

# CONCEPT OF BEGGING IN ANCIENT THOUGHT

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Many beg in the name of religion. Does Hinduism make begging or alms giving an essential feature?

Dharmasastras assert that *Dana* is the characteristic feature of *Kaliyuga*. On *Upanayana* day, the boy has to beg. The sannyasin lives on charity.

However, Patanjali asserts that accepting gifts is forbidden. Manu and Kautilya emphasise charity through institutions. Thus, the modern steps to prevent begging in streets is in line with ancient Indian thought.

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## Introduction

One of the most conspicuous and painful features of Indian cities and towns is the presence of hundreds of beggars in the market place, near the temples, at the railway stations, etc. The beggar asks you, sometimes even compels you, to give him money, food or clothing. He asks you to do *danadharma*. Every Saturday in the month of Sravana, July—August, boys of eight to ten put on *namams* on their forehead shouting "Sriman Narayana Govinda", and go from house to house asking the housewife to give a handful of rice grains. On Saturdays, the Dasari, a beggar by caste, comes to the door with his iron lamp, and stands sounding the conch and striking the gong, to beg. Individuals and families come round asking you to help them to go to Tirupati because they have taken a vow that they would collect money from donors in order to undertake their pilgrimage. Temple gates are infested by beggars. Families give *annadana* on *sraadha* days. They feed the poor to appease their ancestors. Institutions as well as organizations feed hundreds and thousands of people on some specified days.

Thus, in several ways, religious beliefs as much as poverty, are responsible for the perpetuation of indiscriminate beggary in India.

What is the religious sanction behind this

practice? What is the view of the ancient Indian thinkers regarding this problem? An attempt is made in this paper to study this problem.

## The Yuga Theory

One of the important features of ancient Indian thought is the view regarding the deterioration of dharma, righteousness, from *yuga* to *yuga*, from age to age. The first age, the *kruta yuga* is the golden age and the present age, the *kali yuga* is the iron age. Each age, according to the ancient thinkers, has got its own specific virtue and way of life.

For instance, according to the great law-giver Manu, in the *kruta* age, the chief virtue is *tapas*, austerity, in the *treta* age the chief virtue is *jnana*, knowledge, in the *Dvapara* age, it is *yajna*, sacrifice and in the present *kali* age, the chief virtue is *dana*, gift-giving. (1.86).

Thus, the chief virtue in the present age is giving gifts.

What does this mean? One of the conspicuous features of ancient Indian thought is the lack of any discussion regarding concepts. This makes it very difficult for us to understand the implications of the concept of *dana* in relation to the *yuga*.

A comparison of the virtues of austerity, knowledge, sacrifice and liberality or charity enables us to infer the implication of the

concept of *dana*. While austerity and knowledge involve a highly developed personality, and while sacrifice involves riches and implies the political organization of monarchy, by contrast, the assumption appears to be that the society in the fourth age consists of average individuals who have neither the ability to undertake *tapas*, nor to acquire *jnana*, nor to perform *yajnas*, which are elaborate, time-consuming and very costly. So probably, the ancient Indian thinkers laid down that mutual help, liberality and a charitable outlook ought to be the characteristic feature of the *kali* age.

### *The Ashrama Theory*

The above assumption appears to be borne out by the *dharma*, the duty, prescribed for the various stages in the growth of an individual according to *ashrama dharma*.

The *Brahmachari* after *upanayana* is required "to beg alms according to the prescribed rules" (Manu II.48-50). The *Vanaprasta* may beg alms from a Brahmana (Manu VI.27). The *Sannyasin* has to live on alms. However, he may beg only once a day. He should not be eager to obtain a large quantity of alms (VI.55).

Thus, only the child and the *grihastha* are forbidden from begging. The *brahmachari* has to beg alms and give the same to the guru. He should partake of the food only with the permission of the guru (Manu II 50.51). Similarly, the *sannyasin*, who has renounced everything, has to survive by begging alms. Even the great Ramana Maharishi, recalled that before the prosperous ashram was organized, he would go into streets of Tiruvannamalai and walk with his begging bowl. If some housewife saw him and gave him food, he would go to his cave and consume it. If, however, nobody gave him food, he would starve. Swami Vivekananda also relates similar incidents in his life as a *parivrajaka*.

