

AccountAble™

112. Accountability and Hindu Dan

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Continuing our discussion on religious charity and accountability, let us first look at Hindu charity.

Hindu *Dan*

The Hindi word *dan* does not exactly translate into English as *donation*¹. Most Western scholars prefer to use the words *gift* or *giving* instead.

The reason for this seems to be that in the modern West, people remain attached to their donation. They remain interested in knowing how the money was used. In other words, they would like to get the satisfaction of having achieved the purpose of the donation.

As Marcel² has argued, this is not the case in some African societies. We also know that by and large, Hindus engaging in *dan* also do not bother to track their money or check how it was used. What is the reason for this?

¹ Donation comes from the Latin word *donum*, which sounds very similar to the Sanskrit word *danum* (danm). Etymologically, both *donation* and *dan* have a common Indo-European root *do-*. [*The American Heritage dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, p. 21]. However, over the ages, the two societies have evolved differently, and thus attach different connotations to the two words.

² Marcel Mauss (*Essai sur le don, forme archaïque de l'échange* [1925], translated into English in 1954 as 'The Gift').

The three types of *Dan*

If we study the literature on *dan*, we find that donors are required to detach themselves from the object that has been donated. *Dan* then requires *tyag*, or relinquishment of all proprietary rights in the property³. This *tyag* can not be achieved if we remain concerned with the outcome of our *dan*.

A second related aspect is explained very clearly in *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta*. Accordingly, *dan* can be of three types:

1. *Sattvik*⁴ (saiTvK)
2. *Rajasik*⁵ (raj isk)
3. *Tamasik*⁶ (tamisk)

*Sattvik dan*⁷ is one that is made as a duty. It should be made after considering the time, place and the suitability of the receiver. The receiver should not perform any service or provide any benefit

³ When a *dan* is made, the donor cuts off all emotional or legal ties with it: dĀ<mNyĀt ydĪ dĀva tĪ dan<i eQmCyte *Mahabharat, Anushasanparv* (13.1.59.4; page 5656). It then becomes the donee's property. It is for the donee to decide how it will be used.

⁴ *Sattvik* is associated with purity and spirituality.

⁵ *Rajasik* is associated with materialism. It is focused on worldly affairs.

⁶ *Tamasik* is associated with lack of intellect. It leads to darkness.

⁷ datVyimit yĪan<dlyt= npkair [e dĀzkal e c paÇe c tĪan< saiTvK< SmĀml. 20. *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta*, Chapter 17, verse 20.



in return⁸. Swami das explains⁹ that this kind of *dan* is really *tyag*, relinquishment, in which nothing is desired in return. The person making such a *dan* does not seek *punya* (पुण्य), merit in return¹⁰. Seeking such *punya* will transform the *dan* into *rajasik*.



*Rajasik dan*¹¹ is made for getting some direct or indirect benefit (whether material or spiritual) in return. The parting (of property) causes pain or regret to the donor. Or the *dan* is given after some persuasion [as in a collection or *chanda* (चण्डा)]. *Rajasik dan* gives whatever benefits are sought by the donor. This is the *dan* that forms one of the four Indian approaches (Sam, dan, dāna, dāna)¹² to solving a political problem¹³.

When *dan* is made to an unsuitable person or without considering time or place, then it is called *tamasik dan*¹⁴. If the *dan* is made without showing proper respect or in an insulting manner, then also it becomes *tamasik*.

It appears, therefore, that *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta* encourages *sattvik dan*.

However, this conclusion would probably vary from one person to another, depending on which *gun*¹⁵ (गुण) is dominating the person at that time (*sattvik*, *rajasik*, *tamasik*). A person under fluence of *sattv gun* would find *sattvik dan* appealing. However, if a person is under influence of *rajasik gun*, then he or she would be more likely to practice *rajasik dan*.

Dan is also classified as *naimittik* (निमित्तिक, purposive) and *nitya* (नित्य, eternal). *Naimittik dan* is similar to *rajasik*, where one desires some benefit in return. Such *dan* is extinguished once the benefits are received. *Nitya dan* is *sattvik*, as it is done out of a sense of duty. Benefits of such a *dan* are never exhausted -- they flow eternally.

Dan in Theory

Scriptures lay down varying proportions of one's income to be given away in *dan*. By and large, these proportions are no longer followed in practice. Nevertheless, they offer an interesting perspective on Hindu giving.

*Skand Puran*¹⁶ suggests that 10% of one's income should be given away:

Nyayapaj ItivÄn dzmazen xlmta,
ktlyaeivinyagí \$zälTywhtve ¹⁷

It should be noted that *dan* given from justly earned money¹⁸ only would count towards the 10%¹⁹.

⁸ Anpkarl

⁹ *Geeta Prabodhini*, p. 480

¹⁰ @k gna dan, shSÇ gna piy

¹¹ yÄu äTypkarawj)l miIzy va pn>, dlyte c pirkl :q< tÄan< raj s< SmÄtm. 21. *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta*, Chapter 17, verse 21.

