



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2019



## DANA PRACTICE IN NEPAL

**Uddhab Puri**

**Ph. D. , Lecturer at the Central Department of History, Tribhuvan University,  
Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal.**

### ABSTRACT:

*In Buddhist philosophy, the term 'Dāna' means generosity and is taken as a path to attain enlightenment. Dāna is giving away of money, grains, land, medicines, precious jewels, dress, shoes, umbrellas, etc. to the needy. A true Buddhist practitioner is expected to perfect Dāna Pāramitā along with other Pāramitās which literally means to rise above the material life. Hence, Dāna is related to the freedom from the worldly attachment. Dāna is common among Buddhist and Hindu practitioners in Nepal. Both practitioners believe that merit accumulated through these ways is the greatest in life. History of Pañca Dāna in Nepal goes back to the ancient times. All the three cities of Kathmandu valley celebrate their own form of Dana with more or less similar rituals and practices.*



**KEYWORDS:** *Buddhist, Dāna, generosity, enlightenment, Pāramitā, material, freedom, etc.*

### INTRODUCTION

According to the Buddhist philosophy, the term 'Dāna' means generosity and is taken as a form of sacrifice. Literally, Dāna is giving away of money, grains, land, medicines, precious jewels, dress, shoes, umbrellas, etc. to the needy and elderly ones in the related monastery or the community. It is considered mandatory for all its followers to take proper path and perform prescribed practices in order to pursue the path to enlightenment. Every Buddhist practitioner

is expected to perfect Dāna Pāramitā along with other Pāramitās. Pāramitās literally understood as to go beyond the material life. Hence, Dāna is related to the freedom from the worldly attachment. Each practitioner must embrace the practice of generosity.<sup>1</sup>

In Hinduism, the acts like generosity, alms giving, public services, etc. are attached to as means of merit making, and nothing is to be expected in lieu of such actions. In Hinduism such an act of generosity is mainly related to construction of public shelters, schools, and other works of public

welfare. Reigvedaelaborates about Dāna. Other texts such as Bhagvat Gita, Mahabharata, and different Puranas too mention about different forms of Dāna such as Kanya Dāna, Vidya Dāna, Dharma Dāna, Bhumi Dāna, Anna Dāna and so on. The act of Dāna is believed to make this world and the world beyond prosper. These kinds of practices had been gradually imbedded in the society as part of religious rite. It has been a common practice in South Asia that travelers are provided with accommodation and fooding in public shelter house. Hence, this is an old social practice.

<sup>1</sup> Anoja, *Mangala Upadesh*, Kathmandu: Sulakshanakirti Vihara, 2069, p. 75.

Dāna is common to Buddhism and Hinduism. Both practitioners believe that merit accumulated through these ways is the greatest in life. It always creates feelings of sacrifice mitigating selfishness and the self centered ego. It also helps in the concentration of one's mind. Dāna is significant in protection and continuity of the Saṃgha, and is also instrumental in the missionary activities of Buddhism.

History of Pañca Dāna in Nepal goes back to the ancient times. An inscription on the Pindapatra preserved at Kwa Bahal dated 656 NS mentions – On the auspicious day of Pañcadāna, a devotee Jasira Bharo donated this Pindapatra to Buddha to replace the old one which was completely delapidated. The old Pindapatra was some 1000 years.<sup>2</sup>

A Thyasaphu dated NS 799 mentions about Pañca Dāna which determines the historicity of the practice. It was one of the significant religious rituals performed by the Buddhist Newārs of Kathmandu valley.<sup>3</sup> The tradition speaks of existence of the Buddhism even before Śākyamūni. The Buddhist sages who practised Buddhism as a path for salvation, lived life of wandering mendicants in the beginning and survived with the Dāna offered by the devoted followers. Therefore, Dāna practice in Buddhism is as old as the religion itself.

