between atithi and abhyagat. According to the above verse atithis are individuals who do not attend specific events like festivities or celebrations while *abhyāgatas*[9] are those who do attend such events.

The word atithi is defined in *Śabda Kalpadruma* as *atati sātatyena gacchati natiṣṭhati* (*Śabdakalpadruma*, part.1, p.26; as cited in Sarika 2022). It refers to one who does not stay but constantly moves. Based on this, we can infer that the atithi is 'someone who comes and departs after receiving food, without staying'.

The synonyms of atithi like *āgantu, āveśika* suggest that an   atithi is completely unknown to the host, comes unexpectedly and leaves after a time (*see* Sarika 2022).

According to Manu,

> ekarātraṃ tu nivasan *atithi*rbrāhmaṇaḥ smṛtaḥ |
> anityaṃ hi sthito yasmāt tasmād *atithi* rucyate ||

(*see* Sarika 2022)

This verse connotes that the co-inhabiting of the host and the guest makes the host realise that he is hosting God Himself and for this specific unchangeable truth makes the atithi, highest (Sarika 2022). This verse speaks volume of the momentous role of atithi in our day-to-day lives. In the Indian context, hospitality, known as *atithi-saparyā* (hospitality in Indian tradition), is a revered tradition that may be traced back to the Vedic period. The idea is encapsulated in the phrase *atithi devo bhava* (Dandekar 1959 and Das 2013).

In Mahabharata, Yudhisthira asks Bhishma to tell him whether any householder has ever succeeded in conquering *Mrityu* (Death) through the practice of dharma. Bhishma replies, by narrating the story of Sudarsana and Ogavati, that by following the '*atithidharma* (hospitality due to guests')', death can be conquered. Bhishma further reiterates that 'for a householder, there is no greater divinity than a guest' (Dandekar 1966: LVIII; *also see* Hiltebeitel 2005.). The divine guest through whom a householder can overcome death by showing him unstinting hospitality, even to the point of offering him his wife, is itself the practice of Dharma[10] (Hiltebeitel 2005:38-39).

The Vedas contain numerous explicit allusions to the act of honouring an *atithi*, which is manifested through ritualistic activities. Nevertheless, these ceremonial activities underwent a transformation into societal traditions during the era of *Dharmasūtras*[11] and *Smṛitis*[12]. Simultaneously, it is important to acknowledge that the ritualistic essence of *atithi-saparyā* (hospitality) has consistently remained significant in the subsequent stages of Indian culture. In the *Dharmasūtras*, Epics, *Smṛitis*, and *Purāṇas*[7], *atithi-saparyā* is considered a primary and pious obligation of a householder.

There are numerous customs and rituals linked to atithi-saparyā. During the Vedic time, customs like conveying warm greeting, offering seats, and providing food were commonly practiced and are still observed today. The *Yajurveda* contains numerous references discussing the benefits of pleasing atithis. *Brāhmaṇas* like *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, and *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* have atithi-saparyā as a component of house holders' rites (Sarika 2022).

Stories from the Upaniṣhads and Puranas frequently highlight the significance of atithis. The narratives of Nachiketa in the Kaṭha Upaniṣhad and the reception of Gautama by King Pravahaṇa Jaivali in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad exemplify the significance attributed to the concept of atithi during the Upaniṣhadic era (Krishnananda 1983). The texts of the Ramayaṇa and Mahabharata also emphasise the significance of *atithi-saparyā* (see Sarika 2022).

