It was the time when Kanchi Maha SwamigaL was staying in Kalavai, many years before. It was a Sunday. A large crowd had gathered for darshan. One by one the devotees prostrated to the sage, received his blessings and moved away. A middle-aged couple prostrated to AcharyaL and stood up with folded palms. Keenly looking at them, SwamigaL said, "adede... who (is this)... Palur Gopalan! You came a year back. That time you spoke about some problems. Aren't you fine now?" and laughed.

That Palur Gopalan replied, "We are very fine Periyavaa. As directed by you, from the time we started feeding an atithi in the noon time every day, only good things are happening, Periyavaa! Good harvest in (my) fields. The cows don't die as before! The money that dripped out of hands without control for expenses stays in hands now. All that is (due to) the greatness of the atithi bhojana you have asked us to do, by your anugraha. I am doing it daily. Nothing else (is the reason for the prosperity)." Tears filled his eyes as he spoke. His wife who was standing by his side was also in tears of joy.

AcharyaL said, "besh, besh. It is fine if you have understood that good things happen due to the act of atithi bhojana. Alright. Today both of you have come over here. There in Palur--who will do the atithi bhojana?" AcharyaL inquired worriedly.

Gopalan's wife replied promptly, "We have made alternative arrangements for that Periyavaa. atithi bhojana will not be missed even for a day."

Maha SwamigaL was very happy to hear it. "That's the way you should do it. You must have a resolution to feed the hungry. Doing atithi upacAra will give such an anugraha and safeguard the family! One day sAkSAt Parameshvara himself will come in the form of an atithi, will sit and eat, you know that?"

SwamigaL was talking with kutUhala. To listen to these anugraha words, the people standing in the queue surrounded him. He asked everyone to sit down on the floor. The crowd of devotees sat down.

A devotee asked SwamigaL: "Is there such greatness in doing atithi bhojana, Swamy?"
SwamigaL replied immediately. "Yes yes! It is a maha puNya dharma that could lead to mokSa! It has benefited a number of people! Only when you ask people like this Gopalan who have experienced it, they will tell you. Such a lofty dharma is this one!"

A devotee got up and prostrated to the sage. He said with humility, "My name is RamaSethu. Tiruvannamalai is my native place. We all pray together to AcharyaL. We desire to listen more elaborately about the greatness of this atithi bhojana in a way we can understand it. Periyavaa should take mercy on us!"

SwamigaL asked him to be seated. The devotee complied. Everyone was watching the walking God in silence. That parabrahmam started talking after sometime.

"My memory is that it was (the year) thousand nine hundred and thirty-eight or thirty-nine. SriSankara MaTham was doing its administration from KummoNam (Kumbakonam). I am going to tell (you about) an incident that happened at that time. If you listen to it devotedly, the greatness that lies in this (incident) can be understood! I shall tell you (now), listen (carefully)."

Swamigal stopped for a brief while and then continued: "There was a large house on the western bank of the Kummonam Maamaanga (Mahamaha) kulam. A grocer by name Kumaresan Chettiar was living in that house. I remember very well... The name of his dharma patni was Sivakami Achi. They belonged to Pallathur near Karaikudi. That couple had no children. They had brought a dependable boy from their native place and kept him with them for taking care of the grocery shop.

"At that time, the age of Kumaresan Chettiar was perhaps fifty or fifty-five. That Achi's (age was) perhaps within fifty. At all times only the nama smaraNa 'Shiva Shiva... Shiva Shiva' would be issuing out of the mouth of those two people. There was no other talk! Chettiar had in his house a single-bullock cart. Seating Achi in the cart, Chettiar himself would drive! Every day both of them would arrive in their cart at the banks of Kaveri to take bath. Finishing (their) bath, they would come to our MaTham, prostrate, receive the blessings and go back. They were such an intimate couple. About them, I am going to tell (you now) something that will overshadow all these, look (listen)!

He took to silence to keep them in suspense for some time. The devotees were waiting with eager expectations. AcharyaL started speaking again: "You know what work that couple had been doing for many years? To serve and feed the atithis! Don't be surprised! They would entertain the Shiva disciples with food,
every day at noon in the hall of their house, without shrinking a face, whatever the number of disciples they received as guest. They would seat the disciple in the thinnai at the entrance (of their house), wash his feet with water, wipe with a cloth, apply sandal paste and vermillion to them and lead them to the hall and seat them there.

"They did not have any cook in their house! That amma would cook alone, whatever number be the guests of Shiva disciples! Another important thing--if you ask what it is--is that they would inquire from the Shiva disciples the details of the vegetables and dishes they like, go and get them, cook and serve them! Such an elevated mind! Do you think how SwamiGAL knew about all these things...? There is no sort of secrecy about it. (One Sri) Sundaram Iyer, who was close to the MaTham, was looking after the accounts of Kumareshan Chettiar. Only he would tell me these things when he was free. Understand now?"

