

SACRED SUSTENANCE: EXPLORING FOOD AS A DIVINE GIFT IN THE PURANAS

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Abstract

In ancient India, the Gift of food (Annadana) was considered sacred and integral to religious and social practice. The Puranas, which are highly regarded for their extensive mythological narratives, depict food not merely as sustenance, but as a divine gift symbolizing blessings and spiritual nourishment. This exploration delves into the profound significance of food as a sacred offering within the Puranas, and examines the complex web of Dana, the act of gift-giving, within these texts, emphasizing its role in the distribution, redistribution, and exchange of food. Through a close thematic analysis of specific Puranas Agni Purana, Brahma Purana and Skanda Purana, the paper explores the types of food considered sacred gifts, the motivations behind these offerings, spiritual, moral, and societal and the intricate ways they shaped social relationships and religious practices.

Keywords: Annadana, gift-giving, Puranas, Hinduism, food gifts, spiritual motives, reciprocity, social welfare, dharma

Food, considered a divine gift in many cultures, holds a special place in Hinduism. The Puranas, ancient Hindu texts, echo this sentiment by portraying food as a symbol of life, nourishment, and divine blessing. More than fuel for the body, food symbolizes the vibrant breath of life. ¹Dana signifies the voluntary act of relinquishing one's ownership and utilization rights over a particular object. By the mid-fourth century CE, the Puranas had transformed, evolving from their earlier form as repositories of myths and legends into authoritative guides for Hindu rituals and customs. This shift was marked by the incorporation of comprehensive chapters on varnashrama, dharma, acara, shraddha, prayashchitta, dana, puja, vrata, tirtha, pratishta, and utsarga. ²While the Puranas showcase a range of precious gifts, it is the act of offering food, regardless of its material value, which resonates with its most profound meaning and spiritual merit. ³In the past, present, or future, nothing surpasses the gift of food. Giving elephants, horses, or even luxurious objects pales in comparison, barely reaching sixteenth of their merit. ⁴ Brahma Purana emphasizes the gift of food over gift of land ⁵, and says that a person who respects dharma and seeks merit should give food as a gift as it is the life of a man. ⁶

All that can be moved or left unmoved, given life or not, becomes a gift—a testament to the boundless nature of giving. The following are the classifications and lists of food items according to the Puranas.

Grains: Corn, barley, wheat, kidney beans, black grams, and rice.

Fruits: Rose apples, mangoes, walnuts, pomegranates, and grapes.

Dairy Products: Milk, Curd, Ghee, and Clarified Butter.

Sweets and Sweeteners: Jaggery, sugarcane, honey, and betel nuts.

Specialty Dishes: Modaka, Payasa⁷ (rice boiled in milk), Apupa⁸ (round cake of flour), Saskulis (baked cakes), and Pakavannam (baked food).

Vegetables and Roots: Roots, vegetables, and condiments such as white mustard.

During the 6th century BC, agriculture was well developed, marking an era of prosperity in agrarian economies. The widespread adoption of iron tools⁹ coupled with fertile soil has significantly elevated the cultivation of grains, rendering them a sought-after commodity, particularly as a gift. The surplus yield of grains, stemming from successful harvests, faces challenges due to the absence of adequate storage facilities and limited

¹ Satapata Brahmana.9.2.3.16, Panchavimsa Brahmana.12.4.20

² R C hazra, Puranic Records On Hindu Rites And Customs. Page 6

³ Brahma Purana.218.10 – सर्वेषामेव दानानामन्न्ं श्रेष्ठमुदाहृतम् |, Skanda Purana.III.3.3

⁴ Agni purana.211.44-46

⁵ Brahma Purana.83.21

⁶ Ibid.218.12

⁷ Agni Purana.58.34

⁸ Ibid.58.34

⁹ R C. Iron and urbanization in Ancient India, JBPP.1,1977

transportation options. Consequently, grains have emerged as a prevalent choice for gifting purposes, owing to their abundance and practicality. This circumstance contributed to the prominence of grains as favored articles for gifting during this period.