5.3 Atithi in the context of Tithi

The full moon or Purnima tithi is an atithi every-one looks forward to, owing to its splendour and brilliance, whereas on Amavasya tithi moon is engulfed by darkness, giving the night a fearsome feel**.** If moon of Purnima tithi or fullness is heartily invited, does it imply that fallenness or moon of Amāvaśyā is uninvited? What is so alluring about fullness, that we shun away emptiness or nothingness? Are fullness and emptiness contradictory to each other? Should we view them in isolation from each other or in alliance with the one another? Purnima appears not by crossing the threshold of the main door, but by dint of the peeping hinges and creeks of the windowpanes. Individuals with an inherent inclination to pursue knowledge have the innate ability to be drawn towards even the slightest glimmer of information. However, even if the door is completely open, if there is a restricted intent to pursue knowledge, no progress will be made towards acquiring it. Similarly, Nachiketa may be described as a youthful lad, yet his advent was akin to the purnima delicately revealing itself through the openings and crevices of a door. He arrived without waiting for a dramatic entrance, but rather unexpectedly (Prabakaran 2024a). *Laxmi* (Goddess of wealth), equally silvery or perhaps more effulgent, like the Moon, however, prefers the main threshold to enter and what is more, she has to be coaxed to be graced over. The ever luminous moon however, needs no such enticing and graces the bedtime earthlings through every nook and corner. The charm of both Goddess Laxmi and Moon is fleeting in nature. Moon is forever fluctuating and

altering. So is Goddess Laxmi who is '*chanchala*' (the fickle-fortune) and not '*sthira*' (steady) and keeps relocating her *drishti* (gaze) from moment to moment. In variance with these two glistening graces, the narrative will be deficient if we fail to feed the underlooked sides, their due.

These sides are the often avoided and seldom acknowledged laterals of Purnima and Goddess Laxmi. When the opulent, bright Purnima comes, her other half, the shrunken and dull side, the dark moon, or the new moon, infamously referred to as Amāvaśyā is not left far behind. In reference to the mythology of King Daksh's vicious expletive and Lord Shiva's boon, the Moon shrinks to Amavasya, and ripens, becomes Purnima again each fortnightly every month[13]. These phases of the moon reveal the 'being-in' essence of the moon as it posited in spatio-temporal context. In parallel to this, Goddess Laxmi's entry is not complete without the successive entry of her *Jestha* (elder) sister, Goddess *Alaxmi* (Goddess of grief and Misfortune) (Singh 2015). If Amāvaśyā is the dark side of the moon that is necessary for making it full and complete, should not Amāvaśyā be given the same token of respect and reverence as Purnima if not more? What is Amāvaśyā? The literal meaning of Amāvaśyā is derived from the Sanskrit word *'Amā'* meaning together and *'vaśyā'* connoting to dwell. This lodging discloses the conjunction of sun and moon. The tithi, i.e. Amāvaśyā is literally defined by Sir Monier-Williams as 'the night of new moon (when the sun and moon "dwell" together), the first day of the first quarter on which the moon is invisible' (Monier-Williams 1986:81)'

From invisibility to full visibility is an odyssey taken by the moon to glorify and testify once again that from darkness emits light. When one is at the gloomiest moment of life, it is the defining moment when she will calmly take stock of her life and stitches them anew. This stitching and re-fabricating will make her visible in a re-generated way: fresher, bolder and alluring to say the least. This is the moment when the moon becomes the Purnima. It is a wakeup call of the divine to reach out to the divinity itself. This journey of self-revelation could be experienced only when one has undergone the murkiest and aphotic stages of life. Darkness in various genres (emotions, moods, feelings, perspectives, relationships, circumstances, individual, or even spiritual) cannot be ignored or overlooked. That phase is only a transition to reach the highest, the maximum, the zenith. Along these lines, the quintessence to celebrate full life and full light, one must first pay obeisance to the empty life or, the empty moon, the new or the dark. Akin to this is the anecdotal account of Goddess Alaxmiwho is infamously called as the Goddess of adversity and agony. Like Amāvaśyā, the name of Goddess Alaxmi too is whispered with a sigh! There is no embellished ritual for her. She is the inadmissible, distasteful, and the unwished-for sibling of her antithetical sibling, Goddess Laxmi. What is so repelling about Goddess Alaxmi? What makes her the negative version of her sister? Why is negative excluded?

