

Importance of Charity in Scriptures

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ABSTRACT

In our daily life we work, eat, drink, rest and sleep without fail.

We need to be alive, and breathing (inhaling and exhaling) to achieve all these. That means inhaling and exhaling. It is just a process of letting out the breath and taking it back. Can we not understand that Life energy rests in taking and giving. When we inhale, there is no full retention but a part has to be released out and in turn becomes useful for other creatures. This implies the need for sharing a portion of whatever we have benefitted by way of charity.

If one does not give up the air he has taken, he cannot breath.

Charity is an act of giving to entitle ourselves to enjoy a commodity like Prana. In the same way, without charity man is not entitled to live.

So charity is an essential part of life. Donating to the causes we care about, not only benefits the receiving person, but also deeply rewards us by giving a positive effect on our lives. Giving to charity makes us feel good.

The knowledge that we are helping others is highly empowering and makes us feel happy as well as fulfilled.

Researchers have identified a link between, making a donation to charity and increased activity in the area of the brain that registers pleasure.

Blessed with the power to improve the lives of others is, to many people, an opportunity and one that comes with its own sense of obligation.

Living with these powerful feelings of responsibility, is a great way to reinforce our personal values and feel in a way true to our own ethical beliefs. Sharing the experiences of charity with our children shows them, right from their young age that they can make positive changes in the world.

So nurturing their innate generosity is likely to mean that they grow up with a greater appreciation of what they have and will carry on supporting the charity in the years to come. Giving charity encourages friends and family to emulate the same.

Scriptures have presented the great personalities in front of us to inspire us in many ways.

Our purpose of study is to have a look at them and practice such values to elevate ourselves with a bit of improving the society. Scriptures have defined various Charities and the need to do them and provided the proportion to be followed and its benefits. Probably we practice charity with the objective of gaining tax benefits we get from them. But studies of scriptures make us to look beyond all these and to achieve higher standards. They have instructed us to do charity not on occasional basis, but regularly.

So re-collecting the importance and the instances of charity, its need, the right perspectives of charity, and proportion of charity which one should do, is the central theme of our study.

KEYWORDS: Importance of charity, why one should do charity, views of scriptures and other literary works, standard guidelines to elevate the noble acts, conclusions, etc

INTRODUCTION

In our daily life we have observed various charitable acts.

In a few occasions, we come across a pitiable person, or a heart breaking situation or a continuous plead by someone

and we immediately come forward as a response and do a little charity. Pity plays a vital role here.

For society's welfare this is good, since it is born out of compassion.

How to cite this paper: Dr. N. Venkatesha Rao "Importance of Charity in Scriptures"

Published in
International Journal
of Trend in Scientific
Research and
Development
(ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-
6470, Volume-4 |
Issue-6, October
2020, pp.146-151, URL:
www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd33311.pdf



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Shahstra calls this as an emotional act. In situations of calamities or looking at hard-hit situations we react by giving our share of charity.

For this we need not see the person or we need not know the name or even his greatness. This is "Santarpana" and means "pleasing all the living beings." This is like anna santarpana, free food distribution where we all, generally do charity. For food, medicine and water all are eligible.

During natural calamities though we do charity, after some time, when situations turn to normalcy, we may even feel sorry for our emotional act of charity also. This is not good for the individual. We should do charity on our own, with a joy, and by understanding its importance. Then charity becomes our life style.

Understand the situation rightly, mark your objectives and targets, and undertake them with the goal of pleasing the One (Creator) who resides inside the living beings. Know the right place and the time also for doing charity works. Such thoughtful action brings us satisfaction and happiness. This inspires others also. Society will be peaceful and prosperous. "Loka samasta sukhino bhavantu" should be the guideline of all our activities. This is the central theme of our scriptures and charity is a practical approach in that direction.

1. Brahma's advice to all human beings.-Charity is compulsory

Once Devas, Manavas and Demons went to four headed Brahma to seek advice on what is ethically best suitable for them. Brahma thought about what was the best for each group that had assembled there and counseled them like this. He pronounced three times the letter "Da".

Devas understood that they were advised to have control over their senses. Devas due to their past good deeds have access to so many pleasures and attractions in their lives. Having resided in heaven, luxuries are always at their reach. Enjoying them without any limits may cause diseases and arrogance too. Since they need to have control over their senses Dama (control over their senses) was recommended for them.

Secondly, humans understood that they should do charity as much as possible. As they don't have any super natural powers, they have to struggle hard and gain everything. Naturally they may develop avariciousness and keep everything with them. This is greed and not good either for them or for the society. Their greediness would not allow them to have a peaceful life now or later. So Dana (Charity) is essential for humans.

