

The Rite of the Golden Womb

Ritual Rebirth for Social Acceptance



Jayanta Bhattacharya

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Preface

Throughout the last three millenniums of history of the Brahmanical social order in South Asia, the outsiders were always accepted into its fold, whenever the social, political or economic reasons compelled for it. The *hiraṇyagarbha*, or rite of the golden womb was probably the most widely known Hindu rite performed for such acceptance. This rite was probably developed in the early centuries of the Common Era in a region of South Asia, outside the limits of 'Āryāvarta' - the land of the nobles. In this region, the rulers of the newly founded dynasties was not able to establish an elite (brāhmaṇ or kṣatriya) lineage for themselves very easily and searching for an alternate means to achieve the social acceptance.

The nature of this rite of the golden womb evolved continuously from its earliest version, which might be in vogue in the 4th century CE or even earlier to its latest version in the 18th century CE, incorporating the changes in the Hindu theological perceptions in this long period of history. In this work, an attempt has been made to trace the course of the long journey of this unique rite, initially as an expiatory rite and later as a rite of gift. The information from both the literary sources and epigraphical records has been utilized to get a complete overview of the nature of performance in the different periods of history. Since the early medieval period, this rite was transformed into one of sixteen *mahādānas* – the rites of the great gifts, prescribed by the ritualists for the royal donors. Hence, an effort has been made to describe the dynamics of the rites of the great gifts. At the end, a brief study of impacts of social and economic changes on the evolution of the Indian gift system has been made to understand the place of this rite as a royal donation in this system.

The valued studies have been made on the South Asian gift system in general and the rites of *mahādāna* or great donations in particular in the last few decades. P.V. Kane in his magnum opus, *History of Dharmasāstra*, summarised the huge data available in the Hindu normative texts on the gift systems. The contributions of J.C. Heesterman, Ronald B. Inden, Vijay Nath, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, Annette Schmiedchen and Maria Heim on this subject gave us deep insight into evolution of the South Asian gift systems. As this study is focussed on a unique rite, which was evolved into a rite of great gift, help of the modern scholarship on the South Asian gift system has been taken in the concluding chapter to understand the context of its evolution.

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Mumbai.

Jayanta Bhattacharya

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Chapter 1

Rebirth from a golden womb

It would be most appropriate to commence this study with a *mantra* (chant) in the *Matsyapurāṇa* (275.20) addressed to Brahmā, the creator of the world, which, with a few minor variations is repeated in *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* 176.43:

*yathā'ham janitah pūrvam martyadharmā surottama /
tvadgarbhasambhavādeṣa divyadeho bhavāmyaham //*

Translation: O, the greatest of the gods (Brahmā), as I was born earlier with the features of a mortal being, [similarly, now,] for the reason of being born of your womb, I am in possession of a divine body.

The proclamation made in this chant may initially sound strange, but this assertion was made by many rulers of South Asia over a millennium after the successful performance of a unique rite, *hiraṇyagarbha* (literally, ‘golden womb’) to inform his subjects that he had attained a ritual rebirth with a divine or a pure body. This assertion was essential, as this rite was mostly performed by the rulers from the marginal social classes, who needed the social acceptance of his paramount authority equal to the other rulers from the elite social classes.

From the 4th century CE onwards, several rulers of Lower Deccan mentioned in the epigraphic records as ‘born of Hiraṇyagarbha’. In Gorantla (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) copper-plate grant of king Attivarman of Ānanda dynasty, he is described as ‘*aprameya Hiraṇyagarbha prasava*’ (born of immeasurable Hiraṇyagarbha).¹ An epithet of ‘*aneka Hiraṇyagarbhodbhavodbhava*’ (born of [the king], who was born of several Hiraṇyagarbhas) is used for another Ānanda dynasty ruler Dāmodaravarman, possibly the son of Attivarman, in his Maṭṭepāḍ (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) copper-plate grant.² In Bādāmi (Bagalkot district, Karnataka) inscription (543 CE) of Cālikya Vallabheśvara (Pulakeśin I), he was described as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *sambhūta*’.³ In the Mahākūṭa (Bagalkot district, Karnataka) pillar inscription (602 CE) of the Cālukya king Maṅgaleśa also, Pulakeśin I was mentioned as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *sambhūta*’.⁴ The Viṣṇukunḍin king Mādhavarman III was mentioned as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *prasūta*’ in his Ipur (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) copper-plate grant (first set)⁵ as well as his Polamuru (East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh) plates (612 CE).⁶

The only way, the proclamations made by these rulers as either being born (or re-born) of Hiraṇyagarbha or being born of one, who was born of Hiraṇyagarbha, can be explained is that, they are actually referring to the performance of the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha* described in several ancient and medieval texts. During the performance of this rite, the performer enters inside a golden vessel, which symbolizes a golden womb, sits there in the foetal position for a certain period and comes out as being born again of the golden womb.

In the vedic as well as the purāṇic cosmology, it is believed that in the beginning of creation only a golden egg (cosmic egg) existed. The creator god Prajāpati/ Brahmā was born from this golden egg, hence he is also known as Hiraṇyagarbha (‘the golden embryo’). The *Bhaviṣyaparva* 36.1-5 (Appendix 1-42.298-308 in the critical edition) of the *Harivaṃśa* stated that, the god, whom the Vedas describe as Hiraṇyagarbha, came out from the mouth of the god who existed before the creation (Nārāyaṇa). Then, he was instructed by the Lord of the world (Nārāyaṇa) to create the world by dividing himself. He is the Prajāpati (Lord of the creatures), for whom the first oblation in a sacrifice has been prescribed. From the vedic texts to the purāṇic texts, Hiraṇyagarbha was mostly identified with the creator god, Prajāpati/ Brahmā. Āditya, the god of the sun, was also referred as Hiraṇyagarbha in some of the

ancient texts, like *Yuddhakāṇḍa* 105.12 of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (vulgate edition). Hence, by performing this rite, the performer is ritually born again from Hiraṇyagarbha/ Brahmā, the creator of the gods and his body becomes divine.

The perception of possessing a divine body after performing a rite for rebirth from a golden womb is deeply rooted in the early vedic theological percept on the relationship between gold and the purity of the body. This theological percept is visible in the earliest extant narrative of this rite in the *Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa*.

In the early centuries of the Common Era, a major transformation had commenced in the Hindu theological percept on impurity and sanctification of the body. In the early *grhyasūtras*, a genre of vedic ritual texts composed between 600-300 BCE, the codified life-cycle rites were described as either the sacrifices where the cooked food are offered (*pākayajña*) or the domestic rituals (*grhyakarmāṇi*). In these texts, these rites were not linked with the sanctification of the body as it was only possible by performing the solemn sacrificial rites after proper initiation.

The early stage of this transformation is observed in the comparatively late *dharmasūtra* texts, another genre of the vedic ritual texts, which were most probably composed in the last century before the Common Era. *Gautamadharmasūtra* VIII.14-21 designated all codified life-cycle rites as well as the domestic and solemn sacrifices as the *saṃskāras* – the rites for the sanctification of the body. In this transformed perception, the codified pregnancy rites were viewed as the pre-natal sanctifying rites for the foetus. A lost *dharmasūtra* text of Hārīta, cited in the late medieval texts, stated that the series of codified life-cycle rites, beginning with the rite for conception and ending the rite of the ritual bath on completion of the period of the vedic studies, are the *brāhma saṃskāras* – the rites, which sanctify a person to attain the world of the sages after death.⁷ A verse from another lost *dharmasūtra* text of Śaṅkha-Likhita, cited in the late medieval texts, stated that the persons sanctified by these codified life-cycle rites attain the world of Brahmā.⁸

The final stage of this transformation took place in the early centuries of the Common Era. One of early *dharmasāstra* texts, *Mānavadharmasāstra* II.26 stated that for a ‘twice-born’ (belonging to any one of the three elite social classes – *brāhmaṇ*, *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya*) male, the codified life-cycle rites, beginning with the rite of *niṣeka* (conception) must be performed according to the rules prescribed in the Vedas for his purification in this world as well as after the death. In the next verse (II.27), it is explicitly mentioned that the sources of the impurity of a person is the seed (semen) of the father and the womb of the mother and this impurity can only be removed by performing the codified pre-natal rites, childhood rites and the rite of initiation, *mauñjībandhana*. In other words, only a ‘twice-born’, who is eligible for performing the initiation rite, can obtain a pure body after being sanctified by a series of sanctifying rites beginning with the conception. Elsewhere (II.16), this text categorically mentioned that only those persons, for whom the sanctifying rites begin with the conception and end with the cremation, are eligible for the access to the Hindu normative texts. To sum up, the performance of the codified life-cycle rites, beginning with the pre-natal rites for a male foetus became the rites of institution for the acceptance of a person as a member of any one of the three elite social classes.

This transformation in the theological percept on impurity and sanctification of the body remoulded this rite of a ritual rebirth from a golden womb. In the later form of this rite, which is described in the *Purāṇas* as *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna*, the pre-natal rites of the golden vessel were added as the additional elements. From the epigraphical evidence, we may derive that from the 4th century to the early 7th century of the Common Era, the South Asian rulers performed this rite according to the early version of this rite narrated in the

Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa, as these inscriptions did not mention this rite as a *mahādāna* (great gift) rite. From the middle of the 7th century, almost immediately after the composition of the purāṇic narratives, the rulers of South Asia began to perform this rite as a *mahādāna* rite.

The origin of this rite is not very certain. Eliade (1958) was of opinion that the rite for rebirth from Hiraṇyagarbha probably has a pre-Aryan (pre-vedic) origin. According to him:

The *Rig-Veda* says nothing of the *hiranyagarbha* ritual, whether because it was not known in Vedic times or because it was not then practiced in the priestly and military circles in which the Rig-Vedic hymns were elaborated and circulated. The fact that the *hiranyagarbha* ritual appears in the *Atharva-Veda Parishishta*, and that, in modern times, it is practiced chiefly in southern India (Travancore, Comorin) and in Assam, indicates a probable pre-Aryan origin. It is perhaps one of the traces left by the great Afro-Asiatic culture which, between the fourth and third millennia, extended from the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia to India. However, this may be, the *hiranyagarbha* initiatory rite is especially important for the equivalence that it establishes between the three symbols of the Mother Goddess – cow, womb and pot.⁹

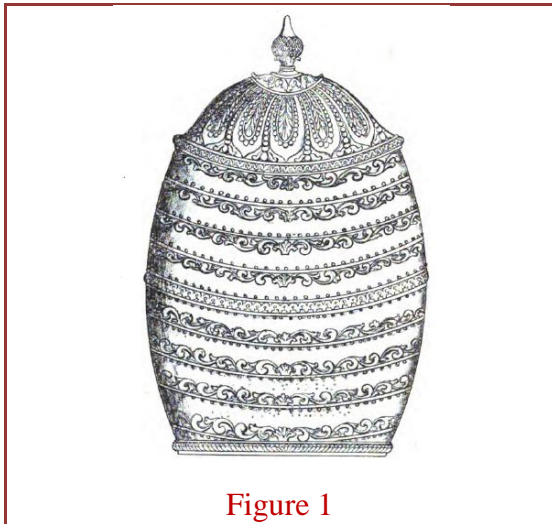


Figure 1

However, this rite is deeply embedded with the theological percept on attaining the purity of the body by a ‘pure birth’, which is expounded later in the vedic ritual texts and the early *dharmasāstra* texts. It seems that this rite was developed by the ritualists in the mould of the late vedic expiatory rites for the sanctification of the body. This rite was most probably originated somewhere in the Deccan and it was spread through the migratory brāhmaṇs to the furthest corners of the subcontinent by the pre-modern period. The records of its performance by the rulers of South Asia are available till the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ The *hiranyagarbha* is probably one of the most

expensive expiatory rites performed ever in South Asia. Still, for more than one and a half millennium, the rulers considered its cultural and social impacts to bear such expenses.

