

DÁNA: A FOUNDATION OF INDIAN SOCIAL LIFE

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This paper discusses the concept of Dána¹ or charity as the foundation of Indian Social life. Dána has been in vogue in India since the Vedic times, but it was codified by the *smritis* which prescribe do's and don'ts of the life of the individual. Limiting its scope to *Yagnavalkya smriti* the paper analyses the significance of Dána as a regulative principle of accumulation of wealth.

A foundation is generally understood to be the one which stabilizes the edifice without revealing itself. But in the context of the social life, foundation would mean something that establishes a relation between the individual and community. Social life would require the individual to establish his own place and also to relate himself to the community. There can be many aspects or practices that can be considered as the foundation of social life. One of the significant aspects that not only recognizes the place of the individual but also relates him to the community is private property or accumulation of wealth by individual. Different social systems evolve various ways of checking the private property. In the Indian social system,² the practice of Dána played a pivotal role in establishing a harmonious relation between the individual and community. This practice was mostly influenced by the belief in the over-arching cosmic process. It is our endeavor to analyze the role played by Dána as a foundation of Indian social life.

Hindu world view

An act of individual has to be analyzed in the light of the world view to which he belongs. Motivation to the action, the way the act is performed and the result of the act get mostly influenced by the world view. Let us look at the Indian world view to understand the way *Dána* is conceived in Indian tradition. V.R. Mehta (2005) has provided us a clear cut presentation of the Indian world view. The world view of the individual-community relationship in the Indian tradition springs from the overarching

¹ There is no equivalent English word which would signify the complete sense and meaning of the Sanskrit word Dána. Related words which are often used for Dána are - Alms, gift, present, donation, generosity, benevolence and charity.

² Indian social system is traditionally influenced by various religions. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have made a significant impact on Indian Social system. Though all three have given a significant place to Dána, here we are concerned only with Hindu view.

cosmic process to which he belongs. Indian conception tried to resolve the tension between the claims of the individual and society, firstly by connecting the individual to the concrete functions one performs in society and secondly, by relating him to the cosmic process of which he is an integral part. The governing principle of social and political thinking in India is a search for a social order which would correspond to the cosmic order. Each individual is an autonomous agent seeking fulfillment of his identity which alone can provide bliss to his life. Its pursuit is ordained by nature and destiny of man. However, the notion of autonomy in Indian tradition does not project a secluded and isolated individual disconnected from the society, rather it sees individuals as persons existing in larger space with their distinct identities trying to achieve inwardness through greater communication with all. Each individual is a whole in himself with his own distinct nature which he derives from birth and temperament and develops in course of adopting his nature to life process. He is related to other individuals and groups because all these are natural conditions which provide a setting in terms of which his life acquires meaning and substance. They are a part of both his psychology and biology and direct to ethics and economics, politics and history.

The world view projected by Mehta informs us of the correspondence between individual-community and individual-cosmic order relationships. Every act of the individual affects, either positively or negatively, his relationship with both community and cosmic order. Though the importance of individual good is well recognized, performance of concrete functions which one ought to do for community good was stressed more.

Place of Dana in Indian Tradition

One of the significant aspects of individual-community relationship is private property. Though private property implies possession of wealth by an individual, it is the society which facilitates the individual to accumulate wealth. This is not to undermine the importance of the efforts of the individual but only to underline the place of society as a necessary condition for the acquisition of private property. Every person has a right to earn his livelihood. Earning more than what one needs leads to accumulation of wealth. Since this right of the individual is facilitated by the community, in turn every individual

has a duty towards the community. This duty should check the excessive accumulation of wealth by leading to its distribution. The practice of Dána was conceived by the Indian tradition for such a purpose.

Giving away the accumulated wealth in charity or Dána is seen in Indian tradition as having both material and metaphysical implications. By linking the life of the individual to the larger cosmic process the tradition has defined richness/greatness of a person not in terms of accumulation of material wealth, rather in terms of the practice of the highest human ideals such as possession of good character, charity and truthfulness. Exhibiting a good character in terms of familial and social relations, giving away one's possession to the needy and always speaking the truth, not only enhance the value of the individual, but also enrich the individual-community relationship. Among these, Dána or charity has to be viewed distinctively, since only in Dána there is a direct involvement of material possessions. Though both material and non-material possessions can be given in Dána, it is only with regard to material possessions one loses ownership over the given object. With regard to the non-material possessions such as knowledge and skill one enhances his understanding and capacity while giving it to others. It is difficult for a person to give away his material earnings unless it gives rise to higher benefits. Two kinds of benefits motivate a person to do Dána; one sociological and the other cosmological. As motioned above social values in Indian tradition are structured in such a way that possession of benevolent and philanthropic character was placed higher than the possession of material wealth. This motivates people to desire fame as a benevolent person than as a rich man. Social status and recognition play a key role in motivating a person to be benevolent.