Finally, Daityas understood that they should have compassion towards living beings.

Demons because of their enormous strength and stubborn thirst for achievement, they could indulge in atrocious violence. Because of this they become unpopular and develop enmity with others. This is not good for society or for them. So Brahma suggested them to have compassion for all. That way the letter "da" told thrice by Brahma implied Dama, Dana and Daya. This is said in Brihadaranyaka upanishad. (05-02-03)

We can interpret that he suggested three Cs. Control, Charity and Compassion. These three Cs are important. The same instruction or advice yields different meanings in different stages of evolution.

When cruelty overpowers the mind, a person becomes a Demon.

When selfishness is predominant, then one is considered as a natural human being. When purity and harmony is established in one's mind then alone he is called as Divine. Truth is one. But it is expressed and interpreted differently in different stages of one's progress. Therefore a thoughtful person should never bring a conflict and dispute in the name of religion and also in the interpretation of scriptures.

This story brings out the theme that men are basically selfish and only by charity, selfishness can be overcome and they will become dearer to all.

Thus Dana is an essential process and practice for the elevation of a man.

Even Taittiriyaopanishad instructs us to do charity with faith, "श्रद्धया देयम्" 1. Further it instructs the student to give Guru Dakshina. "आचार्याय प्रियं धनमाहृत्य प्रजातनुं मा व्यवचेत्सीः" 2.

It advises the person to prepare enough food to serve for all. "अन्नं बहुकुर्वीत तद्व्रतम्" 3.

In the next verse it orders that one should not deny shelter to the truthseeker. Orders that food, residence and education should be provided free for students. "न कच्चन वसतौ प्रत्याचक्षीत" 4. Not even a single person be denied of shelter.

So dana is essential and obligatory on the self dependent person.

Aitareyopanishad confirms that the letter "na" (uttering NO) to the truth seeker in any way and not providing food, shelter and knowledge is a cruel act. "यच्च नैति यच्च अस्याः क्रूरम्" 5.

Kathopanishad says "Men cross birth and death only by the practice of these three". त्रिकर्मकृत् तरति जन्ममृत्यू 6

Those three are: Yajna, Dana and Tapas.

Bhagavadgita orders that "one should never cook for himself. Whoever cooks for his consumption alone, is verily, a sinner and he eats the sin that he has prepared".

"भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापाः ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात्" 7

Krishna Further says that Yajna Dana and Thapas are not optional.

One should necessarily do sacrifice, donation and penance. It should never be stopped.

यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् 18

2. Types of charity

In Bhagavad Gita, Lord Sri Krishna makes three main distinctions about the act of charity.

Virtuos people present their gifts at an appropriate time, place and only for the deserving. They do it with humility, without expecting any credit or returns.

Secondly self -centered people do charity, but always expecting some benefit in return.

Finally it is demonic type who give their gifts with contempt, without respect and to the undeserving persons at wrong places and wrong time.⁹

Why charity should be done---?

A. Nature of wealth

Wealth has only three outlets.

- by giving away as gift (dana)or
- by spending for one's own enjoyment (bhoga) or
- by allowing it to get perished by itself.

दानं भोगो नाशस्ति स्रोतयो भवन्ति वित्तस्य ।
यो न ददाति न भुङ्क्ते तस्य तृतीया गतिर्भवति ॥10.

Dana—has the following benefits:

Dana has no flaws.

1. All that you have can also be given away.
2. It brings name and fame in the society without fail.
3. Even family members can reap such benefits like social respect, satisfaction etc
4. Right distribution of wealth.
5. Society is benefited
6. As a law of nature, each action has an equal reaction and he must be benefited by it, at least in the old age or in the next birth.

Bhoga or self enjoyment cannot be done fully since, all that you have, cannot be eaten or enjoyed.

Over enjoyment can cause diseases.

As a consequence, if he is troubled, his entire family may face crisis. He may be looked down as sickly or self-centered.

So self enjoyment is not a recommended priority. This is just the second best.

Perishment: A ripe fruit that is not given, or enjoyed by eating, naturally perishes and gives a bad smell.

It pollutes the environment and the place where it was stored.

Wealth not given, but stored, gives a strong belief that it belongs to him.

It can exalt one's arrogance, merciless attitude and other bad attributes and slowly his good qualities perish.

It can also get lost by theft or fire or promote vices or royal displeasure like demonetization of the year 2016 etc.

By knowing the nature of wealth one should do charity. It is said

"Money comes and goes, but morality comes and grows".
So charity should be practiced.

