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A Historical and Cultural Study of the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna

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Abstract

The Tulāpuruṣa-dāna, or the ritual of weighing a person against gold, is an essential part of Indian cultural history that connects Vedic morality with modern devotion. This article traces Tulāpuruṣa-dāna from its conceptual origins in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, where the scale (Tulā) symbolised cosmic balance, to its formalisation as the highest *Mahādāna* in the *Purāṇas*, by examining inscriptions from the medieval Indian dynasties of the Cholas, Vijayanagara, and Travancore. The study shows how the ritual was used as a political tool to claim sovereignty, erase sins, and distribute royal wealth. It contends that the ceremony's significance underwent profound transformations over three millennia: originally a metaphor for self-sacrifice in the *Mahābhārata*, it evolved into a spectacle of statecraft during the medieval era, and ultimately into a mechanism for caste legitimisation in the colonial Travancore. The study concludes by analysing the ritual's democratisation in modern temples such as Dwarkadhish and Guruvayur. In modern times, the Tulābhāra has lost its royal status and become a popular religious service open to anyone. This has turned an old royal ceremony into a living tradition of public faith.

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The Tulāpuruṣa-dāna (तुलापुरुषदान), or "man-on-the-scale gift" is one of the most complicated and important of the sixteen great gifts (mahādānas) in Indian culture. The word Tulāpuruṣa-dāna comes from three different Sanskrit roots and means "the weighing of a man." 1) Tulā (तुला): comes from the root tul (तुल्), which means "to weigh". "to compare", or "to balance". In this case, Tulā clearly means a scale or a balance, which conveys the idea of measurement and balance. 2) Puruṣa (पुरुष): comes from the root pṛ (पृ), which means "to fill" or "to live in". Puruṣa denotes an individual, a human entity, or, in philosophical discourse, the cosmic entity or the universal soul. 3) Dāna (दान): comes from the root dā (दा), which means "to give". So, dāna means "gift" or "the act of giving". As a ritual concept, theTulāpuruṣa-dāna refers to a person (usually a ruler) being weighed with a valuable object (often gold). Then the object is given as a gift. It is an act symbolising measurement, sacrifice, and ultimate generosity. Its location, form, ritual details, and political and social meanings have varied dramatically over time.

1.Vedic Period (c. 900–600 BCE)

Although the name Tulāpuruṣa is not explicitly mentioned in the Vedic texts, the concept of Tula is included in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, composed towards the end of the Vedic period (900–600 BCE). There, it is used as a symbol of a balance (Tulā) to illustrate a theory of moral evaluation based on the order of the universe. In *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.2.7.33), the southern edge of the Vedi is identified as a symbolic scale, such that actions performed "inside the Vedi" represent righteous actions. In contrast, those performed outside the Vedi are metaphorically associated with disorder and impurity. A person's actions are continuously measured based on the dharma and adharma they perform. Furthermore, it symbolises the cosmological principle that the preponderance of dharma and adharma also determines his afterlife. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* explains that a person who understands this principle achieves "balance" in this very life and thereby escapes being judged in the next. By doing so, the person consciously participates in maintaining the Vedas' doctrine of orderly truth. Similarly, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* advances the philosophical concept that the weighing of righteous and unrighteous actions, which was once a test judged by someone from outside, becomes a constant self-examination conducted in the person's own mind.

Later, in the *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa*, in the chapter on Tulāpuruṣa-vidhi (*Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa* 11), the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna is described as a ceremony in which a king donates gold equal to his body weight to the priests (Brahmins). People with low incomes may use low-value items available at home; Instead of gold, other minerals, clothes, liquids/juices, and grains (rice/paddy, etc.) can be used. This division of gift objects, gold for the kings and

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substitutes for people experiencing poverty, makes it clear that the gold of the kings strengthen the royal dharma by providing financial support to the Brahmins, maintain the moral-political structure of the society, and at the same time ensure social justice by including people experiencing poverty in the alms by allocating substitutes and making people experiencing poverty participate in the ceremony.