Chapter 2

Evolution of a unique rite

The ritual impurity of an outsider due to the ‘impure body’ always remained the biggest obstacle for the inclusion in the Brahmanical social order in South Asia. Several expiatory rites were evolved in the last two millennia to overcome this obstacle. Most probably, the rite of the golden womb also developed in the ancient South Asia as an expiatory rite for ritual rebirth to attain a ‘pure body’, essential to become a member of the elite social classes. An expiatory rite for the ritual rebirth for a person, whose death rites have already been performed by error, is narrated in the *Baudhāyanapitṛmedhasūtra* and *Āgniveśyagr̥hyasūtra*, and it is almost similar to the rite of *hiranyagarbha*. Another expiatory rite in the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra* for a person, who made an error in the performance of the pregnancy rites shares the belief in ‘purity’ of a golden womb. At least, in three early medieval *Pāñcarātra* texts, the *Pārameśvarasamhitā*, *Pādmasamhitā* and the *Paramasamhitā*, the rite of *hiranyagarbha* is described as an expiatory rite. The examination of the narratives of these expiatory rites in the vedic ritual texts and the *Pāñcarātra* texts, will help us to understand the evolution of the theological percept of the *hiranyagarbha* rite.

An expiatory rite in the *Baudhāyanapitṛmedhasūtra*

Baudhāyanapitṛmedhasūtra 2.7.1-14 prescribes a expiatory rite for a brāhmaṇ, who comes back home from abroad, after the performance of the cremation rite of his effigy by his relatives. It instructed that after offering certain oblations into the sacrificial fire (2.7.2-4), the performer should enter inside a golden vessel or a earthen pot or a black antelope skin filled with clarified butter and water (resembling amniotic fluid) and he should spend a night there (2.7.5-7). Next morning, the pre-natal rites from the rite to create a male foetus (*pum̐savana*) up to the rite after birth (*jātakarma*) should be performed and then the performer is considered as born again (2.7.8). Next, the sanctifying life-cycle rites, beginning with the *jātakarma* should be performed and the performer should observe the vows for twelve nights (2.7.9). Then, he should perform the rite to establish the sacrificial fire along with his same wife and perform a certain expiatory sacrifice (2.7.10). Next, he should go to a mountain and perform certain other rites (2.7.11-13). This text has stated in a verse at the end (2.7.14), that nobody should ever challenge either the conduct or the decision of a brāhmaṇ, who has born (again) from Hiranyagarbha (by performing this rite), as he has become equal to the gods. In the epigraphic records of the Lower Deccan mentioned in the last chapter, we have already noticed this typical expression, ‘*hiranyagarbhaḥ sambhūta*’ (born of Hiranyagarbha) used in this verse. An almost identical account of this rite, including the verse at the end, is found in *Āgniveśyagr̥hyasūtra* 3.9.3 (only difference is that, it has instructed to perform the vows for ten nights).

Hiranyakeśīpitṛmedhasūtra 29.4.41-42 narrative of this rite is very brief. It prescribed that the performer should enter a vessel filled with clarified butter and when he comes out of it, the *jātakarma* and other rites should be performed. He should observe vows for twelve nights. Then, he should perform the rite to establish the sacrificial fire accompanied by his wife and an expiatory sacrifice. Next, he should go to a mountain and perform certain other rites. An almost identical narrative is found in *Bhāradvājapitṛmedhasūtra* 2.12.7-8. Much later, *Garuḍapurāṇa* II.4.169, in its instruction for this rite, stated that the performer should plunge in a pit filled with clarified butter and his sanctifying rites, beginning with *jātakarma* should be performed once again. In these two later texts, the significance of the use of a golden vessel was lost. However, two core elements of this expiatory rite – entering a vessel

filled with a liquid and performance of the sanctifying life-cycle rites of the performer, essential for a ritual rebirth, were not changed.

An expiatory rite in the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra*

Another expiatory rite narrated in the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra* gives us information on the theological percept of the early centuries of the Common Era, which adds the use of gold for the sanctification of the womb for a ‘pure birth’. This same percept is visible in the *hiraṇyagarbha* rite after its change from its early version in the *Atharvaveda Parisiṣṭa* to its later version in the *Purāṇas*.

The *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra* is a late vedic ritual text in ten *praśnas* (sections). This text belonged to the *Vaikhānasas*, an early *vaiṣṇava* (believers in Viṣṇu as the supreme deity) community of peninsular India. This social group also formed the *Vaikhānasa śākhā*, one of the theological schools of the vedic rituals, considered as a sub-branch of the *Taittirīya śākhā*, an ancient theological school of the adherents of the *Kṛṣṇayajurveda*. The first seven *praśnas* of this text is the *grhyasūtra*, the treatise on the domestic vedic rituals and the last three *praśnas* of this text is the *dharmasūtra*, the treatise on the vedic rituals and injunctions, considered as obligatory for the righteous way of life. According to Caland (1929), this text was composed in the 4th century CE.¹ When this text was composed, the transformed perception about the pregnancy rites was accepted by most of the schools of Hindu theology across the sub-continent. The theological positions of this text, as Caland has pointed out, to a substantial extent, are in agreement with the *Mānavadharmasāstra*² and they include the acceptance of the pregnancy rites as the pre-natal rites for the unborn male foetus.

Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra 6.3 described a rite of *prāyaścitta* (expiation) for a person, who has not performed rite for conception (*garbhādhāna*) for his pregnant wife in time, omitted any act during its performance, or reverted the correct order of the acts inadvertently. This text has prescribed to make a piece of gold in a shape similar to a womb, place it on the abdomen of his wife and fasten it with a *darbha* grass stalk. Next, having sprinkled water around the sacrificial fire, he should offer the oblations in to the sacrificial fire for Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Rudra, Indra, Agni and Bṛhaspati and then perform the rite of *garbhādhāna* as prescribed by this text. Then, with the *Viṣṇusūkta* (Rgveda I.154), he should touch his wife’s abdomen. At the end, he should remove the *suvarṇa garbha* (golden womb) from the abdomen, donate it to the brāhmaṇas and serve food to them. It also instructed that this same expiatory rite should also be performed before the rite for creation of a male foetus (*pūṃsavana*) and the rite for parting hair of the expecting mother (*sīmanta*), but in *pūṃsavana* rite, the golden womb should be made with a sign of the male in its middle and the abdomen of the wife should be touched with the *Puruṣasūkta* (Rgveda X.90).³

Gold was always accepted as the symbol of purity in Hindu theology. The substitution of the wife assumed of impurity with her golden image for the performance of a sacrifice was mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Uttarakāṇḍa* 91.25) much before the composition of this text. This text has introduced the concepts of the sanctification of the foetus by the substitution of the impure mother’s womb with a golden womb; the repeat performance of the omitted or improper pregnancy rites on both the mother’s womb and its pure substitute and finally, the donation of the golden womb to the priests.

Expiatory *Hiraṇyagarbhavidhiḥ* in the *Pāñcarātra* texts

At least three *Pāñcarātra* texts, which were composed in southern India, included the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha* as an expiatory rite. One of the significant intent of the *Pāñcarātra* texts was guidance to the priests on the temple rituals. The *hiraṇyagarbha* rite, along with *iulābhāra*, was probably performed in the temples by the *Pāñcarātrins* (adherents of the *Pāñcarātra*

doctrine) in the early medieval period as the rituals to remove the perceived sins of the benefactors, most of them being the rulers and their ministers.

The *Pārameśvarasaṃhitā* is one of the significant *Pāñcarātra* texts probably composed between the 6th and 8th century CE. The *Kriyākāṇḍa* of the *Pārameśvarasaṃhitā*, after describing the rite of *tulābhāra* as a rite of *prāyaścitta* (expiation) in 20.1-151, next, in 21.1-43, described the rite of *hiranyagarbha* or *hemagarbha* as an expiatory rite.⁴ It instructed that the lower part of the golden vessel should be made with one thousand pieces of *suvarṇa* (= 9.7 gm of gold), *pala* (= 38.8 gm of gold) or *niṣka* (= 48.5 gm of gold). The upper part of the vessel should be made with the five hundred pieces of the same amount of gold (21.19). Both the parts of the vessel should be one *aṅgula* (= 0.75 in.) thick (21.17). These vessels should be adorned with all possible ornaments (21.20). The king, after taking bath, having put on precious garments and ornaments, should enter the vessel with the blowing of conch shells and trumpets; however, he should not carry any sword or shield with him (21.28-29). After the king comes out from the vessel, his consecration should be performed by pouring water from the pitchers, he should be bathed, adorned with ornaments and the sun should be worshipped. Next, this text prescribed to perform his sanctifying life-cycle rites, beginning with *jātakarma* for the ritual birth (21.33-35). It prescribed the performer to donate one thousand or five hundred or one hundred or fifty golden *niṣka* to the preceptor and ten or five *niṣka* to the teacher after completion of the rite (21.42-43).

The *Pādmasaṃhitā* is late but very significant *Pāñcarātra* texts, divided into four sections. In the twentieth chapter of its fourth section, *Caryāpāda*, *hiranyagarbha* (20.9-43) and *tulābhāra* (20.44-62a) are described as the *prāyaścitta* (expiation) rites.⁵ This text instructed to make two golden jars, of same dimensions, one *aṅgula* (= 0.75 in.) thick (20.18). It instructed that the king, after obtaining permission from his preceptor, should enter the lower jar and sit inside it and meditate on *Kamalāsana* (*Brahmā*), while he remained covered by the upper jar (20.33-35). Next, it prescribed that the king should be positioned on a tiger skin after coming out from the golden vessels and his consecration should be performed (20.38). At the end, the king should give one thousand *niṣka* (gold coins) to his preceptor and donate all other priests equally; all items used in the rite should be donated to his teacher and the golden vessels should be gifted to the learned brāhmaṇs (20.41-42).