B. Do charity ,because you are not the ultimate owner.
This world is meant for those who donate.

Because we are not the real or ultimate owners of any commodity or properties.

As Ishavasyopanishad has said in the very first line
"ईशावस्यमिदम् सर्वम् ".¹¹

This entire universe is owned by the Creator or God.

We should enjoy everything as allowed or given by God.

Anything shared with others, is a witness that we are enjoying a thing given by God.

Adopt a trustee bhava and not a thirsty bhava.

"Be a trustee in this world, and not a thirsty" is the guiding principle of Upanishads.

So, to implement this awareness, in terms of action, we must do charity.

C. Absence of charity leads to poverty and pitiable condition. This is the Warning of Scriptures

1. Garuda purana:

In our own life, we have observed, each action giving back it's resultant reaction or repercussion. If we do good to any one naturally as a reaction we receive the same. What we offer, we receive it in one way or the other, at some point of time. By remaining uncharitable, one will lose the right to enjoy any commodity. As a consequence he is born poor in the next birth.

Being born poor morally or materially, he needs something for his survival. So he is forced to steal or adopt corrupt practices or shares with the thief or wrong doer. Thus he accumulates sin. As a result of this moral weakness and un-affordability, in the next birth he is also born sickly.

So doctors warn him to avoid taking a long list of things for enjoyment.

Then also he does not donate. Again & again he will be in the vicious circle of poverty, disease and misery. - Garuda Purana.

अदानदोषाच्च भवेद्हरिद्रः दारिद्र्यदोषाच्च करोति पापम्।
पापाख्यदोषाच्च भवेद्धिरोगी पुनर्दरिद्रः पुनरेव पापी॥12,

2. Vishnu Rahasya says that those who have not offered service, or charity, and remain indulging in wicked actions, by pride and arrogance, will be born poor and childless and suffer tragedies.

न यैः कृतं तपोदानम् पापं चाप्यधिकम् कृतम्
निर्धना निरपत्याश्च नानादुःखान्विताः हि ते॥13

3. Subhashitas speak thus:

By sinful activities one reaches the hell. Poverty arises due to non donating lifestyle of the previous birth. So practice charity.

भवन्ति नरकाः पापात् पापं दारिद्र्यसंभवम्।
दारिद्र्यं अप्रदानेन तस्माद्दानपरो भवेत्॥14.

4. Chanakya upholds charity

These are the words of Chanakya, who is also a noted Economist.

Charity drives away bankruptcy and misfortune. If a person has ill-gotten money, he conceals it and offers a little out of that tainted money, for others. Every person should find happiness with his wife, utilizing his rightly earned money. Doing strict penance enables him to have enhanced metabolism, and increased intention to share his wealth.

Just as knowledge eradicates ignorance, courage replaces fear, right conduct removes bad luck, charity drives out poverty. So be satisfied with available food, wife and wealth. Satisfaction in money matters, can be demonstrated by a person only by doing charity.

In the same way one should never be satisfied in the matters of hard work, charity and studies.

If a person stops giving charity, it means that he has lost compassion towards fellow beings and concern for society. Then he prefers more isolated life and becomes arrogant. The positive thoughts will not remain with him. If one has satisfaction in studies then he stops reading.

He becomes reserved and he quarrels with every one's views. Hence, one should never be satisfied in charity, hard work and studies.

सन्तोषः त्रिषु कर्तव्यः स्वदारे भोजने धने।
सन्तोषः नैव कर्तव्योऽध्ययने जपदानयोः॥15.

5. How should charity be done?

We should not do charity by pitying at a person or with pride.

It should be done giving respect, foregoing ownership, with joy, with an awareness of the purpose, without regret, to the deserving persons in the right time and in right place.

दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेऽनुपकारिणे।
देशे काले च पात्रे च तद्दानं सात्त्विकम् स्मृतम्॥16

3. Lessons from charity

A. Live for others

Happiest are those who enjoy doing most for others.

A Dove being chased by a Hawk, approaches the King Shibi for protection.

The King advised the Hawk, to give up the chase.

Hawk argues that "it is not fair to snatch food from one's mouth to please the other. If you snatch away my food from me, I shall die out of starvation. Would you not acquire this sin then?" King Shibi replied "That is not my intention. You ask for any other food and I shall provide it to you". The hawk said "I eat only meat. So you give me your flesh, equal in weight to that of that Dove". King did not disappoint the Hawk.