Legendarily, in the famous *Samudra Manthan* (churning of the ocean) between the *Devtas (*Gods*)* and the *Asuras* (Demons), to extract out Goddess Laxmi, heaps of collectible treasures emerged, both positive and negative, namely, *Kamadhenu* (*the* divine cow*)*, *Chintamani* (wish fulfilling jewel), *Airavata* (the elephant which became the vehicle of Lord Indra), *Parijat (a flower)*, *Dhanwantari* (divine medicine man*)*, to *Halahal* (poison), *Jyestha Laxmi* and more. Jyestha or the elderly sibling of Goddess Laxmi is asked by Lord Vishnu to dwell in places that are inauspicious and grief-stricken. It was instructed that wherever Goddess Laxmi would follow, her elder sister too would follow. It is not unpredictable that places that are flourishing and prosperous often end in bitter stories of family disputes and broken homes which Leslie (1992) has accounted in her study of Śrī and Jyesthā. If Goddess Laxmi and Purnima are celebrated with pomp and splendour, we should not obliterate the relevance of Amāvaśyā and Goddess Alaxmi. For Laxmi Pujan or the worship of Goddess

Laxmi is invoked only during the darkest time of the month, on an Amāvaśyā that heralds with the popular festival of the Lights called *Deepawali*. When Goddess of wealth and abundance herself choses Amāvaśyā as the tithi of her arrival as atithi, one should not categorise what is favourable and what is not. That negation or darkness is not to be anxious of but to be accepted gracefully as a part of ever-changing nature ((Leslie 1992).

6.0 The concepts of Tithi and Atithi in the context of the Katha Upanishad

The concepts of tithi and atithi are deeply rooted in Vedic philosophy and have philosophical as well as practical implications. To understand these concepts fully, their meanings and relevance in the Katha Upanishad need to be explored.

Tithi as explained earlier is a measurement of passage of time, more precisely a lunar day and is used in socio-religious context in consonance with *shubh tithi* (auspicious occurrence or tithi) and *ashubh tithi* (inauspicious tithi). In Katha Upanishad, the story of a young boy, Nachiketa (atithi) and Yama (host), explores the concept of the ultimate truth through the phenomenon of life and death, and has the intersection of eternity and time as the backdrop (Prabakaran2024b). In the context of the Katha Upanishad, time is related to an individual's journey through the cosmic order while following the eternal cycle of life and death. Atithi means a visitor who arrives without any prior announcement. In a deeper sense, it signifies an eternal traveller in consonance with *atman*.

There is a mantra in Yajurveda:

samidhāgniṁ duvasyata ghṛtairbodhayatātithim|
āsmin havyāju hotana svāhā |
idamagnaye idanna mama||

The verse means "Set the agni, the atithi, on fire with ghee and worship it with samit. Offer all havish to it. This is not my property; it is intended for *Agni*" (Mishra 2020a). Here, the word atithi is used as a sobriquet for *Agni*. In the root sense, atithi is derived from '*at'* which means 'to move constantly ' and is like an *ātman* which travels without constraint of time and space. As atman and atithi have same root sounds they are synonyms of constant traveller; atman travels 'from life to life, taking different forms'. This sense of divinity is ascribed to atithi in socio-religious spheres and therefore is to be respected and treated well (Mishra 2020a). Atithi as atman for self-realisation is implicitly described in Nachiketa and Yamraj story.

In the Vedic tradition the hospitable treatment of an atithi is a sacred duty, and falls under the broader and sacred principles of *Dharma* and respect for all beings. The atithi is often seen as a manifestation of the divine and should be treated with utmost respect and hospitality (Sarika 2022).