The *Paramasaṃhitā*, another late *Pāñcarātra* text, was probably composed before 1000 CE. This text, in its seventeenth chapter, named 'īśvara' (nobles), narrated the procedures for the performance of the *hemagarbha* (*hiranyagarbha*) and *tulābhāra* as the preparatory elements for the *vaiṣṇava* initiation (*dīkṣā*) for the nobles. According to this text, if the rulers of bad conduct or the ministers, who are serving a ruler of bad conduct, wish for the *vaiṣṇava* initiation for salvation, but do not have sufficient time to perform any austerity to remove their sins, must perform the expiatory rites before the *vaiṣṇava* initiation. This text stated that for any person, the performances of the sanctifying life-cycle rites, beginning at the birth, are must before the *vaiṣṇava* initiation. (17.1-3) However, for those rulers and rich persons, who did not perform any sanctifying rites, two golden cauldrons (*kaṭāha*) of equal size, together known as *hemagarbha*, should be made at an auspicious time, as instructed by the brāhmaṇs and these cauldrons should be placed in a desolate location. One of these two cauldrons should be filled with yoghurt, honey and clarified butter and adorned with auspicious items. The teacher (*ācārya*) should bathe the noble and holding by his hand, take the noble to the golden cauldron. The noble, having destroyed his physical body in his mind, should enter the cauldron filled with liquids and the teacher should cover it with another cauldron. When, the preceptor (*guru*) considers that the self of the noble, seating inside the cauldron, has been able to destroy his physical body created by nature and has began to create a new one, he should create the new body of the noble with the *mantras* and bring the noble out of the

hemagarbha cauldron. After this ritual rebirth, all sanctifying life-cycle rites – the rite after birth (*jātakarma*), naming ceremony (*nāmadheya*), rite for the first shaving the head (*caula*) and the rite for investing sacrificial threads (*upanayana*) should be performed for that noble according to the injunctions (since after his divine birth, he is eligible for performing these rites). Two golden cauldrons should be gifted to the learned *vaiṣṇava* brāhmaṇs. (17.4-13a) If the noble belongs to one of the three elite ‘twice-born’ social classes (*varṇa*), he should perform the ritual with the vedic *mantras* prescribed for his social class. In case, he belongs to the social class of śūdra, he should perform with the tāntric *mantras*. With the *guṇamantra*, he should be given the upper garment and the sacrificial thread and allowed to wear them only up to the completion of the rite. He should not be allowed to mutter or meditate with the *bījamantra*. (17.13b-15) This text stated that a rich person (including a śūdra) is allowed to achieve religious merit by performing *tulābhāra* before initiation. The performer should ascend the balance and gift high quality gold equal to his own weight. He becomes pure after giving *dakṣiṇā* to the learned persons. Then, he can be initiated by instructing the *mantra* (secret formulae) and the *mudrā* (secret gestures). According to this text, all deficiencies in the performance of any occasional obligatory rite (like initiation) can be made up by means of a great gift (*mahādāna*). Whenever, a wealthy person gifts *tulābhāra* (a *mahādāna*) every year, he enjoys the union with Viṣṇu. (17.22-26a)⁶

It can be inferred from these *Pāñcarātra* texts, that even after the development of all four elements of the purāṇic version of this rite, it still remained as an expiatory rite for the *Pāñcarātrins* and never transformed into a pure act of great gift.

Chapter 3

The rite of the golden womb

The earliest extant description of the *Hiraṇyagarbha* rite is found in the thirteenth *pariśiṣṭa* of the *Atharvaveda*, named *Hiraṇyagarbhavidhiḥ*.¹ Modak (1993) has rightly observed that the extant *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭas* is a collection of the treatises presumably belonging to different chronological periods and the date of this extant compilation lies somewhere between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE, and if one assigns it to a period around the beginning of the Common Era, it may not be far from the truth.²

The *Hiraṇyagarbhavidhiḥ* is a short text, divided into five sections. Its first four sections comprise 11, 9, 16 and 10 prose passages respectively and the fifth section comprises 6 verses. This text is one of the series of eight *Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa* texts on the rites for royal donations – the *Tiladhenuvidhiḥ* (9th), the *Bhūmidānam* (10th), the *Tulāpuruṣavidhiḥ* (11th), the *Ādityamaṇḍakāḥ* (12th), the *Hastirathadānavidhiḥ* (14th), the *Aśvarathadānavidhiḥ* (15th) and the *Gosahasravidhiḥ* (16th). The procedure of the rite described in this text is similar to the other royal vedic rituals.

The *Hiraṇyagarbhavidhiḥ* instructed to perform this rite to get rid of all sins (1.1). It instructed to perform it during the period of *udagayana* (the period from winter solstice to summer solstice), in the fortnight of the waxing moon, when the moon is in an auspicious lunar mansion and when one is driven by the faith. Else, it should be performed at the time of an eclipse (1.2). Both the *yajamāna* (performer) and the officiating priest should shave their heads, beards and clip their nails before commencing the rite (1.3). Before sunset, the priest must kindle the sacrificial fire by churning (by friction) two kindling woods of *aśvattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) tree (1.4). In a pure place, the performer should wear a cloth, his body should be besmeared with oil and fragrances and collyrium should be applied to his eyes (1.6). A golden chain should be put on the neck of the performer and protection should be sought for him (1.7). Both the performer and the priest should sleep that night on a layer of *darbha* grass strewn on the ground (1.8). Next day, in the Abhijit *muhūrta* (8th *muhūrta* after sunrise), a circular golden vessel of the height up to the navel of the performer, together with a lid should be made ready along with ornaments and the sacrificial implements – *sruc*, *sruva*, *ājyasthālī* and *udapātra* (1.9-10). This circular golden vessel with a lid is a symbolic representation of the ‘golden womb’. After the preparatory rites, the oblations of clarified butter should be offered into the sacrificial fire for the gods, Hiraṇyagarbha, Agni, Brahmā and Prajāpati (2.1). The performer should sit in the golden vessel. Then, he should be bathed with water and *pañcagavya* (five products of a cow) poured from the golden pitchers (2.4-5). Next, the remnants of the oblations should be poured into the golden vessel (2.6). It is stated that, the king (performer) symbolically becomes one with Hiraṇyagarbha by this act (2.8). Then, the performer should be shut up inside the golden vessel and he should restrain his speech, control his sense organs and meditate upon the god, Hiraṇyagarbha (3.1-3). He should observe a measure of seventeen (units) inside the vessel, as the number seventeen belongs to Prajāpati (3.4-6). When the king (performer) is about to rise from the vessel, a golden wheel should be pressed on him and the same is removed later (3.9-11). Then the performer should salute the priests (3.12). The priests should say that the performer has received the favour of the god, Hiraṇyagarbha and he should get up from the vessel (3.13-14). The oblations should be offered into the fire (3.15). The performer should be bathed again (3.16) and Āditya (the god of the sun) should be worshipped with a prayer, praising him of his birth from the golden womb (4.1). The sacrificial fire should be extinguished after worshipping Agni (4.4). At the end of this ritual, ten thousand coins and an excellent village should be donated to the brāhmaṇs (priests) as *dakṣiṇā* (4.5-6). The ornaments and the

sacrificial implements, i.e., the *sruc*, *sruva*, *ājyasthālī* and *udapātra*, should be gifted to the *sadasyas* (the assistants of the officiating priest) (4.7). The brāhmaṇs should be served food after the performance (4.9). The six verses at the end of this text (5.1-6) described the merits of this rite. These verses stated that it is due the blessings of the brāhmaṇs, the sun is able to remain in the sky and Indra is able to rule over the gods. The gift of gold brings immortality for the donor according to the Vedas. The king, sanctified through this rite by the priests who know the Vedas, is accepted as the most respected and greatest by his subjects. The performer reaches the luminous *satyaloka* (the world of truth) after death and never return for another birth.

From this narrative, it can be observed that, three elements of this rite were developed in this early version:

1. The performer enters inside a golden vessel with a lid, sits inside the vessel in the foetal position for a certain period and takes bath after coming out of the vessel;
2. he donates coins and grants a village as the sacrificial fee;
3. he donates the golden vessel and feeds the brāhmaṇs after the completion of the rite.

As it is explained earlier, the procedure for this rite mentioned here has not included the fourth element of the performance of sanctifying pre-natal rites by the priests.

Hemādri in *Dānakhaṇḍa* of his treatise *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* cited this narrative (with a few variations) as from a *Brāhmaṇa* text, but he did not name the text. However, Hemādri, in his same work, cited from three other *Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa* texts, the *Tulāpuruṣavidhiḥ*, *Aśvarathadānavidhiḥ* and *Gosahasravidhiḥ* and mentioned their source as the *Ātharvaṇa Gopathabrāhmaṇa*.³

Chapter 4

The gift of the golden womb

In the 6th-7th century, the rite of *Hiraṇyagarbha* was transformed by the purāṇic ritualists into a rite of the great gift and it became known as the *Hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* (literally, “the great gift of the golden womb”). This rite was recast as one of the sixteen rites of the great gifts (*ṣoḍaśa mahādāna*). Among the extant Purāṇas, this transformed version of the rite is narrated in *Matsyapurāṇa* 275.1-29, *Uttarabhāga* 29.1-13 of the *Liṅgapurāṇa* and *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* 176.3-69 (printed as the *Uttaraparva* of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* in the Veṅkaṭeśvara Press edition). Hemādri in the *Dānakhaṇḍa* of *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* cited another narrative of this rite from the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa*, which is not found in the extant text.¹

Matsyapurāṇa 275.1-29 is probably the earliest account of the *hiraṇyagarbha* rite as a rite of the great gift. From the internal and external evidences, Hazra (1940) concluded that the date of the chapters on the sixteen rites of the great gifts in the *Matsyapurāṇa* falls between 550 CE and 650 CE.² Even, the percept of the sixteen rites of the great gifts was probably not developed much before, as Matsya (first *avatāra* of Viṣṇu) is found revealing the untold secret of sixteen rites of the great gifts to Manu in *Matsyapurāṇa* 274.18:

yāni noktāni guhyāni mahādānāni ṣoḍaśa |
tāni te kathayiṣyāmi yathābadanupūrvaśaḥ ||

Translation: The secret of the sixteen rites of the great gifts has not yet been stated; I shall narrate you those rites properly in the successive order.

The ritual mentioned in the *Matsyapurāṇa* is pre-dominantly *vaiṣṇava* (the faith in Viṣṇu as the supreme deity) in character. The account of *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* 176.3-69 has closely followed the *Matsyapurāṇa* (*Matsyapurāṇa* 275.16cd-17ab is identical to *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* 176.47) and also *vaiṣṇava* in character. The ritual mentioned in *Liṅgapurāṇa* II.29.1-13 is pre-dominantly *śaiva* (the faith in Śiva as the supreme deity) in character. According to Hazra (1940), the chapters on the rites of the great gifts in the *Liṅgapurāṇa* were most probably composed between 800 CE and 1000 CE.³

In its later form as a *mahādāna* rite, a new element is added to the *Hiraṇyagarbha* rite. The sanctifying pre-natal rites of the *hiraṇyagarbha* (the golden vessel, symbolic of the god Hiraṇyagarbha) are performed by the priests before the ritual rebirth of the performer takes place from that golden vessel and other sanctifying life-cycle rites from birth onward are performed after he comes out of the vessel.

The *Matsyapurāṇa* narrative

The *Matsyapurāṇa*, like the *Hiraṇyagarbhavidhiḥ*, mentioned that the performance of *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* removes the most heinous sins (275.1). Whoever performs this rite following the injunctions mentioned in this text on an auspicious day is honoured in the world of Brahmā after death. In each *manvantara* (306,720,000 years), he lives in the realm of one or the other *Lokapāla* (eight guardian gods of directions) and at the end, he lives in the world of Brahmā for one crore (10 million) *kalpa* (literally, ‘aeon’; 4.32 billion years). He liberates himself from all sins associated with the *Kaliyuga* (current mythical era). He is worshipped by the *siddhas* (enlightened souls) and *sādhyas* (demigods). The nymphs fan him with a whisk used for the gods. By performing this rite, he frees his one hundred ancestors, friends, son, grandson and great-grandson from the hell (275.26-28). Even, one who reads or listens to the injunctions of this rite receives the respect equal to Viṣṇu by the enlightened

persons and one who encourages another to perform this rite is accepted as the leader of the learned persons (275.29).