By conceiving God to be the most benevolent and unconditional giver or Dána, it is argued that humans are only a part of the larger cosmos and they do not own anything as they come and leave the world without any possessions. As the theory of Law of Karma makes one to believe that, one has to bear the consequences of one's actions, whether good or bad, humans perform good activities such as Dána which are helpful in strengthening individual-community relationship and in the distribution of wealth. The otherworld, heaven and hell, were constructed to accommodate the results of the actions that are not experienced in this world/life. The main motivation behind the charitable acts

has been the religious belief that a charitable activity leads to salvation. Ancient Hindu texts prescribed *Dána* as one of the ways to acquire merit and a place in heaven. Cosmic categories of result of actions such as *papa* (Sin) and *punya* (Moral or religious merit) were construed so that humans would act in such a way that their acts would result in *punya*. *Dána* is linked to Dharma³ which states that charity should be first directed towards family, then society and finally to the world and all living beings. In this way, both sociological and cosmological motivations work on the individual to practice *Dána*.

Philanthropy or Charity during the early period of Indian history has had a strong linkage with religion. Religious giving is the base of ritualistic actions of religions. This has influenced the emergence of religious customs and practices. It is seen, as stated above, as an extension of the relationship between God and the human beings. During the Vedic period, *Dána* was confined to the occasion of big sacrifices undertaken by kings or other royals. However, in the post Vedic period *Dána* was extended to the lives of the common people as well along with poor and the needy travelers.

*Dana*⁴ has a significant place in the social life of India by becoming an *achara* and also *vyavahara*.⁵ *Achara* is practice which bears the strength of tradition. *Vyavahara* is related to the politico-economic issues and law; the rules and regulations of the everyday transaction. *Achara* is the custom that is being practiced since generations; *Vyavahara* is the practice of the tradition according to the times. *Dána* as a tradition is *achara* and as it being practiced now according to the stipulations of time is *vyavahara*. An act of *Dána* presupposes a *Dáta*, a doner; a *gruhita*, a receiver and an object of *Dána*. There are certain conditions and qualifications that are prescribed in *smritis* to be an eligible *Dáta* or *gruhita* or an object of *Dána*. Let us now discuss about the conditions and

³ *Dána* is one of the four methods , the other three being *Sama*, *Bheda* and *Danda*, prescribed by Hindu tradition to get the better of another.

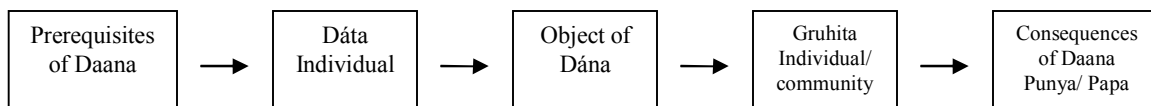
⁴ *Yagnyavalkya smrti* mentions certain conditions under which *Dána* is to be or not to be practiced. There are four terms that are to be carefully understood regarding the concept *Dána*. *Deyam*, something that is to be donated; *Adeyam*, something that is not to be donated because either it is prohibited or doesn't belong to the person or donor; *Dattam*, something that is given and should not be returned (should not again be given in *Dána*) and *Adattam*, something that is to be returned back (that can be again given in *Dána*)

⁵ *Smrti*, in general, is divided into three parts; *achara*, *vyavahara* and *prayaschitta*. *Achara* deals with customs, *Vyavahara* deals with the practice of the customs and *Prayaschitta* deals with ways of purging the wrongs committed.

the qualifications of *Dáta*, and *gruhita*; before we proceed to the objects of *Dána* and the conditions under which *Dána* can/cannot be taken back.

Charity may be of various kinds on the basis of *Dáta*, *gruhita* and the objects of *Dána*. *Dáta* can be an individual or an institution like temple. *Dána* can be either to an individual or to the community in the form of building rest houses for the travelers, construction of water tanks. In the name of the object that is given, *Dána* is variously known as *vidyadána* (if it is education), *Annadána* (if it is food) and *Bhoodána* (if it is land). The present paper largely confines itself to the *Dána* given by the individuals to the individuals.