In the context of Nepal, historicity of Dāna goes back to the Licchavi times. In the lack of evidences, before that period we have limited knowledge of history of Dāna in Nepal. Even the lives of Siddhartha and his fellow ascetics depended on the donations made by his adherents. So, Dāna was of prime significance in the lives of ascetic practitioners. The householders always supported the practising mendicants. During Buddha's life time, various rulers and rich merchants dedicated Aramas to the Buddha. There are ample of such examples that Aramas have been donated to the Buddha and his Saṃgha. King Bimbisara built Vihāra at Rajgriha and donated to the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka visited Lumbini and erected a stone pillar which has inscription in Brahmi script. It is mentioned in the inscription that he worshipped at the birth place of the Buddha and exempted taxes. In this way, he performed meritorious act.<sup>5</sup> Dāna in Nepal is also very old. As mentioned in Buddhist literature, the Newār followed the tradition of worshipping and offering Dāna to the Dipankara Buddha and the Bhikṣu Saṃgha. They perform such Dāna performances from full moon day in Ashad to full moon day in Ashwin according to the Vikram calendar. This is entirely a religious ritual aimed at accumulating merit.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned in the Sugatāvadāna, one of the Buddhist Avadāna stories: Indraprastha Mahabahu, the King of Kashi, asked Buddha about the best way to obtain the heaven after constructing several Vihāras. Buddha instructed him to provide necessities to the Bhikṣu Saṃgha as the act of merit. According to it, he invited Buddha, Bhikṣu Saṃgha, and other gods and goddesses of thirty three types [TetisKoti] to offer 'Samyak Bhojan for four days.' Here the donor is a Hindu King and recipients of the Dāna are the Buddha, The Saṃgha and 'TetisKoti' Hindu gods and goddesses.<sup>7</sup>

Both the Hindus and the Buddhists were involved in the practice of Dāna in the Indian context too. In later times, the practice of Dāna emerged as one of the prime religious festival among the Newār Buddhists. Now Dāna is an inseparable part of spiritual practices in Newār Buddhist culture. Since, Nepal has enjoyed religious harmony between Hinduism and Buddhism; both groups can participate in the same ritual practice with shared spirituality. In fact, it is believed that Pañca Dāna is the best in offering alms and 'Samyak Bhojana Dāna' is the best among offering foods.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hem Raj Shakya, *Samyak Mahadana Guthi*, Lalitpur: Jagatdhar Tuladhar, 100 NS, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Hari Ram Joshi, 'Pañcadāna', *Samarpan*, 7:2, Kathmandu: 2053 VS, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, 1988, p. 59

<sup>5</sup> Ram Nivas Pandey, *Archaeological Remains of Lumbini: The Birth Place of Lord Buddha*, "The Buddhist Heritage of Nepal," 1986, Dharmodaya Sabha, p. 26

<sup>6</sup> Tirtha Ratna Shakya, *Nepal Mandala ka Bouddhaharuko Dharmik Abhyasra Jivan Shailee*, Kathmandu: Buddha Dharma Adhyayan Goshthi, 2008 CE, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. p. 20

In Nepal, there is no distinction in terms of religious belief to participate in such Dāna practices. Kings and people from both religious background participated in such Dāna ceremonies. An inscription of King Jaya Deva at Pashupati refers to the praises of King Vṛsha Deva done by Buddhakirti, a Buddhist Pandit. Vṛṣa Deva built Svayaṃbhū Mahachaitya and several other religious monuments. During his reign, a merchant known by the name of Sarthabaha built a massive Chaitya and offered Nava Dāna, Samyaka Dāna and Bhojan Dāna to the Ārya Jina Saṃgha.<sup>9</sup>

The history of Dāna in the Kathmandu valley has not yet been ascertained. It is celebrated in the three cities in the Kathmandu valley in three different times. They are celebrated in different ways. But Samyak of Kathmandu has been regarded as the special one. But it can be optional. This Samyak is performed in front of the Dipaṃkara image. Non Buddhists may participate in this ritual. But this Samyak is exceptionally lengthy and expensive. So, it is organized by the rich. However, its frequency is quite rare.<sup>10</sup> The Dāna is Samyak because it should be performed with pure mind. The Mahayanists believe that Buddha performed Dāna and other meritorious acts in his former lives. It is the impact of his good Karma that he was born in the royal family.