2. Post-Vedic and Epic Period (c. 400 BCE–400 CE)

Although the technical term Tulāpuruṣa-dāna is not directly used in the epics, another aspect of charity is revealed in the story of King Sibi (*Mahābhārata*, Vana Parva, 130 -131). He gives the flesh of his thigh to save a pigeon that has come to him for refuge, and the pigeon is seen as heavier than all the meat he has sacrificed. Finally, the *Mahābhārata* provides the image of a king who, by sitting on the scales himself, sacrifices his own body to save the life of a pigeon. This makes it clear that in epic times, the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna was not a technical ceremony, but a spiritual symbol of renunciation of dharma, and this provides the narrative basis for the formal Mahādānastructure in later Puranas.

2.1 Dharmaśāstras

Dharmaśāstras, such as the *Manusmṛti*, prescribe charity as a mandatory moral duty and specifically define the qualifications of the donor, the purity of the material, and the qualifications of the recipient (*Manusmṛti* 4.227, 22.1.1.1.3, and 22.1.1.1.4). Among the Dharmaśāstra texts composed between the 2nd and 5th centuries CE, the *NāradaSmṛti*, known as "the juridical text par excellence", or the *YājñavalkyaSmṛti*, known as "the best composed and most systematic specimen" of the Dharmaśāstra texts composed between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE, or the Dharmaśāstra text of Kauṭilya, the *Arthashastra*, does not mention the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna or its procedures, clearly categorising or explaining them as " Mahādāna "; instead, they discuss only general charity, money donation, and royal charity. This absence suggests that, although the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna was part of the general charity during the Smriti-Dharmasastra phase (2nd-5th centuries CE), the whole ritual and the position of “Mahādāna No. 1” developed later through the Purāṇatexts. (*Matsya Purana* 274-289).

3. Medieval Period (c. 550–1600 CE)

By the 6th–7th centuries CE, the Purāṇic tradition had integrated the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna into a standardised framework. It emerged as the first and foremost Mahādāna in the fixed list of sixteen Mahādānas, as described in the early comprehensive account of the Tulāpuruṣa donation in chapters 274–289 of the *Matsya Purana*, composed around 550–650 CE. (*Matsya Purana* 274–289). The *Agni Purana* (210.1–4) also repeats a similar list of Mahādānas

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beginning with the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna. (*Agni Purana* 210.1–4) The *Skanda Purana* also confirms this institutionality in the Puranic corpus by arranging the 16 Mahādānas in the same order. The *Liṅga Purāṇa* written between the 8th and 10th centuries, formalised the royal right by specifying sixteen great gifts as "for kings only" (*Liṅga Purāṇa*, *Uttarabhāga,* ch. 28, vv. 12-15). The simple balance-donation ritual in the Vedic epigraphs became more complex in the Purāṇas, detailing the construction of a mandapa, śānti rites, purification of the donor, the presence of deities, and public witnessing by Brahmans (*Matsya Purāṇa* 274-289; *Agni Purāṇa* 210.1-4). The Purāṇas attributed extraordinary karmic results to the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna; the *Agni* Purāṇa (210.1-4) made it a tool for increasing life-span, destroying sins, and eliminating evil, while the *Matsya Purāṇa* (274-289) linked it to 'reset the cosmic clock' (289.16) and the purification of the kingdom (284.20). The Tulāpuruṣa-vidhi in the Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa evolved into Tulāpuruṣa-dāna, Tulādhirohaṇa, Tulāroha, and Tulābhāra to accommodate regional variations (*Liṅga Purāṇa*, *Uttarabhāgach* 28). Later texts reinforced this Puranic framework—the *Vishnu Purāṇa* (III.8), the *Padma Purāṇa* (Uttarakhand), Lakshmīdhara's *Danakalpataru* (12th century), Ballalasena's *Danasāgaram* (1168 CE), and Hemadri's *Caturvarga-cintāmaṇi* (1270 CE)— elaborated on the fabulous donations. Most importantly, the Puranic systematisation transformed tulā-purusha from a rare event of royal glory to a cornerstone of royal dharma (*Matsya Purana* 274-289; *Linga Purana*). Later texts came to be authoritatively based on the Puranic framework. The *Vishnu Purana* (III.8) and the *Padma Purana* refer to the Mahādāna and expand on their tradition. Medieval commentators compiled these Puranic instructions into a "manual" for ritual performance. Lakshmīdhara's *Dānakalpaṭaru* (12th century) and Ballālasena's *Dānasāgara* (1168 CE) praised the excellent virtues of great gifts, and Hemādri's *Caturvarga-cintāmaṇi* (1270 CE) detailed the materials, astrological periods, and ritual forms of great gifts. It was linked to justice, world order, the accumulation of virtue, and the definition of moral kingship (*Matsya Purana* 274-289; *Linga Purana, Uttarabhagamch* 28).