Act of Dana



General conditions of *Dána*:

Dána is basically giving away something that is under one's possession for the use of the other according to the customs and practices. It also involves transferring of the ownership of the object to the other without anticipating and taking anything in return. *Dána*, in this sense, has to be practiced not as a means, rather as an end. Though, the practice of *guptadána* (giving away things secretly or without any popularity) was in vogue in the Hindu tradition, *smṛti* supports public donations, so that every one would know – what is given, who has given and who has taken. Especially when it comes to immovable property, unless it is a public donation, the transfer of ownership would not be complete, as there is no registration of ownership in the past. The importance of preservation of the interests of the family is stressed in practicing *Dána*. Also the act of *Dána* should not be done at the expense of others. *Dána* is prescribed to be given to an eligible needy person, even if he won't ask for it.

Qualifications or Pre-requisites of *Dáta*

Indian tradition has prescribed certain prerequisites to *Dáta*. One becomes eligible to donate on the basis of his possessions and family conditions. No one can donate everything that he possesses. One has to keep something for the family and only the

remaining can be donated. Since family is the necessary institution which promotes the continuation of the practice of Dána, one has to take care of the interests of the family in doing Dána.⁶ Prostitute, Eunuch, enemy and a person with bad character were prohibited to be Dáta.⁷

Qualifications or Pre-requisites of Gruhita

Dána, in general, is to be given to the needy. But need is not the only qualification to receive Dána in Hindu tradition. Gruhita is given a significant place as by accepting the charity of the Dáta, he not only gains some merit but also helps the Dáta in gaining some. The sanctity or the merit of the Dána largely depends on the qualifications of the gruhita. It is not the birth or the profession that makes one eligible to receive Dána, it is the combination of education and austerity that makes one eligible.⁸ Eligibility of the gruhita has been stressed so much that, an ineligible person by accepting Dána would drag even Dáta into *atholokas*⁹(the subterraneous world, the region below earth). In the same way, by not accepting Dána an eligible gruhita also would attain the same fruits which the Dáta would gain.¹⁰

Objects of Dána

Objects of Dána decide the resultant merits of Dána. Since the act of Dána has both social and metaphysical merits attached to it, the objects of Dána differ on the basis of the motivations. Some of the objects are useful for the every day life of the individuals. *Smrti* mentions of cow, land, til (gingily seeds, the seeds of *sesamum indicum*), gold, cloth, water, ghee, ox, house, rice, slippers, umbrella and vehicle as objects of Dána¹¹

⁶ *Svam kutumbavirodhena deyam.* (yagnavalkya Smrti: vyavaharaadhyayah, Dattapradanika prakaranam. 12:175).

⁷ *Ayaacitaahrutam graahyamapi dushkruta karmanah ! anyatra kulataashanda patitebhyastadha dvishah !!* (Yagnyavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 215).

⁸ *Na vidyaya kevalayaa tapasaa vaapi patrata ! yatra vruttamime chobhe taddhi patram prakirtitam !!* (Yagnyavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 200).

⁹ *Vidya tapobhyam hiinena na tu graahyah pratigraha ! gruhnam pradaataaramadho nayatyaatmaana meva ca !!* (Yagnyavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 202).

¹⁰ *Pratigraha samardhopi naadatte yah pratigraham ! ye looka Dána silanam sataanaapnoti pushkalam !!* (Yagnyavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 213).

¹¹ *Bhudiipascaannastraambhastilasarpah pratisrayan ! naivesikam svarnadhuryam datvaa svarge mahiyat !!*

which would be of empirical value. Along with these, donating lamps and ghee to the temples was also practiced with the view to gain religious merit. Constructing rest houses to the travelers and giving a girl in marriage are considered to be meritorious things of Dána. Interestingly, Yagnavalkya Smrti mentions donation of loved object as one of the meritorious objects. Indian tradition encourages detachment towards worldly things. By prescribing the donation of the loved object, detachment towards one's possessions is encouraged. Cow, especially the pregnant cow, is considered to be the best object of Dána in the Hindu tradition.