During the ancient times, Samyak Dāna was a popular spiritual practice. The Chabahil inscription is the example of Dāna practice in the ancient times. In NS 135 during the time of King Bhoja Deva, and also under Rudra Deva and Lakshmi Kama Deva, new Vihāras were constructed and Samyak Dāna was performed.

During the medieval times in NS 502, Madana Rama Singh Vardhana, a brother of Jaya Simha Rama Vardhana, the Chief Minister of King Jayasthiti Malla consecrated the image of Dipaṃkara Buddha at Pārāvarta Mahāvihāra at Iturṃ Bahāl built by a Bhikṣu known by the name of Arajayana. In NS 599, one of the Mahapatras of Pāṭan arranged a Samyak Dāna at Dharmakirti Mahāvihāra. During this celebration, he invited Dipaṃkara Buddha and Sthaviras. It is mentioned in a palm leaf document kept in the Vihāra.

During the reign of King Ratna Malla of Kantipur, donor Ratnaju, Rupateja and his wife Rupa Lakshmi offered golden vase, Dhvaja [flags], pinnacle to Akṣobhya Buddha at Mañjuśrī Naka Mahāvihāra. He also set up endowment of land to regulate a feast to arrange for the Ārya Bhikṣu Saṃgha. In 645 NS, Samyak Dāna was arranged for the Kvāpādyā in the Hiraṇya Varṇa Mahāvihāra in Pāṭan. During, this celebration, a begging bowl (Piṇḍa Pātra) was offered to the main deity at the Mahāvihāra. In 665 NS, during the reign of King Narendra Malla, a resident of Watu Tole named Toyaju built a statue of Dipaṃkara Buddha and installed in the Vihara. He constituted an endowment of Land for continued operation of Samyak Dāna. After Kathmandu came under control of Gorkha, King Prithvi Narayan Shah, he also permitted to celebrate Samyak Mahadāna in every twelve years which were celebrated in every four year. At that time, those celebrations were not in operation due to financial crunch.

The head of the state also attends the celebration.

The Buddhist tradition of Nepal believes that celebrations like Samyak Dāna brings long life, affluence, wisdom, children, happiness, and so on. There are five types of prominent Dāna in Nepal's Buddhist tradition. They are – Annual Pañcadāna, Optional Pañcadāna, Special ritual Pañcadāna, Samyak Dāna and Optional Samyak Dāna.

The annual Pañcadāna is performed during the Newār spiritual month of Guṃlā which falls during the months of July-August every year. This is a very sacred month for Buddhist as well as the local Hindus. They celebrate it and call it Pañjarān. This annual Pañcadāna are performed in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur in different months. In Kathmandu, the thirteenth day of the month of Bhādra is called the Newār festival of 'Juga Chahre'. This day is commemorated as the beginning of the 'Kaliyuga' [Age of vice].<sup>11</sup> This is celebrated in a place called Kāṣṭhamaṇḍap near the old palace in Kathmandu. The

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the interview with Vajracharyas and Buddhist monks.

<sup>11</sup> AsaKajiVajracharya, *op cit*, no. 17, p. 14.

participating Vajracharyas are formally decorated in traditional attire called 'Jāmā' and Pañca Buddha head gears. During this time, some patrons prefer to go to the residences of Vajrācāryas and the Shakya Bhikṣus to offer Dāna. Such kinds of acts of generosity are also performed at Soyāmbhū.

The annual Pañcadāna in Patan is performed on the eighth day of bright half in the month of Shravan. It falls during the first half of the Guṃlā Dharma. This day is also known as Pañjāṣṭmī. A popular belief has institutionalized a legendary account pertaining to it. According to it, the legendary King Sarvānanda invited Dipaṃkara Buddha and offered Dāna. At that time in the same occasion, a very poor lady also offered Dāna to the Dipaṃkara Tathāgata. To commemorate the moment, the statue of the old lady was erected to conduct the Dāna ritual.