During the medieval period, the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna was primarily used to legitimise and confer moral sanctity on dynasties. Stone inscriptions in India testify to kings sponsoring Tulāpuruṣa-dāna ceremonies to mark coronations, military victories, and jubilees, following the mythological practice. The Tulāpuruṣa-dāna evolved from the simple donations of the Sangam age to the complex and established administrative system of Vijayanagara. The conceptual roots of the Mahādāna are clearly visible in the early Common Era Tamil epics, where Rajadharma is intrinsically linked to the practice of excessive generosity. The Sangam

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literature analyses the act of giving not only as ordinary giving but also as a key feature of kingship. The first recorded Chera king, Uthiyan Chēralāṭan, who is eulogised in the Sangam corpus as "Perunchorru Udiyan" ("Provider of the great feast") for his mythological role in supplying "unstinted savoury food to either host, till all the Kurus fell" during the *Mahābhārata* war (Sesha Aiyar 6), is cited as a prime example of this. Although this description has a didactic purpose in the literary tradition, it also establishes a cultural paradigm in which the extensive redistribution of wealth was considered a central element of political legitimacy; this would later form the basis for formal practices of great charity that evolved over the centuries.

Despite the antiquity of the literary references, the earliest epigraphic evidence for a special charity ceremony called Tulāpuruṣa-dāna dates to the 6th century. A copper-plate inscription from the Pandya dynasty records the performance of the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna by King Jayantavarman (also known as Chendan) (Schmiedchen 173). This evidence suggests that by about 560 CE, these elaborate rituals had become an integral part of the South Indian royal lineage. This custom was not an isolated event but a hereditary political-moral strategy; Chenda's successors, Maravarman Arikesari and Maravarman Rajasimha, continue to perform these rituals to secure divine favour and assert their authority (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XVII, 306–307). The rise of the Rashtrikuta dynasty in the Deccan marked a turning point in the history of Indian kingship. According to historians, King Dantidurga institutionalised this system by performing the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna around 670 CE; it served as a direct replacement for traditional Vedic sacrifices (Inden 170). According to an incident recorded in Kolhapur district, Dantidurga, after weighing himself on a scale with valuables, gave the entire village to a Brahmin as a gift (Fleet 105–120). The reign of Govinda III (793–814 CE) clearly demonstrates the administrative and ritual significance of these donations.

During a very auspicious solar eclipse at Mayurakhandi, the king performed the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna, dividing villages among learned and ritually qualified Brahmins (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXIII, 8). This donation record reveals a highly structured recipient hierarchy based on ritual merit. Later Rāṣṭrakūṭa rulers significantly increased the financial scope of these donations. Records indicate that King Govinda IV (r. 930s CE) performed three separate Tulāpuruṣa-dānas in a single year during the period 929–930 CE. He donated about 3 lakh gold coins to Brahmins and about 32 lakh dram coins to temples (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXXVI, 258).