The *Matsyapurāṇa* instructed to perform this rite on an auspicious day, after the arrangements for the officiating priests, a pavilion, the articles, ornaments and clothes are made identical to the *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* rite (275.2). The *yajamāna* (performer) should fast on the day of performance. The rite should begin with the invocation of Viṣṇu, followed by the proclamation of the auspiciousness of the day of performance by the priests and preliminary purification (275.3). Then, the brāhmaṇs (priests) should bring a golden jar in the pavilion. This jar should be lotus-shaped (eight petal lotus, according to Hemādri; drum-shaped, according to Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara), 72 *aṅgula* (= 5 ft. 4 in.) in height (275.4) and 48 *aṅgula* (= 3 ft.) in width. The choice of the shape of the jar is significant. In Hindu cosmology, Brahmā is believed as born from a lotus. The lotus is also a common symbol of female reproductive organ in the Hinduism. The jar is instructed to be filled with clarified butter and sweet milk. Ten different weapons (ten swords, according to Hemādri), some jewels, a crooked knife and a needle should be kept near it. These items were probably included in this rite as the symbolic representation for the rites of *jātakarma* and *karnavedha* (rite for piercing ears). A golden lotus stalk [for the lotus-shaped jar] and a base should be provided for the jar. The outer wall of the jar should have an image of the sun and a golden sacrificial thread should be wrapped around it (275.5-6). The golden sacrificial thread signifies the initiation rite of *upanayana*. A golden staff (*daṇḍa*) and a golden water-gourd (*kamaṇḍalu*) are instructed to be placed on the two sides of the jar. These two items are symbolic of the *samāvartana* (ritual bathing after completion of the vedic studies) rite of the ‘twice-born’ males. A lotus-shaped golden lid, measuring more than an *aṅgula* bigger (than the jar) all around, should cover the jar (275.7). The jar should be decorated with the strings of pearls and pieces of ruby. The jar should be placed on a heap of sesame seeds kept on an altar (275.8). Uttering the auspicious words and chanting the Vedas, the brāhmaṇs (priests) should bathe the performer with the water mixed with all kinds of herbs. Then, the performer should put on a white garland, clothes and all possible ornaments. With hands folded, holding flowers, he should utter the *mantra*, “I salute Hiraṇyagarbha and Hiraṇyakavaca. I salute the Lord of the seven worlds and the gods; I salute the creator of the universe. The worlds, most excellent of which is the earth (*bhūloka*) are located inside your womb and so are the gods, the first of whom is Brahmā. I salute you, the holder of the universe. I salute the foundation of the world; I salute the refuge of the world. I salute Hiraṇyagarbha, in whose womb, Pitāmaha (Brahmā) resides (as the foetus). You, being the self of every being, reside in every being. Therefore, you rescue me from this world, (which is like) an ocean of endless miseries.” (275.9-14). After thus invoking the god (Hiraṇyagarbha), the performer should enter the golden vessel, with his face towards the north, holding the images of Dharmarāja and Caturmukha, two different images of Brahmā, in both hands (275-15).

As we have seen earlier, this rite was designed by the ritualists to accept an outsider in to the Brahmanical social order by his ritual rebirth from a golden vessel, which represents a pure womb. This was evident even in the early narrative of this rite in the *Hiraṇyagarbhaṇḍiḥ*. However, after the transformation of the perception on the codified life-cycle rites as the sanctifying rites in the early centuries of the Common Era, the codified pregnancy rites transformed into the sanctifying pre-natal rites for the male foetus. This transformation is reflected in the instructions of the *Matsyapurāṇa* on this rite. It instructed that, after entering the golden vessel, the performer should sit, placing his head between his knees (in the foetal position) and take five deep breaths in this position. Next, the brāhmaṇs (priests) should perform the sanctifying pre-natal rites of the *hiraṇyagarbha* (literally, ‘golden womb’) – the rite for conception (*garbhādhāna*), rite for a male foetus (*pumsavana*) and the rite for parting hair of the expecting mother (*sīmantonayana*). Then, the performer should be raised from

the vessel with his heads down by his preceptor (*guru*) along with the songs and auspicious chants, which symbolizes the ritual rebirth of the performer from the ‘golden womb’ (275.16-17). Next, the priests should perform the sixteen sanctifying rites beginning with the *jātakarma*. The performer should gift the needle and other items to his preceptor and recite the *mantra*, “Salutation to Hiraṇyagarbha, salutation to Viṣvagarbha, salutation to the essence of the world of all movable and unmovable beings. O, the greatest of the gods (Brahmā), as I was born earlier with the features of a mortal being, [similarly, now,] for the reason of being born of your womb, I am in possession of a divine body.” The performer should decorate himself with all ornaments and sit on a golden seat. The brāhmaṇs (priests) should bathe him from four pitchers with the vedic *mantra* beginning with, “On the impulse of the god Savitr̥” and say, “I shall consecrate your limbs, which have born now. With this divine body, you live happily as an immortal.” (275.18-23ab). This particular vedic *mantra*, employed in this rite, is probably employed to symbolize that this act of consecration is being performed with the divine hands. After the completion of the rite, the *Matsyapurāṇa* instructed the performer to donate the golden vessel to the officiating priests and also worship many other brāhmaṇs, as instructed by those priests. The articles used in the worship should be presented to the preceptor of the performer. On this occasion, the performer should donate a pair of sandals, a pair of shoes, a parasol, a whisk, a mat, utensils, a village or a group of villages (*viṣaya*) or any other item according to his ability (275.23cd-25).

The *Liṅgapurāṇa* narrative

The *Liṅgapurāṇa* proclaimed that the performance of *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* results in all possible accomplishments (29.1). A golden vessel should be made for this rite in two parts. The lower part of the vessel should be made of one thousand gold pieces (of 9.7 gm each) and the upper part of the vessel should be made of five hundred gold pieces (of 9.7 gm each). The mouth of vessel should be just wide to allow a person to enter inside it (29.2). The vessel should be decorated with the ornaments. In the lower part of the vessel, the performer should think about the goddess, who possesses all three *guṇas* (essential characteristics of the nature), who is the twenty-four *tattvas* (principles of creation) and who manifests as Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Agni. In the upper part of the vessel, the performer should think about the husband of Umā (Śiva), who is the twenty-sixth *tattva* (principle of creation), not bound by the *guṇas* (essential characteristics of the nature). He should think of his self as the *puruṣa*, the twenty-fifth *tattva* (principle of creation), who born before everybody (29.3-5a). The vessel should be placed on a heap of *śāli* rice grains kept at the middle of the *maṇḍala* (auspicious circle) drawn on the top of the *vedī* (altar) and it should be wrapped with a new cloth. After applying the powdered residue of black gram on the vessel, it should be worshipped with the paste of five articles of worship (29.5b-6). The performer should worship it with the five *mantras* - *Īśāna* (*Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 10.47.1) and others. Śiva should be worshipped and the oblations should be offered in the fire in due order (29.7). After muttering the *devī gāyatrī mantra* (*gaurī gāyatrī mantra* according to Hemādri), the performer should enter inside the vessel with his face towards the east. Then the excellent brāhmaṇ (priest) should perform the sanctifying rites of the vessel beginning with the rite for conception (*garbhādhāna*), in the order instructed (by the vedic ritual texts) for the sixteen sanctifying rites. He should sprinkle water with a sprout of *dūrvā* grass in the right nostril of the performer. By sprinkling water twenty-one times with the *udumbara* (*Ficus racemosa*) fruits and *kuśa* grass stalks in the north-eastern direction, the rite for parting hair (*sīmantakarma*) should be performed (29.8-10). An image of an excellent female should be made of thirty *niṣkas* (= 38.8 gm) and her marriage rite (with the vessel) should be performed. After decorating the image with ornaments and offering oblations in to the sacrificial fire, this image should be dedicated to Śiva (29.11). During the performance of rite for consuming solid food (*annaprāśana*), the performer himself should consume rice boiled with milk and other food. The performance of

the sanctifying rites should begin with *garbhādhāna* and end with the *viśvajīta* sacrifice. The brāhmaṇs (priests) with the expertise on the Vedas should perform these rites with the *bījamantra* of Śakti (the Goddess). The rest of this rite should be performed same as the rite of *tulāhema* (golden *tulāpuruṣa*) (29.12-13). The influence of the tāntric practices in the narrative of the *Liṅgapurāṇa* is evident from the instructions to draw the *maṇḍala* (auspicious circle), meditation on the twenty-six *tattvas* (principles of creation) and the use of *bījamantra* of Śakti.

The *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* narrative

The *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* instructed to perform this rite during a *parvakāla* (periodical change of the moon, like a full moon or a new moon). It also prescribed to perform the rite when the sun is in the equinoctial points or the solstitial points or when there is an eclipse of the moon or the sun. The other occasions for performing this rite are *vyatīpāta* (when the declinations of the moon and sun are of equal magnitude), the full moon day in the lunar month of *Kārtika*, when the moon is in the natal lunar mansion, after having bad dreams or when a planet is afflicted by another planet. This rite should be performed in the *tīrthas* (sacred places) like Prayāga, Naimiṣa, Kurukṣetra, Arbuda (Mount Abu), on the banks of Ganga, Yamuna or where the Indus River meets the sea. (176.12-14) According to this text, the preferable locations for the performance of this rite are on the banks of the sacred rivers. It can also be performed in a suitable location like the royal palaces, shrines, gardens and beside the tanks after sanctifying the place for performance. (176.15-16) It instructed that a pavilion of 12 *hasta* long on each side should be prepared for the rite and a raised platform of 5 *hasta* long on each side should be made inside it. It should be decorated with flowers. The *hiraṇyagarbha* (golden vessel) should be placed on the raised platform. (176.17-19) This rite should commence after honouring the artisans with garments and ornaments, paying respect to the brāhmaṇs (priests) and sanctifying the golden vessel. The golden vessel should be of spherical shape, 64 *aṅgula* (= 4 ft.) in height (275.4), 42.67 *aṅgula* (= 2 ft. 8 in.) in width at the centre and 21.33 *aṅgula* (= 1 ft. 4 in.) at the base. Its lid should be one *aṅgula* (= 0.75 in.) larger in measure than the vessel. (176.20-22) Ten different weapons, a golden lotus-stalk and a golden image of sun, a crooked knife with its scabbard, all items required for the performance, a golden needle and a golden razor should be placed near the golden vessel. A golden staff (*daṇḍa*) and a golden water pitcher (*kamaṇḍalu*) should be placed on the two sides of the vessel. A parasol and a pair of sandals decorated with jewels should also be placed near it. (176.23-25) The king should reach the pavilion by a cart driven by an elephant or a horse-driven chariot. He should enter the pavilion with the chanting of vedic mantras and the blowing of conch shells and trumpets. He should wear a white silk garment, a garland of flowers. After reaching the pavilion, he should recite the *mantras* to Hiraṇyagarbha (Brahmā) and stay there in the night. Next day, the oblations should be offered in the sacrificial fire kept in the *kuṇḍas* (holes), made on the four sides of the raised platform. On the north-eastern side of the central raised platform, another raised platform should be prepared and the nine planetary deities, the guardian deities of the eight quarters, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa should be worshipped on that platform. The golden vessel should be worshipped with flowers, incense and fragrances. The pavilion and the arches should be decorated with flags. Two earthen pots should be placed outside the entrances of the pavilion. (176.26-40) The king should take a bath, put on a pure white garment and worship Hiraṇyagarbha with certain *mantras*. After circumambulation of the golden vessel, he should enter the golden vessel filled up with sweet milk, clarified butter and yoghurt, holding a golden image of Dharmarāja (Brahmā) in his left hand and an image of Bhāskara (Sūrya) in his right hand. He should sit inside the vessel with his head between his two knees (in the foetal position) and take five deep breaths. The brāhmaṇs should perform the pre-natal rites of *garbhādhāna*, *pūṃsavana* and *sīmantonayana* (rite for parting hair of the expecting mother) of the Hiraṇyagarbha,