During the Dāna festival, the recipients of Dāna purify themselves. In the Vihāras, the Ājus who are the recipients of Dāna attend in traditional dresses and ornaments. The Dāna implements consist of rice, peas, wheat, salt, sweets, and money. There is a popular belief that each donated item is believed to bring various benefits. Donating rice or porridge leads to happiness. Similarly, donating money is believed to bring Mokṣha and Artha. Grains would help spend the next life in a better way. At the same time, donation of sugar, milk and milk products makes the donor meritorious. Other benefits that come from Dāna are –

- Sweets > affluence, enjoyment and peace
- Pen, papers, etc.> popularity as a Paṇḍit
- Brooms, strings > prosperity
- Civara> lords of all
- House and land > ruler and lord of the earth
- Children and wife > perfection of Dānapāramitā<sup>12</sup>

The tradition at Bhaktapur is little different. The procession of Dipaṃkara Buddhas from different Vihāras are assembled at Suryamaḍhī Tole. Then Dāna is performed and celebrated there. The festival is concluded with playing Guṃlā music and performing Āratī in the evening. It literally refers to Hindu religious ritual of worship and a part of Pujā in which lights from wicks soaked in purified butter or mustard oil is offered to one or more deities.

The optional and special ritual Pañcadānas are organized in special occasions as desired by the donor. Because it is done according to the will of the donor, they do not need auspicious and special days. The ritual induced Pañcadāna is mainly organized during Janko, Machajanko, rice feeding ritual, marriage, death rituals, and so on. During this time, the relatives of the donor also participate in Dāna performances.

Among the Buddhists in Thimī near Bhaktapur, they celebrate Dāna ritual on the thirteenth day of black half of Shravan. The three images of Dipaṃkaras from Heranīlavarṇa Mahāvihāra, Hemavarṇa Mahāvihāra and Guṇakīrti Mahāvihāra are taken to Thimī, Bode and Nakadesh in a procession. During that procession Dāna is also performed.

Samyak Dāna are organized in three cities in the Kathmandu valley differently. They celebrate three types of Samyak. Kathmandu celebrates twelve yearly Samyak, Ilhane Samyak in Pāṭan at the interval of five years and annual Samyak Dāna in Bhaktapur.

Samyak Mahādāna celebrated in Kathmandu is regarded special because it is celebrated every twelve years on the first day of Māgha according to the Vikram Calendar. The venue of Samyak Mahādāna is celebrated at Svayaṃbhū Bhuikhel. Although it is a Buddhist festival, Hindus also participate in this Dāna ceremony. The formal procedures begins a year ago when a formal invitation is sent to the Amitābha Buddha at Svayaṃbhū that is followed by offerings in which betel nut, coins, Pujā implements, fruits are offered. During that time the team also offers Pujā to other gods and goddesses at the Svayaṃbhū complex. The King is also extended with formal invitation. He is also offered formal

<sup>12</sup> AsaKaji Vajracharya (tr.), *Pañcadāna Vidhi*, Lalitpur: Siddhi Raj Shakya, and Family, NS 1102, pp. 12-13.



worship regarding a deity. The Nāga is also worshipped. Altogether 117 gods and goddesses are invited in the Samyak Mahādāna. They all are assembled in the courtyard of Hanumān Dhokā. At that time, the organisers as well as devotees participate in providing Dāna. They are taken to Svayaṁbhū Bhuikhel the following day. The Tāmrakārs of MaruTole play musical instruments called the Pañcatāl Bājā. The day is the main day of performing Samyak Dāna ritual. The devotees offer Dāna to various deities and the householder Bhikṣus. Materials include grains, fruits, sweets, broom, ropes, oil, sewing needle, thread, cloth, pen, exercise books, pen and so on. Similarly, they are also offered with rice, lentil, radish curry, milk, and brown sugar juice. These things are offered in sequence. During this occasion, Śākyas, Uray and Maharjans play prominent role. The Tulādhars of Asan in Kathmandu manage up traditional dish made up of leaves. In the same way, the Śākyas of Iturṁ Bahāl are to offer radish curry. Tulādhars of Naradevī are to offer cooked rice. Other food items are managed accordingly -

Śākyas of Wotu/Jyābahā>milk  
Kumhāle of Jyāthā >Pālā  
KelTole>Twelve kinds of lentils

After completion of the Dāna performances, Svayaṁbhū is taken to Dya Chen at Kilāgal in Kathmandu for overnight stay. Other participating deities return back home. The next day, Svayaṁbhū proceeds to 'Cow horn Mountain' [Go Puccha Parvat] with musical band playing traditional music. Then Hārātī Mātā is taken to Bhuikhel to perform 'Misā Samyak' [Female Samyak]. This is the only SamyakDāna ever designed for a female.