In Katha Upanishad, the *atithi* is a traveller, a seeker who is on a path to spiritual quest and self-discovery and aspires to acquire knowledge. Though the text doesn't emphasise or elaborate on the concept of *atithi* as a physical guest, the spiritual seeker is an *ātman* in search of higher wisdom and can be viewed as a guest metaphorically. The following quote aligns pertinently with this concept.

haṁsaḥ śuciṣadvasurāntarikśasaddhotā vediṣadatithirduroṇasat |
nṛṣadvarasadṛtasadvyomasadabjā gojā ṛtajā adrijā ṛtaṃ bṛhat ||

(Katha Upanishad ‖ 2 ‖)

The literal meaning is 'As mover, he dwells in heaven; as pervader, in inter-space; as fire, in the altar; as guest, in a house; he dwells in man, dwells in betters, dwells in truth and dwells in the *akas*. He is all that is born in water, all that is born of earth, all that is born of sacrifices and all that is born of mountain; true and great' (Sastri 1928:73).

The reverence for deeper spiritual journey, akin to the respect shown to atithi a traveller guest is reflected here. The spiritual seeker, or atithi, is guided towards understanding of the self, beyond illusions of time and space, in his quest for ultimate knowledge.

Tithi is viewed as that aspect of the temporal world that limits the physical body and mind. However, the ultimate truth and real self are not bound by the constraints of time. Understanding the concept of time from this perspective encourages the seekers to look beyond the superficial passage of time and understand to comprehend the eternal nature of self. The concept of atithi is not explicitly mentioned in the Katha Upanishad, but the respect and hospitality offered by Yama to Nachiketa reflects the respect and hospitality that is due, to a spiritual seeker on the divine quest for truth. This is in consonance with the reverence with which guests were treated in Vedic tradition.

In summary, Katha Upanishad through the journey of Nachiketa describes the journey of ātman and its fearless pursuit of knowledge. The concept of tithi and atithi though appear opposite in meaning, and are interpreted differently, yet, when viewed through the spectrum of timeless nature of self and soul, can be seen pointing towards a deeper understanding of existence.

In close symmetry, the above anecdote of the tithi's atithi will be complete only when we bring in the sharp contrast of the host-guest binary as not two exclusive concepts but complimentary to each other. In India, both are interwoven in the ritual and festival matrix. The atithi is not invited, but comes uninvited and is the binary opposite of tithi. As much as the atithis could vary in name (Goddess Laxmi to Alaxmi) but are to be revered, there is this fearsome atithi whose very name not only gives cold feet but also makes one panic-stricken: the very formidable Yamaraja or the God of death, arrives unannounced and is not a favoured atithi. How does, then one reconcile with the idea of 'atithi devo bhava' (atithi is equivalent to God) in the context of Yamraja as the atithi? This conceptualisation has its root in Katha Upanishad.

This reconciliation can be attempted by understanding the teaching of Katha Upanishad which is one of the dominant authorities of the sixty Upanishads of the Veda (Deussen 1980). Upanishad literally, is translated as sitting adjacent to the feet of the teacher and obtaining enlightenment while Katha connotes narrative, anecdote or chronicle. In this sense, Katha Upanishad is acknowledged as the befitting work of Upanishad (Muller 1884). This exemplary Upanishad not only delivers enlightenment to a famished novice of knowledge but also the educator is a very unlikeable Guru. The Guru here is himself a detestable, inevitable atithi to everyone who is born, and is the most feared atithi. The following quotation from Bhagavad Gita speaks of inevitability of the death and birth: which are the duty of Yamraj.

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛityurdhruvaṁ janma mṛitasya cha ।
tasmād aparihārye'rthe na tvaṁ śhochitumarhasi ।।

The essence of this verse is that death is inevitable for those who have been born, and rebirth is inevitable for those who have perished. Consequently, it is unwise to express regret regarding the inevitable (Mukundananda 2017:2.27). The duty related to death and birth is assigned to Yamraj.