To the shock of every one present, he offered to gift the flesh from his body equal to the weight of that Dove and gave it. This brings out the principle that we need to live for others.¹⁷

B. Happiness rests in the act of charity, not in its returns

Bali, the grandson of Prahlada, performed a sacrifice to get the position of Indra. Sri Vishnu attended the event during his incarnation as Lord Vamana and requested Bali to gift him the space occupied by three steps in His feet. In spite of protests from his Guru Shukracharya, Bali accepts the demand, knowing fully well that he is going to lose everything he has. Even today he is worshipped during Deepavali festival, because he showed to the world that giving is the greatest act of grace.

While we practice charity, naturally we become selfless. Offering service will make us more matured.¹⁸

C. Nothing is insignificant in Dana.

In Ramayana, when monkeys were building a bridge on the ocean, a squirrel carried sand from its wet body and poured a few particles of sand, near the construction site as its contribution for Sri Rama's cause. The squirrel explained to other monkeys who were teasing the tiny act of squirrel, that "I cannot carry mountains or rocks, god gave me a little only a little strength, I can carry only pebbles, I will do my level best for lord Sri Rama". Pleased with the service attitude of squirrel, Sri Rama swipes his three fingers on its back. The act of charity, however insignificant or small, when given with love and devotion becomes praiseworthy. We can develop and know the value of love, respect and relationship. We will evaluate objects not based on its materialistic value but on the matured mind behind this. This is essential for human beings as it promotes unity and love.¹⁹

D. Life does not matter when charity matters

Karna was born with a protective shield and ear-ring which defended him from all adversaries. Indra approaches Karna in the guise of a Brahmin requesting him to part with his shield, in order to protect his son Arjuna in the war field of Kurukshetra. Knowing Indra's intention in advance, fully well, without a second thought, Karna just tears and cuts off the shield attached to his body and donates.²⁰

We come across a story of King Alarka in Valmiki Ramayana. The King, a descendent of Lunar Race, happened to see a blind Brahmin. Since he was capable of transferring his eyesight to any one, he readily offered to give away his eyesight and helped that Brahmin.²¹

If we are committed to any specific values then other hindering factors are immaterial.

This is possible with a sense of dedication. In order to adhere to the vow of speaking Truth, even King Harishchandra lost his vast kingdom.

Our values and dedication is proved by charity.

E. Simple life.

Charity means dedicating a part of our income or wealth for the sake of someone else's good. It is not easy. To keep up our promises, we may face many obstacles. First of all we may have to lead a simple life.

We have to cut our luxurious expenses. So we learn to live with the least. Secondly we may face protests from friends and family members. It compels us to convince them and

take them along with us. Even if we fail, our morale will increase and gain strength. In the long run persons who disagreed with us may also become our staunch followers. Whether we fail or succeed in the process, we learn many lessons which makes us happy and strong.

4. Give away- in any way - Guide lines from scriptures.

A. Upanishad says one should donate with Earnestness or Sharaddha." Shraddaya deyam" is the dictum of Upanishad. Offer charity. Even if, your earnestness is low, you should offer charity. अश्रद्धया देयम्²². Even if, you have shame as a hindrance, you should offer charity. हिया देयम्²³.

Even if, you are in fear, you should offer charity. भिया देयम्²⁴. A few argue that it is a word of savarna deerga sandhi. This word should be split as Ashraddhaya + adeyam which means without shraddha one should not give. This is not a right interpretation.

Why? Observe the next line.

Giving with fear, or giving with shame is also approved. Giving with ashreddha is also endurable. अश्रद्धया देयम्. Because initially, a child may not be willing to go to school. But gradually he develops the taste of learning and starts going with interest and discipline. After basic education is over, he loves to gain mastery in his field of interest and even wishes to fly for foreign lands to gain higher education. This is the sign of maturity and love for learning. Same spirit is applicable for a donor also since he will develop a great taste for charity at a future date. At first attempt, start initiating charity, in any situation, and then refine the act and attain perfection.

Driven by the fear of becoming ill, one practices healthy exercises and later he continues exercises even after becoming healthy. Even with fear of hell or of social obligation, if a son takes care for his disabled parents, our social structure is somewhat saved. So "BHIYA DEYAM" Giving with fear is also acceptable. भिया देयम्.

B. Do not give useless things-Upanishad warns.

Sage Vajashravas performs a great sacrifice. As per protocol, he gifts the cows to Brahmins in charity. But the cows were not fit for donation, as they could not drink, eat or sense anything. His son raises stiff objection for this.

His name is Nachiketha, very straight forward by nature and a seeker of truth. His repeated protests made the father angry and he cursed the son to die. Then he goes to Yama Loka (World of departed souls) and meets Yama, the King of Death. Yama gets impressed by his wisdom and burning desire to gain knowledge of unknown.

Later he grants him several boons and names a fire after his name.

