

EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF GIFTS IN HINDUISM

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Gifts and charities occupy a very high place in the Hindu scheme of life. Manu (I. 28) as well as the *Mahābhārata* (*Śānti-parvan*, CCXXXII. 28) say that *dāna* or gifts form the principal aspect of religious life in the age of Kali. The reason given is that gifts and charities liberate the giver from sins. (*Mahābhārata*, *Anuśāsana-parvan*, LIX. 6)

The principle underlying a ritualistic sacrifice and a gift is essentially the same, viz giving up one's ownership over an object willingly and donating it to someone else. In a sacrifice, it is done in fire with respect to a deity, whereas a gift is given to a human being who is in need of it. Hence a gift is also a sacrifice in the broadest sense.

REFERENCES IN THE VEDAS, THE UPANIṢADS, AND THE GĪTĀ

The earliest reference to the concept of gifts is found in the *Ṛg-Veda* (I. cxxv. 6), which says :

Dakṣiṇāvātāmidimāni citrā
dakṣiṇāvātām divi sūryāsah ;
Dakṣiṇāvanto amṛtaṁ bhajante
dakṣiṇāvantaḥ pra tiranta āyuh—

'These various objects of enjoyment belong to those who give *dakṣiṇā* (gifts to Brāhmanas at the termination of a religious rite or sacrifice). The solar worlds in the heavenly regions (belong to them). Those who give *dakṣiṇā* attain immortality and increase their life-span.'

In another place (X. cxvii. 6), the necessity of donating food has been stressed :

Moghamannaṁ vindate apracetāḥ
satyaṁ bravīmi vadha itsa tasya ;

Nāryamaṇaṁ puṣyati no sakhāyam
kevalāgho bhavati kevalādī—

'The foolish man (who does not share with others) obtains food to no purpose ; I say the truth that it is really his destruction ; he does not offer food to Aryamān (i.e. to the gods) nor to his friend (or guest) ; one who takes food alone (without giving to others) partakes simply of sin.'

This statement seems to form the basis for the later teachings contained in Manu (III. 118) and the *Gītā* (III. 13).

We, thus, see the concept of gifts only in a seed form in the earliest Veda, but in the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*, we find it in a more developed form. In the Upaniṣads, the word '*dāna*' is clearly mentioned. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Ch. V) contains the story of Prajāpati's instructions to the gods, the demons, and the human beings. The same sound *da* uttered by Prajāpati was understood by the three groups in three different ways. Human beings understood it to signify *dāna*, since they knew that their chief defect was greed and that they had to counteract it in order to evolve higher.

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (II. xxiii. 1), we find *dāna* classified as a *dharma-skandha*, a division of *dharma*—*Trayo dharmaskandhā yajño'dhyayanam dānamiti prathamah*. *Dāna* here refers to the charity given outside the sacrificial hall. In the fourth chapter of the same Upaniṣad, we find a eulogy of the gift of food, as also a reference to the donation of a large number of cows, gold ornaments, villages, etc. to the sage Raikva by the king Jānaśruti.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa gives us a whole philosophy concerning gifts through the few brief

references he makes in the *Gītā*. In *Gītā* (XVI. 1), he classifies charity as *daiṁ-sampat* or a characteristic of a person endowed with divine qualities. In XVII. 20-22, he enunciates three types of gifts, viz *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*, and describes them. In the last chapter, he declares *dāna* to be sacred, and exhorts us not to give it up.

IN THE DHARMA ŚĀSTRAS

But it is in the *Dharma Śāstras* that we find a detailed treatment of the subject of gifts. *Dharma Śāstras* comprise of works like *Dharma-sūtras*, Smṛtis of Manu, Yājñavalkya, and others, the epics and the Purāṇas, as also the various works based upon these. The *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* devotes one complete section to the subject of gifts. Some of the Purāṇas have devoted several chapters to this subject, whereas some authors like Nīlakaṇṭha and Govindānanda have deemed it necessary to write learned treatises on the same.

The manifold material on gifts made available to us by the *Dharma Śāstras* can be grouped under the following convenient headings: (1) Varieties of Gifts; (2) The Six Branches of Gifts; (3) The Method of Giving; (4) Irrevocability of Gifts; (5) Invalid Gifts; (6) Some Special Gifts.

(1) *Varieties of Gifts*: Gifts can be classified as *nitya* (daily), *naimittika* (occasional), *kāmya* (motivated), and *vimala* (pure). Gifts which have to be given every day, like the cooked food to be given after the *vaiśvadeva* sacrifice, come under the first group. Gifts which have to be given on special occasions like eclipses or special penances and festivals come under the second group. Gifts motivated by desire for progeny, health, wealth, etc. come under the third group. Gifts made with devotion to knowers of Brahman in order to please the supreme Lord are the

purest, and hence are called *vimala*. They form the last group.