After completion of entre segment of rituals related to Samyak Mahādāna, rtheorganisers arrange a feast. After one year, the same day when Samyak Mahādāna was performed, a grand feast is arranged. This day is called 'Lasa Kusa' [welcome] day. Dāna is also offered to principal deities.

In Pāṭan, Samyak Mahādāna celebrated at Nāgbahāl which is called 'Ilhane Samyak'. It has an endowment to conduct Ilhane Samyak. It is said that this endowment was kept by the ancestor of King Bhāṣkar Deva. A number of legends are associated to the ceremony. There is the tradition of erecting a bamboo pole tied with pellet drum [Ḍamaru], bell and flags inscribed with the images of various deities and auspicious signs to inform gods and men of the Samyak. A pair of Nāgas at Nāg Bahāl are repainted and ritual is performed to put life in them.

On the first day of bright half of Fālgun, the Thakālīs arrange a procession with the musical band to go to Dipaṁkara Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Saṁgha members to offer invitation for the Samyak Dāna. A Piṇḍapātra is offered as the invitation. On the eve of Samyak Dāna, all the invitees are taken to the royal palace for overnight stay. Vasundharā Devī of Jeṣṭhavarṇa Māhāvihāra is given prime importance. They all are taken to Nāgbahāl. Some 101 gods and goddesses including Buṅgadya, Chobahā Dya, and Vajrasattva. Pañcadāna begins in the morning and they perform Samyak Mahādāna in the afternoon. Then the whole ritual comes to an end.

The Samyak Mahādāna in Bhaktapur falls on every first day of Māgha in the court yard of Thathu Bahī. There are popular legends that describe its origin. The legend support that this Samyak was organized by the monarch. Dāna is offered to Dipaṁkara Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and the Ārya Saṁgha.

The preparation for Samyak in Bhaktapur begins four days prior to the ritual. PañcaDāna is offered to twenty two gods and goddesses, Upādhyāyas, priests, Vajrācāryas, and others. The gods are invited to the ritual. It is called 'Goye Dān Tayegu'. The senior most in the Guṭhī offer rice and paddy as Dāna using golden and wooden measuring unit traditionally called 'Pāthī'. Finally, they donate food.

In this way, Buddhists of Nepal follow the tradition of Dāna. They perform it regularly. It is believed that the practice of Dānapāramitā blesses with longevity, good health, attaining wisdom, accumulation of wealth, and happiness. The Buddhists of Pāṭan have preserved such traditions.

## CONCLUSION

In Hinduism, the acts like generosity, alms giving, public services, etc. are attached to as means of merit making, and nothing is to be expected in lieu of such actions. In Nepal, such an act of generosity existed since ancient time. In the context of Nepal, historicity of Dāna goes back to the Licchavi times. Dāna was of prime significance in the lives of ascetic practitioners including Buddha himself. Dānapractice was prevalent in all the three cities of the Kathmandu valley in three different times. They are celebrated in different ways. But Samyak of Kathmandu has been regarded as the special one which is performed in front of the Dipaṅkara image, during this time the head of the state also attends the celebration. It is believed that during the Dāna festival, the recipients of Dāna purify themselves. In this way, Buddhists of Nepal follow the tradition of Dāna. They perform it regularly. It is believed that the practice of Dānapāramitā blesses with longevity, good health, attaining wisdom, accumulation of wealth, and happiness. The Buddhists of Pāṭan have preserved such traditions.



**Uddhab Puri**

**Ph. D. , Lecturer at the Central Department of History, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal.**