Yagnavalkya Smrti also mentions of certain objects which should not be rejected, when given in Dána. Most of these objects are items of food, such as vegetables, fish, milk, and curds. Along with these *kusas* (a sort of fine grass used in religious ceremonies and for weaving ceremonially pure mats), *sugandhas* (objects of fragrance), place to sit and to sleep are also mentioned in this category.¹² It is stated that, along with the above motioned, the object which is given without being asked can be accepted from any one without any discrimination. Exceptions to this are prostitute, eunuch, enemy and a person with immoral character.¹³ Dána given by these should not be accepted either for the worship of Gods, guests and teacher, or for those who are under care¹⁴ or for one's own living.¹⁵ There are certain things which are prohibited to be considered as objects of Dána, though they are under one's possession. Wife and children should not be given in Dána. And also something that is needed for one's family should not be given in Dána, which implies that the act of Dána should not deprive the right of others.

In short, object of Dána, can be anything that can be useful to the individual for his empirical living or to the community or can be that of religious value. There are

Gruhadhanyaabhayopaanaccatra maalyaanu lepanam ! yaanam vruksham priyam sayyaam dattvatyantam sukhibhavat !! (Yagnavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 210 & 211).

¹² *Kusah sakam payoomastyaah gandhaah pushpam dadhikshith ! Mamsam sayyanam dhaanaah pratyakhyeyam na vari ca !!* (Yagnavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 214).

¹³ Yagnavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 215.

¹⁴ People under care means, children, disabled and old people.

¹⁵ *Devaatidhyarcanakrute gurubhrutyadhameva ca ! sarvatah pratigruhniyat aatma vrutyathameva ca !!* (Yagnavalkya smrti, Acharaadhyayah, Dána prakaranam: 216).

certain things which should not be denied in *Dána*, and which can be prohibited to be given in *Dána*, on the basis of their relation with the *Dáta*.

Result of *Dána*

Every action will have a reaction. Consequent reaction motivates the action most of the times. Excessive desire for the desired consequences would sometimes lead to actions with selfish motives, which may result in negative consequences to the other people involved. In the same way, some actions though good for the society may not provide any motivation to the individual as their consequences would be either remote or unknown.

According to Hindu tradition, *Dána* has to be done without expecting any consequent returns. This does not mean that the doer will have no effect of the consequences. Rather it implies that the doer should not act with the sole intention of acquiring some personal benefits. This understanding of the act of *Dána*, appears to be contradicting the theory of Law of Karma, which is accepted by most of the orthodox and heterodox traditions of India. According to Law of Karma, no one can escape from the consequences of his actions. Some times one has to reap the consequences immediately and yet other times remotely or probably in the other world or in the next birth. This kind of attribution of reaping the consequences remotely, lead to constructing metaphysical entities like *papa* (sin, if it is a bad act) *punya* (if it is a good act) to control the actions which result in bad consequences and to encourage actions which result in good consequences. On the basis of these two entities *papa* and *punya* two other worlds are created – Hell and Heaven where the doer would reap the consequences of his actions, if he fails to reap in this world.

The concept of *Dána*, without rejecting the possibility of consequences and the subsequent responsibility of the doer only stresses the need for selfless action on the part of the *Dáta* without having any craving for selfish benefits.

Following the above discussion, we understand that though the *Dáta* has to do *Dána* without any selfish motivation, he has to bare the consequences of his actions. His action would fetch *punya*, according to the merit of the action, for him and he would reap

the favorable consequences accordingly. Smṛti mentions of various kinds of results that Dāta would reap for different kinds of Dānas.

Among the non-material things, *Brahmajnana* or *Vedajnana* is considered to be the best and among the empirical things *Godāna* (donating a cow) is considered best. The consequences of both non-material and material things would result in the attainment of cosmic or other worldly place. One who does the Dāna of *Brahmajnana* would attain *Brahmaloka* (from which there is no coming back). By donating a cow one would not only find a place in heaven, but his clan and forefathers up to six generations would be positively affected.¹⁶ He would live in heaven according to the merit of the cow.¹⁷ The sanctity and the economic value of the cow in the Hindu tradition have been, thus, stressed. Furthermore, *Smṛti* mentions of certain Dānas which are equal to godāna. They are, giving a seat or a place to sleep to a traveler or a guest, serving the diseased and worshipping the Gods.¹⁸ Along with these, by donating certain empirical objects such as food, cloth, Gold, Water cultivable land, lamps for temples, rest houses for travelers one is said to be worshipped in Heaven.¹⁹ Added to this list are, girl in marriage and strong ox. A happy life is secured for a person who gives a house, rice, protection (*abhaya*), slippers, umbrella, garlands, vehicle, fruit bearing tree, beloved object or a place to sleep.²⁰