Sesame held a very special position in gift-giving practices and social perception. While getting sesame, especially for rituals and offerings to ancestors, was encouraged, its sale was looked down upon, even considered shameful, Baudhayana dharma sutra and manusmriti texts express these contradictory views.¹⁰Baudhayana Dharmasutra warns against misusing sesamum for anything outside its designated purposes: food, anointing, and charitable gifts. Using it for other purposes is considered a serious offence with karmic consequences, such as rebirth as a worm and being plunged into the ordure of dogs representing a state of degradation and suffering.¹¹ This highlights the sacredness associated with the sesamum. It was not just a seed, but a valuable substance used in rituals, offerings, and personal care.

Milk and its by-products were consistently popular gifts throughout the study period. This suggests widespread consumption and appreciation of dairy products across various social classes. Despite the rise of urban centers, the continued preference for dairy products as gifts indicates a dominant agrarian character in ancient Indian society.

Interestingly, acceptable food types depended on social rank. Some Buddhist and Jain sects preferred cooked food¹², whereas Brahmins preferred uncooked food. This is because uncooked food is considered purer and more suited for ritual offerings owing to its natural state and minimal human intervention. Brahma Purana mentions this special care that the quality of food and source of food should be undertaken.¹³ Moreover, uncooked grains and other foods have a better shelf life than cooked foods, making them practical gifts, especially in rural settings or for long-term offerings. This ensures that the gift remains in good condition until it is used or distributed.

Understanding the motivations behind food gifting requires thinking that goes beyond pragmatism. It demonstrates a deeply ingrained cultural, theological, and ethical framework that sees food as a symbol of life, community, and spiritual significance. Food gifts serve as potent tools for sine expiation.¹⁴ The expected rewards were not just religious merit, but also good things in life, such as health, wealth, beauty, long life, and overall prosperity. According to Brahma Purana, the donor of water receives satisfaction, but the giver of food receives eternal delight, and all his wishes are fulfilled.¹⁵Childbirth, tonsure, marriage, and death – These pivotal moments in life are often accompanied by gift-making rituals.¹⁶ While celebrating milestones undoubtedly played a role, the underlying fear of the supernatural forces influencing these transitions emerged as a powerful motivator. Gifts can be seen as offerings to appease powerful deities and ward-off potential misfortunes. The interconnectedness of karma, rebirth, and gift-giving forms a core tenet that motivates generosity. The hope for a better future served as a powerful incentive to give, further highlighting the focus on individual well-being.

The increasing popularity of gift-making for personal gain is a sign of growing individualism in ancient Indian society. Concerns for personal well-being, both in this life and the next, appear to have overshadowed tribal or community-oriented concerns. that even seemingly selfless motives like charity and merit-seeking ultimately stem from a desire for personal well-being, often driven by anxieties about life's impermanence and social expectations.

By the later Vedic age, compassion had become a prominent value, and the ten incarnations of Vishnu gained popularity during this period, further emphasizing his compassionate nature. Each avatar represents a specific divine intervention for the benefit of humanity, showcasing Vishnu's willingness to help and forgive. The emphasis on devotional worship (bhakti) to secure Vishnu's favor is also significant. This concept suggests that compassion was not simply a passive attribute of deity but could be actively cultivated through devotion and dedication.

The accrual of spiritual merit, encapsulated by the concepts of istapūrta or punya¹⁷, assumes significant importance as a pathway to a better afterlife. Gift-giving is a prevalent method of amassing spiritual capital, reflecting a deep-seated belief in the transformative power of virtuous actions. Ancestor worship, epitomized by śrāddha offerings, has emerged as a multifaceted practice, intertwining concerns about property inheritance and the pursuit of immortality through progeny. This ritualistic approach serves as a tangible manifestation of human desire to transcend mental limitations and ensure a lasting legacy. The concept of rna, or debt, became a pivotal aspect of the lives of householders during the era of the Puranas, encompassing obligations owed to various entities, including gods, sages, ancestors, and all living creatures. This all-encompassing indebtedness sets the stage for a complex system of rituals and offerings designed to appease and fulfil these multifaceted obligations. The discharge of these debts was intricately woven into prescribed rituals, gifts, and food offerings