The Dharmasastras looked upon it as a duty of the *grihastha* to provide food to the *brahmacharis* and the *sannyasins*. It may be pointed out that even today, the *Jagadgurus* are invited by the *Bhaktas* to receive 'bhiksha'. The food served to them is called *bhiksha*, alms, though as heads of the *mathas*, they are very prosperous people with vast wealth and income.

### *The Varna Theory*

The Varna theory also prescribes the rules for giving *dana* and for obtaining *bhiksha*.

Describing the functions of the persons belonging to the four varnas, Manu declares that only the members of the Brahmana varna are entitled to give and receive *dana* (I.88 and X 76). On the other hand, the *Kshatriya* and the *Vaisya* are authorised only to give *dana*, but are forbidden from receiving *dana* (X.77).

It must be pointed out that in this context the term *dana* stands for giving gifts. However, even in ancient times, in the story of Devayani in Mahabharata, Sarmishtha, the daughter of Vrishaparva, the king of asuras, mocks at Devayani, the daughter of Sukracharya, the preceptor of the king, by saying that she is merely the daughter of a beggar who lives on her father's bounty. This enrages the guru as well as his daughter.

It may also be recalled that the very gods who wish to punish the arrogant and powerful kings, take the form of a beggar. Vishnu, the God of gods, assumes the form of Vamana to beg three paces of land from the powerful king Bali and covers the entire world with the first step, the heavens with the second step and yields to the persuasion of Bali to put the third step on his head! Similarly, Indra, the king of gods, when he wants to weaken the great warrior Karna, takes the form of a

Brahmin and begs him to gift away his earrings and the armour with which he is supposed to have taken birth.

Thus, according to the ancient books only those belonging to Brahmana varna are entitled to receive charity and no one else.

### *Concept of Aparigraha*

It is well known that Patanjali, the author of the great work *Yoga Sutra*, has prescribed *aparigraha*, the non-acceptance of anything from others, as one of the five *yamas*, rules of conduct, along with truth, ahimsa, continence and non-stealing.

There is no doubt that *aparigraha* is a very important principle of conduct. All corruption is due to the acceptance of gifts. Any such acceptance implies that there is the obligation to return the value in some other form. Gifts are generally given only to those who are in a position to render help. The help expected is generally against rules of law and rules of morality. That is why the people in power are given gifts so that they may go out of their way and break the rules to help the donor in return.

### *Contradiction between Dana and Aparigraha*

It is obvious from the description of the ancient precepts, that the two concepts of *dana* and *aparigraha* are contradictory. It is impossible to make gifts when there is no one to receive them. While *dana* emphasises the charitable outlook of the giver, a very desirable personal and social quality, the acceptance of *bhiksha* reveals the cringing quality of the recipient. The beggar is dependent on others, a despicable quality.

Even the most ancient *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* asserts that gifts should not be accepted (1.8.23.6). In this it expresses sentiments similar to Patanjali's rule of

*aparigraha*. Similarly in *Adiparva* it is said "Thou shouldst always give but never beg".

That the ancient thinkers were conscious that able-bodied men resort to begging as a way of escape is revealed by the assertion of *Kautilya*. He laid down that when a capable person neglects to maintain his wife, children, mother, sisters etc., and takes up *sannyasa* without proper provision to the dependents in his family, he must be punished (II. 1.48).

On the other hand, there is the ancient concept of *poortha*, which involves the digging of wells, construction of choultries and rest houses, conducting hospitals for human beings and animals and such other activities, all involving *ahimsa*, *karuna* and *bhootadaya*. Thus, the concept of *poortha* involves constructions and setting up of institutions for social welfare.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* asserts that *Janasruti Pautrayana* had erected everywhere shelters in order to feed people who go there (IV. 1-2).

Institutionalised charity is referred to by *Manu*. He requires that the king should give gifts to those afflicted by disease, those who are orphans, those who are old in age (VIII. 395). The same view is expressed by *Kautilya*. "The king shall provide the orphans, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted and the helpless with maintenance. He shall also provide sustenance to helpless women, when they are carrying and also the children they give birth to" (II. ch. 1).