Along with these positive consequences, there are certain negative consequences that would result if a Dāna is given to an ineligible person or *apatra*. A *apatra*, by accepting Dāna would drag even the Dāta also into *atholokas*.²¹ Thus, one needs to be careful in choosing the right person for Dāna. In contrast, an eligible *gruhita* by not accepting the Dāna would attain the worlds to which the Dāta is eligible.²² Thus, qualifications of *gruhita* are also given significant place in determining the consequences of the Dāna. These can also be understood as the checks on the possibility of fake Dānas which may result because of the ineligibility of the *gruhita*.

¹⁶ *Sarvadharmamayam brahma pradaanebhyoodhikam yatah ! tadhadatsarvamaapnoti brahmalokamavicyutam !!* (Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dāna prakaranam: 212).

¹⁷ Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dāna prakaranam: 204-208.

¹⁸ Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dāna prakaranam: 209.

¹⁹ Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dāna prakaranam: 210.

²⁰ Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dāna prakaranam: 211.

²¹ Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dana prakaranam: 202.

²² Yagnyavalkya smṛti, Acharaadhyaayah, Dana prakaranam: 213.

The practice of Dána at the conceptual level, with its stress on distribution of wealth will have significance for all times. But its practice in the everyday life may encounter certain difficulties according to the change of times. Given the qualifications of Dána and gruhita, and objects and results of Dána, there is a need to discuss certain issues involved in the practice of Dána. Whether once given is the final? Whether Dána can be taken back? Under what conditions something given should or should not be taken back? – are some of the issues of our present concern.

Conditions under which Dána should or shouldn't be taken back:

Generally, once a word is given, one has to stick to it. However, if the person who has to receive Dána has fallen from his dharma, then one need not follow his word. But if the Dána is already given then, it would not be taken back. Further, there are certain conditions prescribed by the *smṛti* under which something that is given according to law should not be taken back. They are; i) cost of the brought object (*panya mulya*), Salary given for the work (*bhṛti*), something given to the retinue with happiness, something given to the children out of love, something given in return of the help received, money given to the relatives of the bride and something given for *punya* or *anugraha*. Whatever is given according to law, out of love and happiness should not be taken back. If something is given by not following law that can be taken back. *Smṛti* has identified sixteen instances under which a given thing can be taken back.

Things given by the kids, fools, dependents, diseased, drunkard and psychologically disabled, according to *Smṛti*, can be taken back. If a thing is given to the jailors due to the fear, or for protecting the children from the anger of others or due to the differences between the two people involved or to a non-learned person who boasts himself to be learned - such a thing can also be taken back. Furthermore, a bribe or something given with the expectation of returns or due to deception or for fun or because of the fear of the loss of children can also be taken back. If somebody collects money in the name of *yagna* and spends it on gambling such money also can be taken back. Kids, fools, dependents, diseased, drunkard and psychologically disabled were made ineligible to give anything lawfully. In the same way, any thing that is given in deception or fear is rejected to be a valid Dána. Both bribe and something that is given with the expectation

of returns are considered to be unlawful. In this way, *smṛti* has mentioned certain instances under which Dána can be cancelled and things given can be taken back.

Conclusion

Thus, the qualifications of Dána and gruhita, objects and the result of Dána and the conditions under which Dána can or can't be taken as mentioned in *smṛti* attempt to strengthen healthy relations between individuals in the society. Qualifications prescribed for Dána and gruhita aim mainly at cultivation of moral character by realizing one's duties and responsibilities towards one's family, society and world at large. Dána, for instance, has to practice Dána and at the same time has to protect the interests of the family. In the same way, gruhita to be eligible to accept Dána should follow certain ethical and social principles. Objects of Dána, mentioned in the *smṛti*, have to be basically understood in relation to the attitude of the Dána. What is to be taken into account is, not what kind of object it is; rather what would be the attitude of the Dána towards the object. In order to highlight this aspect, objects of the every day need and loved objects were included in the list. Thus, the practice of Dána basically intends to promote one to one relationship among the individuals by making them work towards their social responsibility. Motivation for this practice in the Hindu tradition was provided by cosmic and metaphysical elements such as God, *papa*, *punya*, hell and heaven. The practice of Dána, in this way, by facilitating the distribution of wealth in a judicious way functions as a foundation for both the social and economic life of the people.

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