Nachiketa objecting his father's giving useless things as dana shows his shraddha. दक्षिणासु दीयमानासु श्रद्धा आविवेश, पीतोदकाः जग्धतृणाः दुग्धदोहाः निरिन्द्रियाः, अनन्दा नाम ते लोकास्तान्स गच्छति ता ददत्²⁵.

C. A donor should try to assess the social implication of his donation.

Upanishad says beware before you donate. If a person, out of a passion donates alms to the child, which is on the street,

the child may have improved financial condition for the moment. If a wicked person happens to see money in child's hand and kidnaps that healthy child and causes handicap to employ the child for begging, then the donor has sponsored an evil activity in society. So study the background before you donate.

A beggar may be given ten rupees, but if he purchases cigar and smokes and develops cancer, the donor also happens to have a share in making him ill. A cow being donated is good. But if the receiver sells it to a Slaughter house, and the butcher kills the cow easily, the donor verily, gets the sin of having killed the cow.

Samvida deyam-Give with a thorough knowledge of the transaction of Donation. संविदा देयम्²⁶

D. Follow morals strictly

We come across a moot question that if an unethical or immoral person does charity, can he get away from his sins?

Some argue that by doing charity, they can have a social status even if they are immoral. It amounts to self-deception. Though, a few acts of charity may be beneficial to society, cheating others and doing charity is not commendable. Garuda purana says that charity done by such persons are useless. Even if someone does charity in favor of anti-social elements, it will not free them from hells and related severe punishments.

पापिनां नोपतिष्ठन्ति दानं श्राद्धं कृतान्जलिः।
अतः क्षुद्याकुला यान्ति पिण्डदानभुजोऽपि ते॥²⁷

Some persons who have made their life style as to exploit and trouble the weaker sections of society they never repent for their evil actions. They instruct others also to do such activities. These anti social elements will surely face severe punishments, says Garudapurana.

“पापशीला नरा यान्ति दुःखेन यमयातनाम् ।²⁸

E. Amount allotted for Charity should be of right proportion.

A few people, are having a tendency to give away a sum for a good cause and feel that their charity work is over. Shastras, being a perfect science, have even recommended the proportion of our income to be spent for charity.

I. According to Vishnu Rahasya: Ten percent of the income One who has ten units of income should allot one unit for charity.

Persons in abject poverty, can spend just five percent of their income.

But Vishnu rahasya warns that, this exemption should not be misused by middle- class persons. So a person with normal status should spend ten percent of his income towards charity.

एकं दशधनो दद्यात् सहस्रधनवान् शतम् ।
दश दद्यात् शतधनः सर्वे तुल्यफलाः स्मृताः
पन्च दद्यात् शतधनः सहस्रधनवान् दशम् ।
पुण्याधिक्यं शतधने भवेत्तत्र न चान्यथा ॥²⁹

- II. According to Bhagavata purana, twenty percent of the income should be spent for charity. This gives him name and fame in the society and also a good life. This is the advice given to King Bali by Shukracharya (A Preceptor for the wicked or Demons).

As such we can say this is Shukra neeti (Code of ethics for the wicked)

He is an expert in Arthashastra or Economics. So this can be an all- time model for charity. His formula for wealth distribution is this:

Divide your income into five parts. Spend one for dharma or performing prescribed duties in scriptures; spend one for Yashas or earning name and fame in society; spend one for Artha or invest to earn money and lead a comfortable life which includes saving for the old age; one for Kama or fulfilling your desires related to day to day life and family life; one for charity.

धर्मय यशसेऽर्थय क्षेमाय स्वजनाय च।
पंचथा विभजन् वित्तं इहामुत्र च मोदते॥३०.

The global welfare cannot be achieved by mere slogans or occasional dedications. The percentage of have-nots are more and have's is very less. That means less percentage of persons are enjoying the benefits at the cost of larger group of needy persons. A higher sense of wealth distribution will result by lessening the gap between the poor and the rich.

There are occasions when we happen to get income by way of lottery prizes or unexpected treasure, selling our ancestral property etc, we are supposed to reserve fifty per cent of this towards charity. Everyone has an obligation to share with the society. Scriptures have instructed us to share twenty percent of our income.31.

Conclusion

Man should bring some contribution, for the society. It is possible only when we begin an altruistic life style. Our charity should be based on concrete guidelines and it should be on the right direction without giving room to niggardliness. Dana should be at the right time, to the right person and in the right proportion.

So scriptures are highly relevant to us. If we follow this, our goal of “लोकाः समस्तः सुखिनो भवन्तु ” will definitely be achieved.

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