followed by the sixteen sanctifying life-cycle rites beginning with the *jātakarma*. (176.41-48) After the king comes out of the golden vessel and circumambulate it once again, eight brāhmaṇs should bathe him with the vedic *mantras* from the golden or silver or earthen pitchers, filled with water mixed with yoghurt and unhusked barley-corns and perform his consecration (176.49-53). After consecration, the king should donate the golden vessel, the utensils used in the sacrifice, the pair of shoes, parasols, whisks and feed the brāhmaṇs. (176.50-57) It stated at the end, that, when one enters the womb made of gold, according to the rules, becomes sanctified by the sanctifying rites, while remaining there, and, after coming out from the womb, donates the brāhmaṇs with veneration, he lives in the heaven with his divine body like the sun (176.69).

The narrative in the *Kāmikāgama*

The *Kāmikāgama* is a significant late 12th century *śaiva* āgamic text, composed in southern India. The *Uttarabhāga* 84.1-22 of the of this text described the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha dāna*, which has similarity with the narrative of the *Lingapurāṇa*. This text stated that the gift of *hiraṇyagarbha* results in all possible accomplishments.⁴

Historical records of performance

From the mid-7th century onwards, almost immediately after the composition of the purāṇic narratives, the epigraphical evidences are found for the performance of this rite as a *mahādāna* rite by several early medieval rulers of the Deccan and far south. The inscription of the Pandya dynasty ruler Jayantavarman or Seliyan Śendan (reigned c. 645-670 CE) found from the bed of the Vaigai river in Madurai recorded his performance of this rite.⁵ The performances of this rite by another two Pandya dynasty rulers, Arikesari Māravarman (reigned c. 670-710 CE) and Māravarman Rajasiṃha I (reigned c. 740-765 CE) are recorded in the Velvikūḍi copper-plate grant of Parāntaka Neḍuñjaḍaiyan (reigned c. 765-815 CE).⁶

The Sanjān (Valsad district, Gujarat) copper plates (871 CE) of the Raṣṭrakūṭa ruler Amoghavarṣa I mentioned that his ancestor, Dantidurga (reigned 733-757 CE) performed this rite in Ujjain.⁷ The performance of a *mahādāna* rite in Ujjain by Dantidurga was also recorded in his undated inscription in the Daśāvātara Cave (Cave XV) of Ellorā (Aurangabad district, Maharashtra).⁸

An inscription in the Śivayoganātha temple in Tiruviśālūr (Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu) recorded the performance of the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha* by Dantiśaktiviṭāṅki or Lokamahādevi, a queen of the Cola king Rājarāja I in his 29th regnal year (1014 CE).⁹

Inden (2000) has analyzed the significance of the performance of this particular *mahādāna* rite by Dantidurga as well as the other rulers of the early medieval India:

It is highly likely that the ‘rule’ (*vidhāna*) for the ceremony performed by Dantidurga was itself an elaboration of an earlier ceremony, one that earlier imperial kings had performed as a complement to, and partial displacement of, the much older Horse Sacrifice. What appears to have distinguished this reworking of the ceremony was that it stood alone and replaced the Horse Sacrifice.

The place of these ‘great’ gifts’ in the making and remaking of Indian time and space and of the religious orders and the imperial kingdoms situated in them has, like so much else here that has been essentialized and, hence, dehistoricized, a long and intricate history which, given their importance, should not be surprising. Let me just say here that the purpose of this rite was to bring about a rebirth of the king who had completed a conquest of the quarters, to endow him with a ‘divine body’, but not just in the same degree as did the imperial-style ceremonial bath into kingship (*rājyābhisheka*). That rebirth, that infusion of a king of kings with the luminous will

of Vishnu, provided the king and his subjects with the will to begin a regnal year. Another ‘great gift’ ceremony, the Man on the Balance (Tulāpurusha), the weighing of a king against gold and silver (given away, as in the Golden Embryo rite), was performed by a king of kings to mark the beginning of a reign (or, as on the occasion of a solar eclipse, to mark his participation in the renewal of calendrical time). The execution of the Golden Embryo, performed less often, but more important, brought about the beginning of a new royal era which was tantamount, in the instance where it was performed by a king claiming the paramount overlordship of the entire earth, to the inauguration of a new period of time, invariably depicted as the end of An Age of Strife (Kaliyuga), as above, and the beginning of a new Golden Age (Kṛtayuga). The performance of this rite by Dantidurga may, therefore, be taken as an attempt on his part dialectically (and eristically) to transform in a witnessed deed the whole of India into a new polity, what I refer to as an imperial formation.¹⁰

The Nagarī (Cuttack district, Odisha) copper plate inscription (1230 CE) of the Eastern Gaṅga king Anaṅgabhīma III (reigned c. 1211-1238 CE) referred to the performance of the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* by his ancestor, Kāmārṇava VII (reigned c. 1147-1156 CE).¹¹ The Nagarī inscription also recorded the performance of a *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* rite by Anaṅgabhīma III in *Puruṣottamakṣetra* (Puri) on the occasion of a solar eclipse on 14th May, 1230 CE. Five *vātīs* (100 acres) of land were donated by him as a part of its performance. Three *vātīs* (60 acres) of land was donated to his teacher (*ācārya*) and the rest was donated to the priests.¹²

Yajñanārāyaṇa Dīkṣita in his *Sāhityaratnākara* (Canto XII) mentioned that the Nāyaka ruler of Tanjore Raghunātha Nāyaka (reigned 1600-1634) had performed several *mahādāna* rites on the day of his coronation, which included *hiraṇyagarbha*.¹³ A very biased contemporary narrative of the performance of the *hiraṇyagarbha* rite by the last Nāyaka ruler of Tanjore, Vijayarāghava Nāyaka (reigned 1633-1673) in 1664, after his failure against the Nāyaka ruler of Mādurai Cokkanātha Nāyaka, is available in a letter written by Antonio de Proenza, a Jesuit missionary of Madurai to R.P. Paul Oliva, General of the Company of Jesus in Trichinopoly in 1665:

Permit me to enliven my narrative with a small trait of the Nayaka of Tanjore. After having being defeated and fleeced by Chokkalinga, whom he had notoriously betrayed, he knew no more how to spend his glorious of leisure. His Brahmans persuaded him that he had nothing better to do than to be born again. Immediately the work started: a colossal cow was cast and the king shut himself up in her womb. After many ceremonies which it would be too long to describe, the wonder was revealed: the animal of bronze brought forth another animal quite alive. The wife of the great Brahman, guru of the Nayaka, acted as midwife; she received him in her arms, lulled him on her knees, caressed him on her bosom and, to complete the farce, the big infant sought to imitate the cries and wailings of a real new-born.¹⁴

The Marava chieftain of Rāmnād, Tirumalai Raghunātha Setupati (reigned 1659-1670), who later became independent of the Nāyaka rulers of Madurai, performed *hiraṇyagarbha* rite and bore the epithet of *hiraṇyagarbhayājī* (the performer of the *hiraṇyagarbha* sacrifice).¹⁵ It seems that his successors, like Raghunātha Kiḷavan Setupati (reigned 1674-1710), Vijaya Raghunātha Setupati (reigned 1710-1725), Muthu Kumāra Raghunātha Setupati (reigned 1734-1747) and Rāmaliṅga Setupati (reigned 1761-1772 and 1780-1795) also performed this rite up to the end of eighteenth century and hence bore the epithet of *hiraṇyagarbhayājī*.¹⁶



Figure 2

Since the late medieval period, records are available on the performance of the *hiranyagarbha* rite by several rulers of the Malabar region (present-day Kerala). King Mārtanḍavarmā (reigned 1729-1758) of Travancore performed the rite of *hiranyagarbha* in 1751.¹⁷ The line of succession of the ruling family of Travancore was based on the principle of matrilineal agnatic primogeniture. Hence, it was not possible to transfer the elevation of the social class attained by the predecessor after the performance of this rite to his successor. Therefore, every new ruler of this family could elevate his social class equal to his predecessor only by performing this rite. Rāmavarmā (reigned 1758-1798), the successor of Mārtanḍavarmā, his sister's son, performed this rite in 1761.¹⁸ Adrian Moens, a governor and director of

the Dutch East India Company in the Malabar coast, in his *Memorandum on the Administration of the Coast of Malabar* (1781) commented on his performance of this rite. Moen's comments are seemingly based on the information reached him through the informants:

It is true he is not of noble birth, but he caused himself to be made a noble, following the example of his uncle who first caused himself to be ennobled. This is called by the people of Malabar "to be re-born"; for that is the force of the word in which they express it. It is derived from the droll ceremonial which the ennobled person goes through, viz., passing through a big cow made of gold; after which, the golden cow is beaten to pieces, and divided among the Namburis or the priests; and this king also was so raised to the nobility but with this difference that the ceremonies performed in his case were more complete and costly than those of his uncle, on account of which not only has he himself been made a noble, but his posterity also have been ennobled once for all, so that there is no longer any necessity for them to go through this ceremony.¹⁹

Balarāmavarmā (reigned 1796-1810), who succeeded Rāmavarmā, performed this rite in 1801.²⁰ The next male ruler, Rāmavarmā II (reigned 1829-1846) performed *hiranyagarbha mahādāna* in 1834.²¹ He was succeeded by his younger brother Mārtanḍavarmā II (reigned 1846-1860). Mateer (1871) has left us an elaborate description of the performance of the *hiranyagarbha* rite by Mārtanḍavarmā II in 1854, based on a contemporary account of Srinivasa Row, an administrator of Travancore:

The total weight of gold used on this occasion in the construction of the golden lotus and for other purposes amounted to 9,070 kalanja of about 78 grains each – equal to nearly 124 pounds troy, and valued at about £6,000 sterling.