Yamraja the unwelcomed *atithi* plays the role reversal in this Upanishad and becomes the host of the inquisitive learner, Nachiketa. Nachiketa literally refers to negation of knowledge or one who is hungry for knowledge. Nachiketa gate crashes the much feared and less trodden path of Yamalok after getting reprimanded from his father, Sage Vajasravasa who in a momentary fit of angst uttered the following words to his son:

sa hovāca pitaraṃ tata kasmaimāṃ dāsyasīti |
dvitīyaṃ tṛtīyaṃ taṁ hovāca mṛtyave tvā dadāmīti ||

|| Katha Upanishad 4, p.6||

Literarily, the verse means: 'He said unto his sire, "father, to whom wilt thou give me"; he said this again and for the third time. To him, he said 'unto Death do I give thee (Sastri 1928:6).

As the narrative progresses, what we see in Yamraj is a nourishing host and a Guru of hidden knowledge who lives up to the concept of *atithidevo bhava* and minds his p's and q's with Nachiketa (an atithi here) with utmost reverence. This is reflected when Nachiketa who arrives as an atithi unannounced at *Yamlok* finds the unaware host missing for three nights and days and as a result Nachiketa remains unserved and unfed.   Yamraja was ashamed that his *atithi* was unserved.

āśāpratīkśe saṃgataṁ sūnṛtāṃ ceṣṭāpūrte putrapaśūṁśca sarvān |
etadvṛṅkte puruṣasyālpamedhaso yasyānaśnanvasati brāhmaṇo gṛhe ||

(Katha Upanishad 8, p.7).

The verse literarily means: 'Hope and expectation, company with good men, true and pleasant discourse, sacrifices, acts of pious liberality, children and cattle, all these are destroyed in the case of the ignorant man, in whose house a Brahman guest fasting stays'. (Sastri 1928:7-8).

Since, under no circumstances a guest is to be neglected and Nachiketa as a guest had been neglected, therefore as an act of propitiation Yamraja grants the former three boons.

tisro rātrīryadavātsīrgṛhe me'naśnanbrahmannatithirnamasyaḥ |
namaste'stu brahmansvasti me'stu tasmātpratitrī nvarānvṛṇīṣva ||

(Katha Upanishad 9, p.8)

The verse translates: 'As you have lived here. Oh Brahman, a venerable guest in my house for three nights fasting, be my prostration to you, Oh Brdhman, may good befall me. Therefore, ask three boons in return' (Sastri 1928:8).

For Nachiketa, death or the generic fear of death turned out to be not someone who preys but is worth praying to. Yama's presence acts as a guiding light for Nachiketa, symbolising the unforeseen teachings and wisdom derived from unexpected encounters. This mysterious figure appears strategically in Nachiketa's journey, offering enigmatic guidance and thought-provoking inquiries to propel the young seeker towards a profound quest for self-realisation. Yama's mysterious counsel compels Nachiketa to confront his fears and

boundaries, urging him to ponder over the essence of his spiritual pursuit and the depths of his inner self.

The atithi, Nachiketa through his interactions with Yama, gradually unfolds the deeper layers of his consciousness, and obtains a deeper understanding of the timelessness of the soul and the realm beyond the time-bound cycle of life and death. As Nachiketa engages and immerses himself in his spiritual odyssey, he begins to recognise that his internal conflicts and uncertainties are reflected in Yama's advice and to embrace his real self he will have to face them.

In this introspective journey, Nachiketa inches closer to his journey of self-awareness by acknowledging the suppressed emotions and memories hidden deep in his psyche. During this spiritual progression, Nachiketa recounts pivotal moments from his life that offer him a fresh perspective on his current challenges and help him in paving the way for profound personal development. These reminiscences serve as pertinent cues for Nachiketa to reassess his beliefs and convictions with clarity, based on the earlier decisions made and life paths chosen by him. Amidst the plethora of memories and associated revelations, Nachiketa discerns patterns that link his present obstacles to past events, thus compelling him to uncover concealed truths by delving deeper into his psyche. Nachiketa unearths sentiments and unresolved conflicts that were subconsciously shaping his actions and relationships and as he reconcile his present reality with his past by exploring the intricacies of his internal realm, he is propelled towards a state of self-realisation.