As already indicated, the *Gītā* (XVII. 20-22) classifies gifts into three groups, viz *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*, described as follows: 'Charity given as a matter of duty, without expectation of any return, at the right time and place, and to the right person, is said to be *sāttvika*. Charity which is given either in the hope of receiving a reward or with a view to winning merit, or grudgingly, is declared to be *rājasika*. Charity given at the wrong place and time, and to the undeserving recipient (and that too) with contempt is designated as *tāmasika*.'

Yogī Yājñavalkya eulogizes gifts given without publicity. He says:

Pracchannāni ca dānāni
jñānam ca nirahaṅkṛtam;
Japyāni ca suguptāni
eṣāṁ phalamanantakam—

'The result of the following is limitless: secret gifts, knowledge without pride, and secretly muttering the name of God.'

This reminds us of the statement in the Bible: 'But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret.' (Matthew vi. 3-4)

(2) *The Six Branches of Gifts*: The giver, the recipient, faith, the object given, time, and place—these constitute the six branches of gifts.

The giver is expected to have the following qualifications: capacity and willingness to give, freedom from sins, freedom from incurable diseases and evil habits, and practice of a taintless profession.

The greatest qualification of the recipient is that he should be badly in need. Gifts given to such people as also to destitutes, those excelling in some art or science, the teacher, parents, friends, and those who have helped the giver, will be fruitful. On

the other hand, gifts made to evil persons, thieves and dacoits, hypocrites, gamblers, etc. will not only be fruitless but may even bestow upon the donor a part of their sins. A story told by Sri Ramakrishna brings out this point clearly. The donor of food to an exhausted butcher, who subsequently recovered and killed the cow he had with him, had to partake of a part of the sin of that butcher.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the *Dharma Śāstras* have prohibited gifts of any kind to persons who do not at all practise the duties of a Brāhmaṇa though born in the Brāhmaṇa family.

As regards the gift of food, clothing, and other necessities of life to persons in dire need of the same, no rules apply except that they be given as quickly as possible.

When a donor sees a needy person approaching him for charity, he should put on a kindly smile, receive him properly, and render him whatever help he can ungrudgingly. It is this attitude of mind that has been termed as 'faith' (*śraddhā*) in the above-mentioned list.

Certain rules have been laid down regarding the objects to be given as gifts. The *Mahābhārata* (*Anuśāsanaparvan*, CIX. 7) says that those objects which we like most, which we desire to keep with us, are the fittest to be given away :

*Yadyadiṣṭatamam loke
yaccāpi dayitam grhe ;
Tattadgunavate deyam
tadevākṣayamicchatā.*

What is obviously meant here is that one should be prepared to sacrifice even his dearest object for the sake of others.

Another point that is often stressed is that the object to be donated must not have been acquired through unlawful means. It should have been acquired by one's own labours in accordance with *dharma*, without depriving others of their

rightful share. This clearly shows that, according to the *Dharma Śāstras*, wealth accumulated through unrighteous means is unfit to be donated.

A limit is also set to the quantity that can be given away. The donor is forbidden to give more than he can comfortably give. He will be going against *dharma* if he brings misery and destitution to his family and other dependents by giving away everything. This is a general rule and there may be exceptions, as in the case of persons performing the *sarvajit* sacrifice.

If what the donor offers is against the *svadharma* (i.e., one's own religious duties and customs) of the recipient, he should flatly reject it. For instance, a good Brāhmin should never accept weapons or detestable objects like liquor.

As regards the time suitable for making gifts, the *Dharma Śāstras* hold the following days to be more fruitful than ordinary days : the first day of each *ayana* (i.e. the sun's passage to the north or south), new moon and full moon days, eclipses, day of any sacred festival, days of marriage or *upanayana*, etc.

Like the time of making gifts, the place is also of importance. What is given in a sacred place of pilgrimage or a temple fetches far superior merit than that given in one's own house.

(3) *Method of Giving* : Making gifts is a sacred act. Hence there is a way of doing it, if one is desirous of acquiring the greatest merit out of it. The donor is expected to take bath, don pure white clothes, wear the sacred ring of *kuśa* grass, perform *ācamana*, and pour water into the hands of the donee uttering suitable *mantras* to signify the act of giving.

(4) *Irrevocability of Gifts* : A gift once made by the donor and accepted by the donee is irrevocable. If a person gives word regarding the gift of an object, he

becomes a debtor to that person and the latter may sue him before the king, if the promise is not kept.

(5) *Invalid Gifts*: Gifts made under duress or when a person is not in a proper state of mind are invalid. So also the ones made by children, or doting old people, or those suffering from serious diseases, are invalid for the simple reason that the givers have no control over their minds at the time of giving.