The gold having been duly procured from Bombay, an auspicious day was appointed for the melting of the metal and the casting of the golden vessel. This was cylindrical in form, about six feet in height and four feet and a half in diameter. The cover was lotus-shaped, with a crown on the top, richly ornamented with precious stones. After its completion, the sacred vessel was carried in procession around the palace and the great temple, in an open hall of which – the Hall of Ceremonies, massive with pillars

of sculptured stone, and dazzling with decoration of silk clothes, glittering ornaments, and garlands of fragrant flowers – it was then placed in readiness for the subsequent ceremonies.

A week before the day appointed for the principal ceremony, the Rajah retired from his ordinary residence into a separate and consecrated building, secluding himself from his attendants of the Sūdra caste, abstaining from the use of betel and other indulgences, and abstracting himself as much as possible from the ordinary duties of state. Here he was occupied in private devotions and in prayers to his tutelary deity for long life, happiness, and prosperity.

On the morning of the great day of the festival, the Rajah in state procession visited the temple and having presented to the idol munificent offerings of gold coins and jewelry, proceeded to the sacred hall. Inside the golden vessel there has been placed a small quantity of consecrated mixture, composed of the five products of the cow (milk, curd, butter, urine and dung). His Highness entered the vessel and remained there for the prescribed period, during which the officiating priests repeated prayers appropriate to the occasion. Immediately on emerging from the vessel, the Rajah presented to the chief priest the whole of the rich jewels and ornaments which he had worn while undergoing the ceremony. At the same time a royal salute was fired by the Nair Brigade, drawn up in front of the temple. The European officers of the brigade were required to attend on the occasion of these idolatrous festivals, but they have since been relieved from all such unchristian compliances.

After the completion of the ceremony, the Rajah decorated himself with a new set of jewels, and walked in solemn procession around the temple, accompanied by the members of the Royal Family and all the great officers of state. Again, approaching the idol, he offered adoration and prostrated himself on the ground before the altar. The high priest then brought forth the magnificent crown, and placed it on the head of the Rajah, proclaiming aloud three times the royal titles, - “Kulaseghara” (head of the tribe) and “Perumāl” (a name of Vishnu).

Again the brilliant procession wended its way around the temple, the Rajah wearing the crown and carrying the sword of state, and again he entered the sacred hall; this time to be bathed in pure water. Once more the procession encompassed the pagoda, and then returned to the palace, where it was received with another royal salute of artillery and musketry.

These ceremonies were attended by several minor rajahs and their followers, by noted Gurus and expounder of the Vedas and Purānas, and by about 22,000 Brahmans from various parts of the kingdom. For the reception and accommodation of all these, liberal provision was made to all the nobles and the Brahmans present at the festival, and the whole of the gold of which the vessel was made was afterwards made into coins of various sizes, and distributed among them. To this fact the word Dānam (gift or bounty) refers.²²

Menon (1878) also presented a similar but brief account of the performance of this rite by the rulers of Travancore in the nineteenth century, which, as per him, was performed as a part of the coronation ceremony:

“Hirannya Garbham or Padma Garbha Danam” is a costly ceremony, like the other, but performed by the Greatest of Emperors only at their coronation. A vessel in the shape of a lotus flower, ten feet high and eight feet in circumference is made of pure gold, with a cover in the form of a crown, somewhat in the shape of a “Prize Cup,” and this is half filled with punchaguvyum, water mixed with up with ghee, milk, and other substances; and the Brahmans perform their devotional prayers and hymns over the vessel according to the canon of the Vedas. The king, after performing his devotions, approaches the place where the vessel is kept, accompanied by all the high priests, Brahmans of note and learning in Malabar, Tinnevely, Madura, Canara, &c.,

and gets into golden vessel by means of a beautifully lined ladder, expressly made for the purpose. When His Highness enters it, the cover is put on and he dips himself into the holy water five times, while all the assembled priests and Brahmans praying and chanting Vedic hymns. This ceremony lasts about ten minutes, after which the king comes out of the vessel by the same ladder and after going through certain other ceremonies prostrates himself before the image of Sree Padmanabha Swamy, when the high priest, who is the chief celebrant of the ceremonies, and who acts the part of a bishop, takes the crown and placing it on the king's head pronounces the title "Kulasekhara Perumal." The place then resounds with Vedic recitations, prayers and hymns from the learned Brahmans.²³

The successors of Mārtanḍavarmā II continued the practice of performing the *hiranyagarbha* rite for social elevation. Rāmavarmā III (reigned 1860-1880) performed this rite in 1871²⁴ and Rāmavarmā V (reigned 1885-1924) performed it in 1894²⁵.

In the pre-modern period, this rite was also performed by the Kachari king Kṛṣṇacandra (reigned 1780-1813) in 1790 in his capital, Khaspur (Cachar district, Assam). The Bengali brāhmaṇs from Sylhet, who migrated to his kingdom, performed this rite as an expiatory rite for him. A large hollow copper effigy of cow was made, which was covered with gold plates. The king and his ministers entered inside this effigy and came out of it for ritual rebirth. Subsequently, the gold plates were gifted to the priests and they accepted the king and his ministers as the *kṣatriyas*. At the end of this rite, food was served to the brāhmaṇs.²⁶

Chapter 5

The rites of great gift

The evolution of the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha* to a rite of great gift (*mahādāna*) will remain incomplete, if it is not viewed in the context of the evolution of the sixteen rites of *mahādāna* (literally, ‘great gift’). Each of these sixteen rites has its own significance, and probably originated from diverse ancient rites before their transformation.

Descriptions in the early texts

Most interestingly, the topic of *mahādāna* is not found in the *dharmasāstra* texts. The word ‘*mahādāna*’ is used in *Āśramvāsikaparva* 3.31 and 13.15 of the *Mahābhārata*, but without any narrative on the associated rituals. The early brief narratives of a number of rites of gift, some of which later became known as the *mahādāna* rites, are found in a late compilation of vedic rituals, the *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa*. Possibly, one or two of these rites of gift were already elevated as *mahādāna* rites when this compilation composed, as the *tulāpuruṣa* rite was eulogised as the most excellent *mahādāna* (*mahādānātīdāna*) rite in *Tulāpuruṣavidhiḥ* 2.3. However, ten rites of making gifts are explicitly mentioned as *mahādāna* in *Hastirathadānavidhiḥ* 1.8. This list comprises the rites of gift of gold, sesame seeds, a cow, a maid, a house, land, a chariot, a bride, an elephant and knowledge. The *Agnipurāṇa* 209.23cd-24ab list of ten *mahādāna* rites is almost similar. It comprises the rites of gift of gold, a horse, sesame seeds, an elephant, a maid, a chariot, land, a house, a bride and a tawny cow. This list is cited as of the *Kūrmapūrāṇa* in *Malamāsattva* (mid-16th century CE),¹ *Dānamayūkha* (c. 1625 CE)² and *Dānacandrikā* (mid-17th century)³ of Divākara. This percept of ten *mahādāna* rites, probably developed during the early centuries of the Common Era, when the precious stones were still not available for donation. In the Pasupubaru copper plate grant of the Eastern Cālukya ruler Viṣṇuvarhana III (reigned c. 718-752 CE) of Veṅgi, he was mentioned as the performer of ten *mahādāna* rites, beginning with the *tulādāna* (*tulādānadi daśavidha mahādāna*).⁴ It is evident from this inscription that the percept of ten *mahādāna* was still in vogue in the eighth century CE, even after the inclusion of the *tulāpuruṣa* rite as a *mahādāna*.

Hazra (1954) fixed the latest date of composition of the *Āgneyapurāṇa*, which later became known as the *Vahnipurāṇa*, as 500 CE.⁵ Some of the rites of gift, which later included in the lists of ten *mahādāna* rites in *Hastirathadānavidhiḥ* 1.8 and *Agnipurāṇa* 209.23cd-24ab, are described in this text – gift of knowledge (*vidyādāna*) in chapter 43, gift of a house (*grhadāna*) in chapter 44, gift of a maid (*dāsīdāna*) in chapter 45, gift of sesame seeds (*tilādāna*) in chapter 52 and gift of a bride (*kanyādāna*) in chapter 53. *Vahnipurāṇa* 42.1 eulogised the rite of gift of a palanquin (*śivikādāna*) as a *mahādāna*. Two rites of gift, which were included as sixteen *mahādāna* rites in the later *Purāṇas* are also described in this text – *tulāpuruṣa* in chapter 51 and *hiraṇyakāmadhenu* in chapter 63.

An early reference to the performance of *tulābhāra* (*tulāpuruṣa*) rite is also found in the *Cilappatikāram* (c. 450 CE) of Iḷaṅko Aṭiḷal. The *Cilappatikāram* (27.175-176) mentioned that the Cera king Śenguṭṭuvan made a gift of *tulābhāra* to a brāhmaṇ, Māḍalan on the banks of the Gaṅgā.⁶

From the 6th century CE onwards, in several *Purāṇas*, a new set of sixteen rites of gift were grouped together as the *mahādāna*, but these *Purāṇas* were never unanimous about the names and ritual procedures of these rites. The most well-known list of sixteen *mahādāna* rites is *Matsyapurāṇa* 274.6-10, which is followed by the elaborate narratives of these rites in the chapters 274-289. *Agnipurāṇa* 210.1-4 list is almost identical to the *Matsyapurāṇa* list and

probably copied from it, as this chapter is part of that section of the *Agnipurāṇa*, which according to Hazra (1940), was composed in the 9th century CE.⁷ However, no description of any of these rites is included in this text.

The names of these sixteen rites of great gifts as mentioned in the *Matsyapurāṇa*, *Agnipurāṇa* and the *Liṅgapurāṇa* are enumerated below in a tabular form:

Table 1: The sixteen rites of great gifts in the <i>Purāṇas</i>		
<i>Matsyapurāṇa</i>	<i>Agnipurāṇa</i>	<i>Liṅgapurāṇa</i>
<i>tulāpuruṣa</i> (man on a balance)	<i>tulāpuruṣa</i> (man on a balance)	<i>tulādhīrohaṇa</i> (ascending of a balance)
<i>hiranyagarbha</i> (golden womb)	<i>hiranyagarbha</i> (golden womb)	<i>hiranyagarbha</i> (golden womb)
<i>brahmāṇḍa</i> (cosmic egg)	<i>brahmāṇḍa</i> (cosmic egg)	<i>tilaparvata</i> (hillock of sesame)
<i>kalpapādapa</i> (boon granting tree)	<i>kalpavṛkṣa</i> (boon granting tree)	<i>sūkṣmaparvata</i> (subtle hillock)
<i>gosahasra</i> (one thousand cows)	<i>gosahasra</i> (one thousand cows)	<i>suvarṇamedinī</i> (golden earth)
<i>hiranyakāmadhenu</i> (golden boon granting cow)	<i>hiranyakāmadhenu</i> (golden boon granting cow)	<i>kalpapādapa</i> (boon granting tree)
<i>hiranyāśva</i> (golden horse)	<i>hiranyāśva</i> (golden horse)	<i>gaṇeśeśa</i> (Lord of Gaṇeśa)
<i>hiranyāśvaratha</i> (golden horse driven chariot)	<i>hiranyāśvaratha</i> (golden horse driven chariot)	<i>hemadhenu</i> (golden cow)
<i>hemahastiratha</i> (golden elephant driven cart)	<i>hemahastiratha</i> (golden elephant driven cart)	<i>lakṣmī</i> (goddess of wealth)
<i>pañcalāṅgalaka</i> (five ploughshare)	<i>pañcalāṅgalaka</i> (five ploughshare)	<i>tiladhenu</i> (sesame cow)
<i>dharā</i> (earth)	<i>dharā</i> (earth)	<i>gosahasra</i> (one thousand cows)
<i>viśvacakra</i> (disc of the universe)	<i>viśvacakra</i> (disc of the universe)	<i>hiranyāśva</i> (golden horse)
<i>kalpalatā</i> (boon granting creeper)	<i>kalpalatā</i> (boon granting creeper)	<i>kanyā</i> (bride)
<i>saptasāgara</i> (seven seas)	<i>saptasāgaraka</i> (seven seas)	<i>hiranyavṛṣa</i> (golden bull)
<i>ratnadhenu</i> (jewelled cow)	<i>ratnadhenu</i> (jewelled cow)	<i>gaja</i> ([golden] elephant)
<i>mahābhūtaghaṭa</i> (pot of the [five] elements)	<i>mahābhūtaghaṭa</i> (pot of the [five] elements)	<i>lokapālāṣṭaka</i> (eight guardian deities of the quarters)

The detailed and systematic accounts of the group of sixteen *mahādāna* rites are currently available in three *Purāṇas* – *Matsyapurāṇa*, *Liṅgapurāṇa* and *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa*.