Like Nachiketa encountered all these emotions during his discussion with Yama, we are also visited by these atithis time and again and the proclivity to discern the cause and effect not only ensures mental composure but also is a step closer to self-awareness. When these atithisare given the attention they deserve, they depart, allowing for the arrival of newer atithis with new knowledge. This knowledge will subsequently assist the individual in accelerating their progress towards self-awareness.

This is where we gauge the intensity of Yamraja from the binary of both abhorred atithi to an indulging host. Thus when we accept 'death' as the inevitable 'atithi' we can rise above the fear of it, and can address all the mental 'atithis' mentioned above and become self-aware. Yamaraja, the dark or the fearsome, is celebrated here as the revered teacher who is the ever indulging host. An atithi just because he is the lord of death or decay, degeneration, defect should not be avoided or averted if the true nature of the atman, the eternal atithi is understood by all. The verse below from Bhagavad Gita further elaborates the essence of soul (atithi here).

āśhcharya-vat paśhyati kaśhchiden māśhcharya-vadvadati tathaiva chānyaḥ |
āśhcharya-vachchainamanyaḥ śhṛiṇoti śhrutvāpyenaṁ veda na chaiva kaśhchit ||

This means, 'Some see the soul as amazing, some describe it as amazing, and some hear of the soul as amazing, while others, even on hearing, cannot understand it at all' (Mukundananda 2017:2.29). In the dimension of space and time, the soul keeps on changing houses. In the cycle of life, for the new growth to occur the old has to degenerate. In the Indian tradition, the tithi of Purnima signifies the ending of one lunar cycle, and is the harbinger of the beginning of a new one. The lordship of Purnima is assigned to the *Naaga* or serpent for time and again they also shed their old skin and grow a new one signifying that there is regeneration only after degeneration. Rebirth not only means birth in a different time

but also takes place when our perception changes and when we shed off the fusty thought patterns and replace them with newer progressive ones. As such, rebirth occurs when every atithi of our mental world like fear, regret, depression, guilt or sorrow is welcomed and dealt with or without any prejudices. Embracing these atithis paves a path for a fresh perspective on life and leads to a profound transformation by allowing a deeper understanding of oneself. When these atithis are accepted, an individual overcomes limitations leading to self-discovery that ensures recognition of complexities of human emotions and experiences and a heightened sense of empathy towards other beings.

This newfound empathy enables individuals to forge deeper connections and foster a sense of unity and compassion in general, while respecting the diversity of human experience. Through this process, a profound appreciation is developed for the unique perspectives and stories that everyone brings to the tapestry of life. In embracing this diversity of atithis, a wealth of knowledge and wisdom that enriches the understanding of the world, is opened up for an individual, fostering a sense of unity that leads to building of a more harmonious and inclusive society.

7.0   Conclusion

The analysis reveals the depth of Vedic philosophy in addressing the complexities of human behaviour and existence. Tithi and atithi are not mutually exclusive but complementary, influencing both textual interpretation and social behaviour. The ancient teachings, such as those imparted in the Katha Upanishad have the power to influence contemporary life, particularly in ethical and spiritual domains. The exploration of the ancient Vedic concepts of tithi and atithi, as drawn from the Katha Upanishad, reveals an intricate synthesis of time, hospitality, and the search for knowledge. These dualistic yet complementary entities transcend mere social or religious roles; they embody the universal human experiences of giving and receiving, birth and death, knowledge and ignorance. The dialogue between Nachiketa and Yama offers profound insights into the eternal nature of the soul (atman), which transcends the confines of temporal existence symbolised by tithi.