¹⁰ Baudhayana dharma sutra II.1.2.27, Manusmriti X.91

¹¹ Baudhayana dharma sutra II.1.2.27

¹² Acarngasutra.II.1.1

¹³ Brahma Purana.218.13

¹⁴ Ibid.218.19

¹⁵ Ibid.218.24

¹⁶ Gobhila Grihya Sutra.IV.3.35

¹⁷ Taittiriya Brahmana.II.5.5

tailored to the specific requirements of each creditor category. The Vaiśvadevas, considered universal gods, were honored through devayajña, sages through brahmayajña, ancestors through tarpana or śrāddha, and all living beings through bhūtayajña involving bali-harana or food offerings.¹⁸In essence, it reflects deep-rooted cultural values that emphasize generosity, reciprocity, the moral imperative to share resources with various institutions, and the interconnectedness of individuals within the social structure.

The Puranas talked about all sorts of people and suggested different types of gifts based on what one could afford. They also clarified that even if someone was poor, they could still participate in the rituals and benefit from the offerings. According to Baudhayana, there is strong advice against eating without first sharing a portion with the deities, ancestors, servants, guests, and friends. Doing so is tantamount to ingesting poison.¹⁹ Manu underlines the duty of householders to share food generously, to allow it to those who cannot cook for themselves, and to extend this practice to the benefit of all living beings without compromising their well-being.²⁰ Sudras and women are treated in great regard.²¹ Mahabharata emphasizes that the recipient's caste or background should not be considered when gifting.²² Brahma Purana Promotes giving food, clothes, and blankets to the poor²³ and mentions that people who give water to thirst and food to the hungry die happily in due course. This suggests recognition of the shared humanity and vulnerability of all people, regardless of their social standing.

CONCLUSION

In the early stages of human society, the act of sharing food, whether through hunting or agricultural cooperation, served as a fundamental manifestation of mutual aid. This cooperative approach to sustenance not only ensured survival, but also laid the foundation for the concept of gift-giving as a communal endeavor. During the 6th century BC, agriculture was well-developed, marking an era of prosperity in agrarian economies, and societies characterized by communal wealth accumulation often engaged in periodic redistributions of food resources. This was frequently executed through feasting or offerings to deities, serving the dual purpose of sustaining communal well-being, and expressing gratitude to higher powers. In the Puranas, amidst varied gifts, food takes precedence, symbolizing the recognition that, for an ordinary person, life's essentials extend beyond material or spiritual wealth to encompass fundamental needs such as food, clothing, and shelter. This underscores a profound understanding of the Puranic tradition.

The Puranas addressed all sorts of people and suggested different types of gifts based on what one could afford. They also clarified that, even if someone was poor, they could still participate in rituals and benefit from the offerings. People believe in receiving not only spiritual benefits but also good things in their daily lives. They expressed their wishes for wealth, health, and even being born into prestigious families or attractive forms.

a distinction between Dana and the Western concept of charity, While self-interest remains a common thread in both, Dana is often characterized by a desire for accruing merit, seeking fame, or fulfilling religious duties. In contrast, charity tends to be associated with sentiments of pity and compassion. Nevertheless, the demarcation between the two becomes blurred as even acts of compassion can be influenced by societal expectations or personal satisfaction.

In stratified societies, the act of giving food as charity or gifts to religious institutions has become a means of redistributing resources and addressing social inequalities. This practice, designed to help the less fortunate, has evolved. This underscores the enduring significance of food gifting as a mechanism for social cohesion and assistance in diverse societal contexts.

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¹⁸ Apastamba Dharma Sutra. II.4.9.5-6

¹⁹ Baudhayana Dharma Sutra, II.3.5, 17, 18

²⁰ Manusmriti. IV.32

²¹ Brahma Purana. 218.20-21, Bhagavata Purana Uttaraparva 156.24

²² Mahabharata Anusaparva. 63.13, 17

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