The elaborate descriptions of the sixteen *mahādāna* rites in the chapters 274-289 of the *Matsyapurāṇa* are probably one of the early extant accounts of these rites. These narratives, as mentioned before, were composed in c. 550-650 CE. The *Matsyapurāṇa*, according to Hazra (1940), was composed in the upper Deccan, somewhere near the Narmada River.⁸ The epigraphical evidences also indicate the popularity of the *mahādāna* rites among rulers of the Deccan, within a short period of composition of this text. The rituals prescribed in the *Matsyapurāṇa* for the performance of *mahādāna* ceremonies received wide acceptance among the medieval *nibandha* authors also. These procedures are cited by Aparārka, Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara, Ballālasena, Hemādri, Rāmadatta, Mitramiśra and Bhaṭṭa Nīlakaṇṭha.

The *Liṅgapurāṇa* narrated the sixteen *mahādāna* rites in the chapters 28-43 of its *Uttarabhāga*. *Liṅgapurāṇa* II.28.14 mentioned that these rites are for the performance of the rulers only. Date of composition of these narratives, as mentioned earlier, probably lies between 800 CE and 1000 CE. The rituals prescribed in the *Liṅgapurāṇa* for the performance of *mahādāna* rites are cited by Hemādri. The sixteen rites described in these chapters are not identical with those described in the *Matsyapurāṇa*. In fact, some of the *mahādāna* rites described in the *Liṅgapurāṇa* belong to two earlier groups of *dāna* rites described in earlier *Purāṇas* – *dhenudāna*, comprising ten rites for gift of cow made of various staff

(*Matsyapurāṇa* 82.18-19) and *parvatadāna* (also known as *acaladāna* and *merudāna*), comprising ten rites for gift of hillocks of food and other staff (*Matsyapurāṇa* 83.4-6). The rite of *kanyādāna* is one of the ten *mahādāna* rites mentioned in the earlier texts.

Nath (2000) has made a comparative analysis of the rites of great gift described in the *Matsyapurāṇa* and the *Liṅgapurāṇa*:

Out of the sixteen *mahādānas* listed in the *Liṅga Purāṇa*, four appear in their original forms, namely *hiraṇyagarbha*, *hiraṇyāśva*, *gosahasra* and *kalpapādapa*. The popularity of these four great gifts is well attested by contemporary epigraphic records. This may also account for their remaining relatively untampered. Of the remaining twelve *mahādānas*, *tulāpuruṣa*, though at par with *hiraṇyagarbha* in popularity, is renamed *tulādhirohaṇa*; *dharādāna* appears as *suvarṇamedinī*; *viśvacakra* becomes *viśveśvara* and *hemahastiratha* has been recast as *hiraṇyagajadāna*. Another variant of *hiraṇyagajadāna*, which figures for the first time, is a *mahādāna* called *hiraṇyavr̥ṣa*. It seems to have replaced the *pañcalāṅgalaka mahādāna*. The author of the *Liṅga Purāṇa*, by substituting the *hiraṇyavr̥ṣa* for the *pañcalāṅgalaka*, was perhaps trying to retain the agrarian cast and spirit of this particular *mahādāna*. The concept of some *mahādānas*, such as *hemadhenu*, *tiladhenu*, *tilaparvata* and *sūkṣmaparvata* would seem to be based upon the various forms of *merudānas* and *dhenudānas* listed in the *Agni Purāṇa*. Amongst the more innovative forms of *mahādānas* introduced by the author of the *Liṅga Purāṇa* are *lakṣmīdhara*, *lokapāla* and *kanyādāna*.⁹

Most of the *mahādāna* rites described in the *Matsyapurāṇa* and *Liṅgapurāṇa* are included in the *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa*. Hazra (1963) fixed the date of compilation of this text as c. 700-800 CE and, according to him, it is highly probable that this text was composed towards the end of the 8th century CE.¹⁰ The descriptions of the *mahādāna* rites from the *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* are cited by Aparārka, but, Ballālasena stated in his *Dānasāgara* that he avoided the citations from this text, as he was not sure about its authenticity.¹¹ In the following table, the *mahādāna* related chapters of the *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* are compared with the similar chapters in the *Matsyapurāṇa* and *Liṅgapurāṇa*:

Table 2: The chapters on the great gifts in the <i>Purāṇas</i>					
<i>Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa</i>		<i>Matsyapurāṇa</i>		<i>Liṅgapurāṇa</i>	
Chapter	Topic	Chapter	Topic	Chapter	Topic
149	<i>kanyā</i>	-	-	II.40	<i>kanyā</i>
152	<i>tiladhenu</i>	-	-	II.37	<i>tiladhenu</i>
156	<i>kāñcanadhenu</i>	279	<i>hiraṇyakāmadhenu</i>	II.35	<i>hemadhenu</i>
157	<i>ratnadhenu</i>	288	<i>ratnadhenu</i>	-	-
159	<i>gosahasra</i>	278	<i>gosahasra</i>	II.38	<i>gosahasra</i>
165	<i>sauvarṇapṛthivī</i>	284	<i>dharā/ pṛthivī/ hemapṛthivī</i>	II.32	<i>suvarṇamedinī</i>
166	<i>halapaṅkti</i>	283	<i>pañcalāṅgalaka</i>	-	-
175	<i>tulāpuruṣa</i>	274	<i>tulāpuruṣa</i>	II.28	<i>tulādhirohaṇa/ tulāpuruṣa</i>
176	<i>hiraṇyagarbha</i>	275	<i>hiraṇyagarbha</i>	II.29	<i>hiraṇyagarbha</i>
177	<i>brahmāṇḍa</i>	276	<i>brahmāṇḍa</i>	-	-
178	<i>kalpavr̥kṣa</i>	277	<i>kalpapādapa</i>	II.33	<i>kalpapādapa</i>

179	<i>kalpalatā</i>	286	<i>kalpalatā/ mahākalpalatā/ kanakakalpalatā</i>	-	-
182	<i>saptasāgara</i>	287	<i>saptasāgara</i>	-	-
183	<i>mahābhūtaghaṭa</i>	289	<i>mahābhūtaghaṭa</i>	-	-
186	<i>hiranyāśva</i>	280	<i>hiranyāśva</i>	II.39	<i>hiranyāśva</i>
189	<i>Hemahastiratha</i>	282	<i>hemahastiratha</i>	-	-
190	<i>viśvacakra</i>	285	<i>viśvacakra</i>	-	-
199	<i>tilācala</i>	-	-	II.30	<i>tilaparvata</i>

Kāśīkhaṇḍa, *pūrvārdha* 10.25 of the *Skandapurāṇa* referred to the sixteen *mahādāna* rites, beginning with the *Tulāpuruṣa*, but without any further details. *Sṛṣṭīkhaṇḍa* 34.379-412 of the *Padmapurāṇa* narrated the rite of gift of *brahmāṇḍa*. *Uttarakhaṇḍa* 88.16-17 and 119.9 of this text mentioned about the gift of *tulāpuruṣa*. However, none of these two rites are identified as the *mahādāna* rites in this text. Some of the medieval *nibandha* texts cited from a lost *Purāṇa* text, *Ādityapurāṇa* on the rite of gift of *Gosahasra*.

Descriptions in the medieval texts

From the early 12th century, the late medieval *nibandha* texts on *smṛti* included the procedures for the performance of these sixteen rites for great gifts. The procedures prescribed in these texts are based on the narratives from the *purāṇas*.

Aparārka (early 12th century) is probably the earliest medieval author, who described these sixteen *mahādāna* rites as a part of his explanation on *Yājñavalkyadharmasāstra* I.208.¹² He narrated the procedures from the *Matsyapurāṇa* and added a few citations from the *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* in the narratives of *tulāpuruṣa*, *Brahmāṇḍa* and *kalpapādapa* rites.

The *Dānakāṇḍa*, a part of Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara's treatise *Kṛtyakalpataru* (c. 1110 CE), also known *Dānakalpataru*, is an almost contemporary *nibandha* text on the rituals for the gifts. Lakṣmīdhara narrated the detailed accounts of these sixteen *mahādāna* rites from the *Matsyapurāṇa*. The narratives from the *Matsyapurāṇa* were followed by a narrative from the *Padmapurāṇa* on the rite of *brahmāṇḍa mahādāna* and two narratives from the *Kālikāpurāṇa* and the *Ādityapurāṇa* on the rite of *gosahasra mahādāna*.

Dānasāgara (c. 1169 CE) of Ballālasena is the next significant text on the sixteen *mahādāna*. It also cited mostly from the *Matsyapurāṇa*. The ritual procedures prescribed in this text for different rites of *dāna* were followed by the Eastern Gaṅga rulers of the present day Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh; which is evident from the Nagarī copper plate inscription of Anaṅgabhīma III.¹³

Uttarabhāga 83.1 of the *Kāmikāgama*, a late 12th century *śaiva* āgamic text composed in the southern India stated that sixteen rites of gift would be narrated. However, in the following sections (83-97 *paṭalas*), only fifteen rites of gifts (*dāna*) are narrated. The names of these fifteen rites, their order and the procedures for their performances are similar to the *Liṅgapurāṇa*. The rites of gift described in this text are - *tulārohaṇa* (*paṭala* 83), *hiranyagarbha* (*paṭala* 84), *tilaparvata* (*paṭala* 85), *suvarṇabhūmi* (*paṭala* 86), *kalpapādapa* (*paṭala* 87), *gaṇeśa* (*paṭala* 88), *hemadhenu* (*paṭala* 89), *lakṣmī* (*paṭala* 90), *tiladhenu* (*paṭala* 91), *sahasra go* (*paṭala* 92), *hiranyāśva* (*paṭala* 93), *kanyā* (*paṭala* 94), *hiranyokṣa* (*paṭala* 95), *gaja* (*paṭala* 96) and *lokapālāṣṭaka* (*paṭala* 97).