Thus, both *Manu* and *Kautilya* are in favour of social security measures. *Kautilya* describes all the various groups which have to be supported by the state. He also mentions workhouses for the unemployed persons.

This analysis shows that the ancient Indian thinkers condemned individual begging but were in favour of setting up institutions to help those in need.

This helps us to understand the signi-

ficance of the emphasis on dana, making gifts in the Kali yuga.

### *Gita Analysis of Dana*

In its characteristic way Gita uses the concept of guna to analyse the attributes of dana (XVII, 20-21).

The sattvika dana is the gift that is made to a person from whom no return is expected. It is a gift that is given with the feeling that it is one's duty to give. It should be given to a worthy person at the proper time and in the proper place.

The rajasa dana is the gift which is made with the hope of a return or with the expectation of a future gain or when the donor feels it as something painful.

The tamasa dana is the gift that is made in a wrong place or at a wrong time or to an unworthy person. It is a gift that is made with a contempt towards the recipient.

It is clear that this analysis of the forms of dana is not very helpful to understand the problem of begging.

When a person gives money to a beggar in the temple precincts, all the characteristics of sattvic dana are fulfilled. The gift is made at the proper place and at the proper time. It is made in the precincts of the temple and after one has performed the puja. It is certainly given without any expectation of return. Of course, in some cases, there may be the hope of collecting *punya*, merit, by giving money.

But the important points are the attributes of the recipient and the purpose of the gift. Is he worthy of being given a gift? Does the gift given meet the purpose for which it is made?

Who is a worthy recipient? According to the ancient thinkers, Brahmacharins who are pursuing their studies and the Sannyasins who have renounced everything are worthy recipients.

Let us take the students first. In the

ancient days, students went round and collected grains or cooked food, not for their personal consumption, but for the teacher, who had no other source of income. This contingency does not hold good today. We now recognize that the poor student should be accommodated in a free hostel where he gets boarding and lodging at the cost of the state or society. In some cities, even now students recommended by the teachers, are given meals by rotation—a maximum of fourteen house holders accept to give one meal a week to the worthy student. This takes care of his food needs. But really the aim should be to provide free boarding and lodging in a hostel, an institution, so that there is no element of personal charity which may induce haughtiness in the donor and a sense of degradation in the recipient.

Next, regarding the problem of sannyasins. According to the rules laid down in the ancient books, the sannyasin never begs. He eats when food is offered to him with reverence, otherwise he starves. In places like Hardwar and Rishikesh there are even now numerous organizations which prepare food once a day and give them to the sannyasins who go there to collect it. There is no begging. Also we have ashramas, or mathas, institutions which are maintained through public donations. The Sikhs conduct the *langars* in which meals are served to any person who goes there at the proper time. There are similar organizations run by other religious groups.

Thus, neither a student, nor an ascetic has to go about with a begging bowl and degrade himself by begging.

Next there are the orphans. Even Kautilya and Manu recognize that it is the duty of the state to provide for orphans. And today there are orphanages run with the help of funds provided by the public or by the state. The same may be said of the aged, the infirm, the physically handicapped and

the mentally handicapped. Reference has been made above to the need for looking after pregnant mothers as indicated by Kautilya.

Thus, the beggars who swarm the temples are really not worthy recipients.

Next about the problem of the purpose of the gift. As noted above some donors may be deluded by the notion that they collect merit, *punya*, by giving charity to beggars. But this is a delusion. More of this later.

Many donors are of the opinion that they are helping the poor. Do they in fact? By giving them a coin or two, can they help the poor beggar? This is sheer arrogance. The problem remains. Probably the beggar is even procreating and bringing up beggars. It is a familiar sight to see little children begging.

Thus the characteristics of *sattvika dana* given by the author of Gita are not really satisfactory. But the features he has described regarding *rajasika* and *tamasika danas* appear to be more satisfactory. The *rajasika dana* is that given with an eye for benefits. This is at the bottom of corruption. The *tamasika dana* is the gift made with contempt.