By the Middle Ages, the practice of Mahādāna had crossed gender boundaries and

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begun to influence temple architecture. Towards the end of the 9th century, Queen Veera Mahadevi, wife of the Pallava king Nripatunga, performed the Tulāpuruṣa and Hiraṇyagarbha offerings at a Shiva temple (Schmiedchen 173). This act is considered a crucial moment of women's moral influence; it is evident that the royal queens actively used these rituals to enhance the prestige of the dynasty. During the Chola period, this donation ceremony was firmly memorialised in stone. Emperor Rājarāja I (reigned 985–1014 CE) performed the Tulāpuruṣa at the Tiruvīḻāḷūr Mahadeva temple in 1013 CE. To commemorate this donation, he ordered the construction of a special temple called "Tulavara-Sri-Koil" (Schmiedchen 173). The inscriptions indicate that these ceremonies were strictly regulated according to Puranic principles; this is also evidenced by the presence of eight high Brahmin priests representing the four Vedas (Schmiedchen 173). In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Pandya dynasty revived this tradition with comparable grandeur. King Jatavarman Sundara Pandya, who ruled from 1251 to 1268 CE, built an ornate Tulābhāra temple at the Srirangam temple. He donated his entire wealth of gold and gems to establish himself as the Chakravarti (sovereign king) (Ayyar 19). The series reached its peak during the Vijayanagara Empire from the 14th to the 16th centuries; eventually, the act of donating became a central feature of the country's political and economic system. The epigraphs record that Krishnadevaraya, who ruled from 1509–1529 CE, made a whole series of sixteen fabulous donations at his coronation (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. VII, 20). Nalini Rao points out that these rulers used the fabulous donations as a means of moral kingship (Rao 7). They created a circular economic system in which the wealth of the royal treasury flowed to the temples, which in turn supported artists and markets. In this way, they combined religious authority and economic stability (Rao 170). All of this shows the transformation from person to land. Although the donor initially entered the balance as a gift of gold, the epigraphs often consistently recorded gifts of land of equal value. Through this, the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna is not only a physical donation of gold but also a financial foundation for temples and Brahmin centres through a large land donation.

4. Modern Period (c.1600- to Present)

The ritual did not disappear after the pre-modern period; it continued into the 19th–20th centuries. However, its social platform shifted from royal-political legitimisation to temple-based personal vows and symbolic commemorations. After 1900, it existed not as a nationwide state ritual, but mainly as a popular temple ritual and a form of remembrance of the customs of the old dynasties. In the 19th century, as British rule weakened the political autonomy of the Indian princes, the Maharajas of Travancore further strengthened their ritual life. Tulābhāra

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was not just a simple devotional act; it was a necessary ritual for attaining the desired status of the dynasty. The rulers of Travancore belong to the Nair community, and, according to traditional Brahminical beliefs, they had to perform these rituals to become Kṣatriyas and wear the Poonul (sacred thread) (Pillai 2019). Records show that the Maharajas of Travancore, such as Swathi Thirunal (reign: 1829–1846 CE) and Moolam Thirunal (reign: 1885–1924 CE), performed these elaborate rituals throughout the 19th century. However, this strengthening occurred amid increasing colonial pressure (Hindustan Times). In 1848, the Governor-General of India, the Marquis of Dalhousie, observed that the Mahādānas were among the main reasons for Travancore's financial collapse (Sadasivan 45). Despite this, Moolam Thirunal continued to perform the Tulābhāra and Hiraṇyagarbha rituals, demonstrating how modern administrative reform and Eastern religious traditions coexisted within the ideology of the same ruler. The end of this series was clearly established during the reign of Chithirathirunal Balarama Varma, who ruled from 1931–1949; he became the first Travancore ruler to officially abolish the Hiraṇyagarbha and the royal Tulābhāra and This abolition was due to several factors: the economic crisis following World War I made these costly ceremonies financially unviable. The temple entry proclamation brought about profound changes in social values. Chithira Thirunal also had a renaissance and reformist spirit, different from the customs of previous rulers (Wikipedia, "Travancore Royal Family" 2008).

The royal ceremony became a democratic temple ritual, indicating a shift from a political philosophy, that is, from the king’s ceremonial position representing spiritual and political authority, to a health-related and devotional philosophy, where individual devotees use the ritual to relieve their physical or mental ailments, fulfil vows, and express gratitude to the gods.

In the modern Guruvayur Sree Krishna Temple, Tulābhāra has evolved to become a daily ritual accessible to devotees of all castes and economic statuses (“History of Guruvayur Temple”). The temple maintains dedicated infrastructure, standardised procedures, and regulated fees (Poojn). While the devotee sits on one plate of the large ritual scale, temple workers fill the other plate with the selected substance until the weight matches. The temple itself provides most standard items; however, devotees can request permission to use specific items not included in the standard, subject to certain conditions (“History of Guruvayur Temple”). The substances used have suggestive medicinal and health benefits: cassava for stomach ailments, sugar and kalkanda for diabetes control, lotus flowers for career advancement and mental strength, manjadikuru for longevity, coir for respiratory problems,

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butter and ghee for general prosperity, and precious metals for increasing wealth ("History of Guruvayur Temple"). This objective integration of Ayurvedic medicine and the Bhakti tradition represents a fundamental departure from the old context of royal Tulābhāra. There are no caste-based prerequisites. Thus, access to the ritual, previously restricted to the royal and upper Brahmin classes, has now been thoroughly democratised.

The Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanams (TTD) have integrated the Tulābhāra ceremony into a highly elaborate and systematically planned pilgrimage management system . Performed at the Srivari Padi Kaval near the Mahadwara, this ritual continues throughout the darshan period (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams). Unlike the elaborate priestly rituals seen at royal ceremonies, the Tulābhāra at Tirupati is conducted in a simplified manner to ensure efficiency and public attendance . Devotees of all ages and status are weighed against specified items or currency measures. The financial transactions and accounting procedures of the entire Tulābhāra are handled by two nationally regulated banks, Indian Bank and Syndicate Bank, working in alternating shifts (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams). This method of integrating modern financial systems into the temple ceremony represents a remarkable combination of sanctity and bureaucratic logic; the ceremony is fully traceable to state-controlled systems and recorded in official ledgers.

At the Dwarkadhish temple in Gujarat, the Tulābhāra is clearly linked to the Satyabhāmā–Rukmiṇī story of ancient literature. In it, the spiritual devotion represented by a single Tulasī leaf, compared to the enormous piles of gold and pearls, ultimately outweighs the physical weight of Krishna (Pattanaik 27). Pilgrims perform the Tulābhāra by balancing their weight with grains such as wheat, rice, or sugar. These items are then donated to the temple's gauśālās (cow sheds) or community food banks. This reduces the status-enhancing nature of royal Tulābhāra and foregrounds the value of charitable giving. This epic reenactment spreads a spiritual message that transcends materialism. In modern times, the Tulābhāra has evolved from a symbol of royal political power to a symbol of personal devotion and healing. Temple-based systems have democratised it and made it accessible to all devotees. Various temples maintain it as a renewed form of charity, linking it with community service and food donation. In this way, Tulābhāra or Tulāpuruṣa-dāna remains an active and living tradition that combines tradition and innovation.

5. Conclusion

The long history of the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna shows that it is not a fixed custom preserved unchanged over time, but rather a flexible custom suited to the social, political, and religious

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needs of different periods. Tulāpuruṣa-dāna continues to exist even today as a custom that change with each period. Although direct evidence of the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna is not available in the Vedic, Smriti, Dharma, or epic periods, a philosophical concept of the balance between dharma and adharma is introduced at the end of the Vedic period through the concept of 'Tulā'. However, the Smriti-Dharmasastra period evaluates the general theme of donation as an indispensable part of the observance of Dharma. When we come to the epics, the story of Shibi Chakravarti in the *Mahābhārata* appears to be a sacrifice to protect Dharma. However, it is the Puranic period that provides a precise framework for the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna. The Puranas provide a clear picture, including how it should be performed, the materials that can be included, etc. The Puranas also place the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna at the top of the sixteen great offerings. The later medieval period follows this Puranic framework. The dynasties of medieval India – especially the Pandya, Rashtrakuta, Chola, and Vijayanagara empires – adopted the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna as a symbol of the king's virtuous achievement and political legitimacy. As queens began to participate in the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna, the ritual's social scope also expanded. In the medieval period, Tulāpuruṣa-dāna emerged as a comprehensive political and moral system that divinely affirmed the ruling power and economically sustained the temple society. In the modern period,Tulāpuruṣa-dāna gradually moved away from the centre of royal communal power structures and was reshaped into a temple-based ritual of public participation.

In the contemporary context, Tulābhāra emphasises personal devotion, healing, and the fulfilment of vows. Devotees who visit temples like Guruvayur and Tirupati now bring simple items like sugar, grains, or fruits instead of precious metals. This shows a shift from political legitimacy to personal religious purpose. In harmony with contemporary institutional frameworks, the practice has endured. Banking partnerships in Tirupati and standardised donation systems in Guruvayur show how the practice has adapted to modern economic and bureaucratic systems. The fact that the Tulāpuruṣa-dāna has been practised for almost 3,000 years shows how stable Indian cultural and ritual traditions are.

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