In modern society, where individualism often overshadows communal values, the lessons imparted by these ancient texts remind us of the deep importance of compassion, respect, and the holistic interdependence between the guest and the host. Whether in personal relationships or broader societal interactions, these teachings encourage individuals to embrace the fluid nature of existence, where opposites like fullness and emptiness, light and darkness, complement rather than conflict with one another. Further, the recognition of atithi as an unexpected visitor in both physical and spiritual contexts encourages openness to new experiences, challenges, and the unknown. In a world fraught with uncertainty, the readiness to welcome the unfamiliar—whether in the form of a literal guest or as life's inevitable trials—can lead to profound personal growth, wisdom, and inner peace. Thus, the Vedic traditions, when applied to the fast-paced and often stressful contexts of contemporary life, offer not only ethical guidance but also spiritual solace. If these teachings are disseminated to the younger generation from an early age, they can help them deal with various emotions leading to mental composure and stability in today's stressful times. These ancient teachings, if integrated into modern education and personal practices, have the potential to nurture amore empathetic, balanced, and harmonious existence, both on individual and societal levels. By embracing the cyclical nature of time and life as symbolised by tithi and by welcoming all experiences, whether pleasant or challenging, as our atithi, we align ourselves with the deeper truths of existence, fostering resilience and spiritual fulfilment.

Notes

1. Tithi is a unit of time and is explained in the text. Atithi's English equivalent is 'guest', but the latter does not connote the cultural meaning that the former carries.

2. Katha Upanishad can be written as a compound word by joining Katha and Upanishad. This is spelt as Kathopanishad.

3. Rev. E Burgess's translation of *Sûrya-Siddhânta* is a useful text to know about the science of India's astronomy.

4. Thereupon it said, in such and such a year that flood will come. Thou shalt then attend to me (i.e. to my advice) by preparing a ship; when the flood has risen thou shalt enter into the ship, … And in the same year which the fish had indicated to him, he attended to (the advice of the fish) by preparing a ship; and when the flood had risen, he entered into the ship…. up to the yonder northern mountain.' In this translation of Eggeling (1882:216-217), the word atithi is omitted.

5. See Dumont (1974), Kakar (1996(, and Chattopadhyaya (2002) to understand the nature and scope of holistic approach to India's pluralistic culture.

6. Literarily, *panch* means five and *anga-* limbs (Bhujle & Vahia 2006:2), part of anything, or aspect. Panchanga refers to the vedic calendar as it is composed of five aspects of time, namely *tithi* (a lunar day) , *vara* (a solar day, a week day), *naskshatra* (asterism of the day), yoga (angular relationship between Sun and Moon) karan (half of a tithi) (Sewell & Dikshit 1896:3-4; *also see* Bhujle & Vahia 2006).

7. The concepts of *adhika* and *kshaya* are elaborated in Sewell & Dikshit (1896:25-28).

8. Freed and Freed (1964) have studied festivals performed in Shanti Nagar (a pseudonym) near the city of Delhi in 1960s based on lunar and solar tithis.

9. *Abhyāgata-* literarily atihi or guest. Atithi meane one who comes without prior information. *Abhyāgata* is a compound word: *abhi+ agat; abhi* (just now) and *agat* (arrived) and the word means 'one who arrived just now (without prior information).

10. Hiltebeitel (2005) comes to the conclusion with reference to the story of Sudaresana and Ogavati (ibid.: 39, fn78) which, however, was not detailed in Dandekar (1966:LVIII).

11. **Dharma-sutra** refers to any of several manuals of human conduct that form the earliest source of Hindu law.

12. **Smritis** are the secondary scriptures of Hinduism that expound on the principles laid down in the Vedas.

13. This version is taken from Devdutt Pattanaik (2011). But there is another version (Kamakoti.org n.d.) which states that the Moon reappeared after the churning of the ocean. The Moon was blessed by Brahma to be worshipped during purnima.

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