#### *Vinoba's Interpretation of Dana*

It is well known that during the fifties Vinoba launched his *bhoodan* movement. He asked the landowners to give as gift a part of their land so that the millions of landless could have land of their own to till and thus solve the terrible conflict that arose at that time between the land-owning class and the landless class in the rural parts. He wanted to solve the conflict between these two classes by appealing to the rich to have a charitable outlook and gift away some part of their property. This he called *prem dan*, gifts with love. He persuaded the land owners to give the land

out of love to the landless.

Vinoba also launched other movements like *shram dan*, the gift of labour, *sampatti dan*, the gift of wealth, *vidya dan*, the gift of education and above all, *jivan dan*, the gift of one's entire life to the service of the people.

Underlying all these movements is the ideal of charity and compassion for the weaker sections of society. They involve not only gifting land and money, but also labour and education. The fundamental aim of all these movements is the distribution of land and wealth and expertise so as to bring about a society based on love instead of exploitation and coercion.

This is an illustration of the way in which the concept of *dana* is put to use to bring about a new social order.

#### *Institutionalization of Dana*

While *brahmacharya* and *sannyasa* emphasised *bhiksha*, begging, *poortha* emphasised construction of rest houses, digging wells, establishing hospitals and setting up such other institutions which promoted social welfare without necessitating begging. Similarly, according to Kautilya, it is the duty of the state to set up orphanages for giving protection to the orphans, providing institutional care to the pregnant women who are in need of protection and organizing workshops to provide work for the unemployed.

As noted above, the students do not have to beg now because of the scheme of setting up hostels to provide free boarding and lodging to the poor students whose parents are unable to provide these facilities. Nor do the *sannyasins* have to beg because there are two types of institutions to look after their needs. There are the *mathas* and *ashramas* set up by the religious orders and there are the organizations which prepare and distribute food as in

Hardwar, Rishikesh and such other places where a large number of sannyasins pursue their ascetic practices.

The social welfare departments have now set up a number of institutions to provide lodging, boarding, education, health care for needy women and children and for the physically, mentally and socially handicapped.

Legislation has been passed for the prevention of beggary and for the setting up of beggar homes which not only provide boarding and lodging but also training in some craft or vocation.

Is prevention of begging against Hindu dharma? Is punishment of the beggars against Hindu dharma?

Our analysis has shown that wrong notions of charity prevail among those who give dana personally and those who receive dana from individuals. Commenting on the concept of aparigraha, non-acceptance of gifts, Swami Vivekananda writes, "The mind of the men who receive gifts is acted on by the mind of the giver, so the receiver is likely to become degenerate. Receiving gifts is prone to destroy the independence of mind and encourages slavishness. Therefore accept no gifts" (Raja Yoga p. 223).

Thus, institutionalization of dana is the best method. It is to the good of the giver and of the receiver. Individual giving makes the giver arrogant or will help him to get away from the terrible problem of poverty and suffering by giving a few coins. The person who receives from individuals becomes degraded and dependent. He exploits the compassion of the giver.

Institutionalization prevents both these possibilities, voluntary donations to institutions which look after the needs of the poor and suffering will make the help both impersonal and efficient. It also makes the

receiving of the help a right. The person who receives does not have to lose his self-respect. This is the basic aim of social security measures. Help which destroys the self-respect of the receiver is really a social crime.

Finally, some observations may be made regarding the problem of poor feeding on sraaddha days, birth anniversary of religious leaders etc. The present writer recalls a skit enacted by the famous Tamil actors Maduram and Krishnan. Just after the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 with all its noble ideals, they put on the stage a one-act play. The couple want to offer food to poor in the name of their ancestors. The food is prepared in large quantities. The husband goes out to collect beggars. He is unable to find any. He comes back with great regret. The couple decide to abandon poor feeding from the subsequent year because the social conditions have changed.

It is very difficult to find whether the custom of poor feeding has survived because there are poor who are quite eager to get one free meal or because the rich are able to satisfy their conscience by providing a free meal once a year. So long as people are there with no self-respect the custom of poor feeding will survive.

So the main task of the society is to build self-respect in every citizen so that he does not resort to begging and does not look forward to getting a free meal.

Manu has said "feeding a large company destroys these five: respectful treatment of the invited, propriety of time and place, selection of the pure and virtuous guests (III. 126).

It is custom and not a proper understanding of ancient Indian thought which is responsible for the twin social evils of begging and poor feeding.