AcharyaGAL stopped for some time and relaxed. None of the seated moved an inch. They were all looking with fixed eyes at Maha SwamiGAL. That walking God continued: "One day it was raining very well. (It was) noon time. Kumareshan Chettiar came to the entrance (of his house) and looked (here and there). No atithi was in sight! Holding an umbrella, he descended the steps of the Mahamaham pond and surveyed the scene. A Shiva disciple was seated after bath in a small building there, wearing vibhUtis (all over his body). Chettiar prayed to him and brought him for dining (at his home). He seemed somewhat like a well-read Shiva disciple. He came singing Thevaaaram. Washing his feet, Chettiar led him to his hall and seated him. The couple prostrated to the Shiva disciple. Chettiar's dharma patni went to the disciple and asked, 'What vegetables are the favourite of Swamy? Please tell me, so I can go to the shop, get and serve them after cooking.'

"It seemed that the Shiva disciple was in good hunger. He got up and went to the backyard and looked around. He saw sprouts of tender spinach there. He came inside, called the mother and said that he needed nothing except the tender spinach in koottu and their stems in sambar and that it would be sufficient for him. Chettiar went to pluck the spinach with a bamboo plate in his hand. The rain had stopped by then. Since it was becoming late, the Shiva disciple who was very hungry decided to give a helping hand for plucking the spinach, so he asked for a bamboo plate and went to the backyard.

"Sivakami Achi was standing at the backyard entrance, watching the two men pluck the spinach. Both of them placed their plates inside the house after enough spinach was plucked. You know what that amma did immediately? She washed
the two spinach plates separately. She lit two furnaces, kept the spinach in two separate pans on the furnaces and started cooking. The Shiva disciple who was looking at her act was surprised! He was confused: 'What is this? Both the plates have the same spinach sprouts. Without using a single vessel to cook them, why this mother lights two furnaces and cooks them separately?'

"After sometime, that amma took the pans out of the furnaces, took the disciple's spinach only to the puja room and offered it as nivedana to Swami. The disciple who was watching it was pleased with immense pride! Know what he had thought? He decided, 'I am a big Shiva bhakta. Sannyasi. So this mother has understood that Lord Shiva would accept only the spinach I plucked and offers it as nivedana. Still I would ask the mother herself after my meal about the offering.'"

Stopping here briefly, SwamigaL watched the devotees sitting opposite him. Nobody lowered a jaw. He continued: "The Shiva disciple, who had finished his dining, asked that Achi about his doubt. You know what reply did the Achi give? (She said 'Ayya, when the spinach was plucked in the backyard, I was watching. My husband chanted the name 'Shiva Shiva...' and plucked the spinach. So it became ShivArpaNa then and there. There was no need to offer it again. You plucked (the spinach) without chanting any name. That is why, I lit a furnace, cooked your spinach separately and offered it to the Lord.' The disciple was embarrassed to hear this. The couple then prostrated to the disciple. He appreciated the Achi's bhakti and wisdom and started on his way. They were a couple who served annam in such a way..."

AcharyaL stopped. The crowd of devotees was sitting with amazement. Nobody lowered a jaw. SwamigaL continued: '"You know what was the phala prApti that was given to them for such incessant atithi bhojana? Some years later, they celebrated their shashti apta pUrti (completion of 60 years of age). On a Maha Shivaratri day they sat for darshan of the four sessions of puja in the Kumbeswarar temple. When they returned home, that amma, who sat in the puja room complaining of exhaustion, stretched out and breathed her last. Shocked, the Chettiar called her by name and went inside, but he too fell down and breathed his last. That was all. On that very day of Maha Shivaratri both of them attained the Shiva sAyujya together. Did you see the position that couple attained because of their act of incessant atithi bhojana? Even now, on every Maha Shivaratri day, I would remember the couple. They are the couple who served food in such a lofty manner."
AcharyaL finished. Tears seeped from the eyes of those who heard the story. The walking God stood up and said, "Seems it is almost two o' clock. Everyone will be hungry. Go inside and dine well", and bade them farewell with compassion.

**Author:** Sri S. Ramani Anna (in Tamil)
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**Glossary:**

arpaNa - offering, delivering, consigning, entrusting
atithi - guest, a person entitled to hospitality (from a-tithi: one who has no fixed day for coming)
bhojana - feeding, enjoying, eating
kulam - pond, usually near or in the precincts of a temple
kutUhalu - curiosity, interest in any extra-ordinary matter
mokSa - emancipation, liberation, deliverance, release from
sAksAt - before one's eyes, in person, in bodily form, visibly
sAyujj - intimate union, communion with
smaraNa - the act of remembering or calling to mind, calling upon the name of a god, a rosary of beads held in hand, not worn as a necklace.
upacAra - service, act of civility, polite behavior