¹² saça dann Édn d{fn c pirdr. *Mahabharat: Shantiparv*, Chapter 103, verse 36. P.4690

¹³ *Acharya Kautilya's* verses on *dan* (23-25) list five methods of making the *dan* to a financially weak king: l Bx<]l[< va tpiSv-mÖyavSwapnaplvi dann saxytl, 23, tTpÄivxml - dlyivsgal ghltanvthmaÄaitdan< SvÖVydanmpvl; prSve u Svyçahdan< c, 24, #it dankmß 25, *The Kautiliya Arthashastra*, 9.6.21-73. Part I, p.227.

¹⁴ Adzkal eyÄanmpaÇeyí dlyte AstkÄtmv}at< tÄamsmdaütml. 22. *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta*, Chapter 17, verse 22.

¹⁵ Attribute

¹⁶ The largest of eighteen *Mahapurans*

¹⁷ *Kya Karein, Kya Na Karein*, p.105, para 1.

¹⁸ Nyayapaj ItivÄn

¹⁹ *Dan* given out of stolen or unjustly earned funds is credited to the rightful owner (person to whom the money belonged in the first place)! Thus, such money can not be purified by giving charity.

*Shreemadbhagwad Puran*²⁰ suggests that one's funds should be divided into five parts:

नमाल्या यज्ञस्यैवायि कामय स्वयं नय च,
पञ्चाशद्विंशतिर्निवृत्तिमहामुक्तये ३७. २१

One part should be used for *dharm* (*dan* etc.), second for *yash* (public works, which bring fame to oneself), third should be reinvested into business (*arth*), fourth for *kam* (enjoyment of material things), and fifth for one's family and friends.

If one follows the above prescription, then you would end up spending about 40% of your funds on philanthropy²²: 20% as *dan* and another 20% on works for public-benefit, such as step-wells, temples, water-tanks, gardens, etc.

Dan in Practice

In practice, Hindu *dan* can be divided into four broad categories:

1. Offerings (*nirmalya*, in-mally) to Deities
2. *Dan* to individuals
3. *Dakshina* to individuals
4. *Dan* to institutions

When *nirmalya*²³ is offered to the Deities, the devotee



considers it as a return of the divine blessings. The *nirmalya* is either meant for the personal use²⁴ of the Deity or is returned to the devotees after symbolic acceptance. Cash offerings are used for the upkeep and maintenance of the temple and salaries of the staff. By and large, such *dan* does not raise any concerns about accountability among the devotees themselves.

Dan given to individuals is meant for their personal use. *Dakshina* is a form of fees²⁵, and is not really *dan*. Therefore, in both these cases, need for accountability does not arise.

Dan to institutions is a relatively modern phenomenon in the Hindu society. Such institutions may be *maths* (m0), ashrams (Aai m) or charitable organizations. This, the fourth category of *dan*, is the only area where we see some concerns regarding accountability of the recipients.

The accountability model

What, then, is the accountability mechanism used in Hindu society to ensure that *dan* is used properly? In our understanding, the emphasis is on proper selection of the donee²⁶. If the donee is selected carefully, then the *dan* will be effective²⁷. There will be no need to monitor how the funds are actually used.

Another aspect to be kept in mind is the relinquishment aspect. Goswami Tulsi-das says that in *kaliyug*, the method of making *dan* is not so important²⁸. Ra-

²⁰ One of the eighteen *Mahapurans*; highly influential and widely read

²¹ *Shreemadbhagwad Puran*, 8.19.37, vol. 1, p.841

²² Except that *sattvik dan* should not be treated as philanthropy, because *sattvik dan* requires total detachment whereas philanthropy indicates love of mankind!

²³ This may be material (leaves, flowers, fruits, sweets, ornaments, etc.). Bhagwan Shree Krishna has said in *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta* that he happily accepts simple things such as a leaf, fruits, flowers, even water, if offered with devotion. पञ्चपुष्पं च त्रायकं मे ईक्यायं च दत्तं, तद्वै ईक्युत्तमं हिमं य-

तात्मनः. 26. *Shreemadbhagwad Geeta*, Chapter 9, verse 26

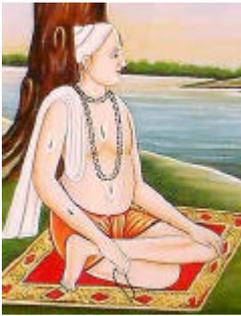
²⁴ Ornaments, clothes, etc.

²⁵ Hindu practices require that every *dan* to a Brahmin should also be accompanied by *dakshina*. *Puranic Concept of Dana*, P.3

²⁶ पञ्चता, suitability

²⁷ सौम्यं, one that bears fruit.

²⁸ जन्तुनां विषयं दानं कर्म कल्याणं. 1030. (7.103.b) p. 873, *Shree Ram Charit Manas*



ther, *tyag* or quishment is more important.

Hindu thought encourages gradual detachment from the material world, if one is to achieve *moksh* (मोक्ष) or release from the painful cycle of birth and death. The act of giving is, therefore, an act of cutting off ties from the material world.

If a person subscribes to this view, then it is clear that he or she can easily cut off connections from the *dan* that has been made. Once this happens, it is no longer necessary to enquire how the money has been used.

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