(6) *Some Special Gifts*: The *Dharma Śāstras* have taken great pains to eulogize the gifts of certain objects as very special. Gift of land, of cows, and of gold have always been held far superior to other gifts. Certain gifts like the *tulāpuruṣa* (i.e., weighing a person in silver or gold) are termed as *mahādāna*, and special results are mentioned for them. Gift of land, of building, of religious books, etc. to religious institutions like temples or monasteries, as also arranging for religious discourses at sacred public places are also considered to be capable of conferring high merit upon the donor.

THE WAY SHOWN BY SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

All that the *Dharma Śāstras* have to say on the subject of gifts boils down to this: Donating unobjectional objects which have been earned through rightful means by a good man to a needy person, in accordance with the latter's need and his own capacity to give, with grace and willingness, at the right time and place, and in the right manner, constitutes *dāna*.

But most of these rules laid down by the *Dharma Śāstras* regarding gifts are impracticable in this modern age. The reasons are many. The wealth accumulated in the hands of the rich is, in most cases, acquired by unrighteous means, and not of 'the right type, fit to be donated'. Many of those who receive charity are

found unfit, if the standards of the *Dharma Śāstras* are applied strictly. Even the rules regarding time, place, and procedure are not easy to follow in this busy age. However, most of our people are still devoted to the ancient religious customs, and their zeal for acquiring merit through gifts and charities continues unabated. For such, the way shown by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is the most suitable, for it is in tune with the changed modern conditions and, at the same time, is completely in consonance with the spirit of the ancient *Dharma Śāstras*.

One day, at Dakshineswar, while explaining the tenets of Vaiṣṇavism, Sri Ramakrishna remarked in an exalted spiritual mood that we are not to show compassion to *jīvas*, the ordinary mortals, but serve them, in a spirit of worship, regarding them as the very embodiment of Śiva. Swami Vivekananda, who was nearby, took up the hint given by Sri Ramakrishna and built a sublime philosophy round it. There can be no greater comment on those words of the Master than the following sayings of the Swami culled from his well-known utterances: 'Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hands and say "Here, my poor man!", but be grateful that the poor man is there, so that by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed but it is the giver.'

'In this world, take always the position of the giver. Give everything and look for no return. Give love, give help, give service, give any little thing you can, but keep out barter!'

'You cannot help anyone, you can only serve; serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of his children, blessed you are. Do not think too much of yourselves. Blessed you are that the privilege

was given to you, when others had it not. Do it only as a worship. The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, and the sinner.'

In another place, Swami Vivekananda enumerates four kinds of gifts: 'The highest of gifts is the giving of spiritual knowledge, the next is the giving of secular knowledge and the next is the saving of life; the last is giving food and drink.' (*The Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 133,

8th edition) It is clear from this that he gives the lowest place to ordinary charity which is very high in the esteem of many a philanthropist. The reason is obvious: this help is very temporary, whereas the gift of spiritual knowledge removes man's wants for ever.

It is thus seen that the concept of gifts, which has evolved by stages, finds its highest expression in Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, who have raised the principle behind gifts to the status of a philosophy and a practical religion in one.

THE CONCEPT OF SAMJNĀNA (CONCORD) IN THE VEDAS

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Swami Vivekananda spoke enthusiastically of the Vedic ideal of *samjñāna* in his lecture on the 'Future of India'. Emphasizing the need of 'co-ordination of will', the Swami said: 'Already before my mind rises one of the marvellous verses of the *Atharva-Veda Samhitā* which says: "Be thou all of one mind, be thou all of one thought, for in the days of yore, the gods, being of one mind, were enabled to receive oblations. . . ." Being of one mind is the secret of society.' (*The Complete Works*, Vol. III, p. 299, 8th edition)

The stanza referred to by the Swami is this:

*Sam janidhvam sam prciyadhvam
sam vo manāmsi jānatām;
Devā bhāgam yathā pūrve
samjñānā upāsate—*

'Be in harmony with each other, mingle with each other, let your minds be of one accord, as the *devas* of old, being of one mind, receive their share (of oblation).'

This stanza in the *Atharva-Veda* (VI.

lxiv. 1) is a reproduction, with a slight change, of the second stanza of the closing hymn of the *Rg-Veda*, which has been given the title '*Samjñānam*', concord. The *Rg-Vedic* stanza begins with '*Sam gacchadhvam sam vadadhvam*', meaning 'Meet together, speak together'.

The Vedic prefix '*sam*' corresponds to the Greek '*sum*' ('*sym*' in the English form, as in 'symphony', union of sounds) and the Latin '*cum*' ('*com*') and its variants in English like 'compassion', 'concert', etc. As 'symphony' means not only a combination of sounds but a harmony produced by the combination, so *samjñāna* means not only the knowledge (*jñāna*) of each other among people, but the loving unity, the concord, produced by such knowledge. In another hymn (X. lxxii. 6), the *Rg-Veda* gives the idea of *samjñāna* through the analogy of group dancers (*nrtyatāmiva*) who were in each other's clasp (*susam-rabdha*). In group dancing, each member performs his own part and at the same time