The *Dānakhaṇḍa*, a part of Hemādri's treatise *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* (c. 1260-1270 CE) is an extensive work on this topic. Hemādri narrated the procedures for the sixteen *mahādāna* rites mostly from the *Matsyapurāṇa*. He cited from the *Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa* texts on the rites of

tulāpuruṣa, *hiraṇyagarbha*, *gosahasra* and *hiraṇyāśvaratha*. Among the other *Purāṇas*, he cited from the *Liṅgapurāṇa*, *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, *Garuḍapurāṇa* and *Skandapurāṇa* on *tulāpuruṣa*; the *Viṣṇudharmapurāṇa* and *Liṅgapurāṇa* on *hiraṇyagarbha*; the *Padmapurāṇa* on *Brahmāṇḍa*; the *Liṅgapurāṇa* on *kalpapādapa*; the *Liṅgapurāṇa*, *Skandapurāṇa* and *Ādityapurāṇa* on *gosahasra*; the *Liṅgapurāṇa* and *Vahnipurāṇa* on *hiraṇyakāmadhenu*; the *Liṅgapurāṇa* on *hiraṇyāśva*; the *Bhaviṣyottarapurāṇa* on *halapaṅkti* (*pañcalāṅgalaka*) and the *Liṅgapurāṇa* on *suvarṇamedinī* (*dharā*). He added the *dāna* rites of *jambudvīpa*, *saptadvīpa* and *pṛthivīpadma* from the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* and the rite of *pṛthivīdāna* from the *Padmapurāṇa* in his account on *dharā*.¹⁴

From the epigraphical sources, it is amply clear that, within a few decades, the ritual procedures for various *dāna* rites (including the *mahādāna* rites) prescribed in *Dānakhaṇḍa* of *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* became the standard in the whole of Deccan and southern India. The Porumamilla tank (Kadapa district, Andhra Pradesh) inscription (1369 CE) of a ruler Bhāskara Bhavadūra, brother of Vijayanagara ruler Harihara II, stated that he made gifts following the composition of this text (*hemādrikṛti*).¹⁵ An undated stone inscription of the Vijayanagara ruler Harihara II (reigned 1377-1404 CE) found near a temple in Gooty mandal (Anantapur district, Andhra Pradesh) mentioned that he followed the procedures mentioned in this text (*hemādriśāstra*) for making the gifts.¹⁶ The Vanapalli (East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh) copper plate inscription (1380 CE) of the Reḍḍi ruler of Koṇḍaviḍu, Anavema (reigned c. 1364-1386 CE) mentioned that his father Prolaya Vema (reigned c. 1325-1353 CE) and his elder brother Anavota (reigned c. 1353-1364 CE) bestowed the gifts described in this text (*hemādrīdāna*).¹⁷ Later, another Reḍḍi ruler, Peḍa Komati Vema (reigned c. 1402-1420 CE) was described in a copper plate inscription (1416 CE) found in Aminabada near Phirangipuram (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) as diligent in making gifts according to the procedures of this text (*hemādrīkalpoditadānadakṣa*).¹⁸

Several later *nibandha* texts on the *dāna* rites narrated the sixteen *mahādāna* rites, which include *Dānaratnākara* (early 13th century CE) of Caṇḍeśvara Ṭhākura, *Dānasāra*, a part *Nṛsiṃhprasāda* (early 16th century CE) treatise of Dalapati Mahārāja (it also narrated ancient ten *mahādāna* rites), *Dānaprakāśa*, a part of *Vīramitrodaya* (early 17th century CE) treatise of Mitramiśra and *Dānamayūkha* of Bhaṭṭa Nīlakaṇṭha (c. 1625 CE).

Dānapaddhati or *Ṣoḍaśamahādānapaddhati* (c. 1350 CE) of Caṇḍeśvara's cousin Rāmadatta is a dedicated work on the procedures for the performance of the rites of sixteen *mahādāna* only. This text prescribed the procedures for the rites described in the *Matsyapurāṇa*.¹⁹ *Mahādānapaddhati* or *Mahādānaprayogapaddhati* (c.1450 CE) of Rūpanārāyaṇa is another dedicated work on the procedures for the sixteen *mahādāna* rites. This text also followed the narratives of the *Matsyapurāṇa*.²⁰

The brief descriptions of the sixteen *mahādāna* rites in *Āin-i-Akbarī* (c. 1590 CE) of Abū al-Faẓl are probably based on the information supplied by his contemporary scholars on *smṛti*. The names of these rites mentioned here are almost identical with the *Matsyapurāṇa* – *tulā dāna*, *hiraṇyagarbha dāna*, *brahmāṇḍa dāna*, *kalpataru dāna*, *gosahasra dāna*, *hiraṇyakāmadhenu dāna*, *hiraṇyāśva dāna*, *hiraṇyāśvaratha dāna*, *hemahastiratha dāna*, *pañcalāṅgala dāna*, *dharā dāna*, *viśvacakra dāna*, *kalpalatā dāna*, *saptasāgara dāna*, *ratnadhenu dāna* and *mahābhūtaghaṭa dāna*.²¹

In the *Madhyamaparva* (1.17.7) of the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa*, composed in c. 15th century CE²², the name of the sacrificial fire for the *tulāpuruṣa dāna* rite is mentioned as *dhātāgni*, whereas, in its immediate previous verse (1.17.6), the sacrificial fire for the *mahādāna* rites is named as *havirbhujā*. It seems that, the composer of these verses was not aware of the status of the *tulāpuruṣa* as a *mahādāna*.

Divākara in his *Dānacandrikā* (mid-17th century CE) also narrated only two of the sixteen *mahādāna* rites – *tulāpuruṣa* and *gosahasra* in the beginning, but did not mention them as the *mahādāna*. Then, he moved to the narratives of the more ancient ten *mahādāna* rites and described the rites of great gift of gold, a horse, sesame seeds, an elephant, a maid, a chariot, land, a house, a bride and a tawny cow with the citations from a number of *Purāṇas*.

Historical records of performance

The *Purāṇas* associated the performance of the *mahādāna* rites with several ancient heroes. *Matsyapurāṇa* 274.11-12 stated that all of the sixteen *mahādāna* rites were performed by several ancient heroes and rulers, such as Vāsudeva, Ambarīṣa, Bhārgava, Kārtavīrya Arjuna, Prahlāda, Pṛthu and Bharata. *Uttarakhaṇḍa* 88.16-17 of the *Padmapurāṇa* mentioned the gift of *tulāpuruṣa* by Satyabhāmā, a wife of Kṛṣṇa. She, being instructed by sage Nārada, weighed Kṛṣṇa on a balance according to the injunctions and gifted the articles equal to his weight.

On the testimony of the epigraphic and literary records, it can be concluded that the *mahādāna* rites attained popularity among the rulers of South Asia **only** from the 7th-8th century of the Common Era, following the composition of the purāṇic narratives.

The Maṭṭepāḍ copper-plate grant of the Ānanda dynasty ruler Dāmodaravarman (c. 4th-5th century CE) mentioned that his father, most probably Attivarman, had performed the *gosahasra* and several *hiraṇyagarbha* rites.²³ However, these two rites were probably performed according to the procedures rendered in the *Atharvaveda pariśiṣṭa* texts, not as the *mahādāna* rites.

The Madurai (Tamil Nadu) inscription of the Pandya dynasty ruler Seliyan Śendan (reigned c. 645-670 CE), which has been mentioned earlier, recorded his performance of three *mahādāna* rites – *tulābhāra* (*tulāpuruṣa*), *gosahasra* and *hiraṇyagarbha*.²⁴ The Veḷvikuḍi (Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu) copper-plate grant of Parāntaka Neḍuñḍaiyan (reigned c. 765-815 CE) mentioned about the performances of the *mahādāna* rites by his ancestors. It recorded the performance of *hiraṇyagarbha* and *tulābhāra mahādāna* rites by Arikesari Māvarman (reigned c. 670-710 CE) and the performance of *gosahasra*, *hiraṇyagarbha* and *tulābhāra mahādāna* rites by Māvarman Rajasiṃha I (reigned c. 740-765 CE).²⁵

Five copper plate inscriptions of the Raṣṭrakūṭa ruler Indra III (reigned c. 914-929 CE) – two sets of Bagumrā (Surat district, Gujarat) copper plate inscriptions,²⁶ Jāmbgāon (Aurangabad district, Maharashtra) copper plate inscription²⁷ and two sets of Vajirkheḍā (Nashik district, Maharashtra) copper plate inscriptions,²⁸ dated 24th February, 915 CE, recorded his *tulāpuruṣa ārohaṇa* (literally, ‘ascending of the balance’) on this day, after the completion of his *paṭṭabandha* (literally, ‘binding the head with a turban’, coronation) ceremony at Kurūndaka (present-day Kurundwad in Kolhapur district, Maharashtra, on the banks of the Panchganga), on arrival from his capital Mānyakheṭa. The Andūrā (Akola district, Maharashtra) copper plate inscription (930 CE) of Govinda IV (reigned c. 930-935 CE) recorded the performance of his first *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* on the day of the summer solstice. It also recorded that on the same day, in the courtyard of the Govindeśvara temple, for the religious merit of his queen Bhāgiyambā, he performed *hiraṇyagarbha*, *gosahasra* and *kalpavṛkṣa mahādāna* rites and also donated *ubhayamukhī* (calving) cows.²⁹ Both the fragmentary Gaonri (Madhya Pradesh) copper plate inscription³⁰ and the Kalas (Dharwad district, Karnataka) stone inscription³¹ of Govinda IV, dated 17 January 930 CE, recorded his performance of his second *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna*, as well as several other donations made by him, on the occasion of a lunar eclipse on that day.

The Khājūrāho (Chhatarpur district, Madhya Pradesh) stone inscription (1002 CE) of the Candella ruler Dhaṅgadeva (reigned c. 950-1002 CE) mentioned his performance of the rite of *tulāpuruṣa*.³²

The Khairā (Shahdol district, Madhya Pradesh) copper plate inscription (c. 1076 CE)³³ and the Jabalpur (Jabalpur district, Madhya Pradesh) copper plate inscription (c. 1084 CE)³⁴ of the Kalacuri king Yaśaḥkarṇa (reigned c. 1070-1125 CE) described his performance of *tulāpuruṣa* and other *mahādāna* rites.

The Candrāvātī (Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh) copper plate inscription (1100 CE) of the Gāhaḍavāla king Candradeva (reigned c. 1089-1100 CE) recorded his performance of *tulāpuruṣa* and *gosahasra mahādāna* rites in front of the image of Ādikeśava.³⁵ The Benares (Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh) copper plate inscription (1124 CE) of Govindacandra (reigned c. 1114-1155 CE) mentioned the performance of *pañcalāṅgala mahādāna* rite by his mother Rālhaṇadevī.³⁶

The Barrackpur (North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal) copper plate inscription (c. 1157 CE) of the Sena king Vijayasena (reigned c. 1096-1157 CE) recorded his grant of a piece of land to a brāhmaṇ, Udayakaradevaśarmaṇaḥ, as the *dakṣiṇā* for the *homakarma* (offering oblations to sacrificial fire) during the performance of *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* rite by his queen Vilāsadevī, the mother of Ballālasena, on the occasion of a lunar eclipse.³⁷ The Naihāṭī (North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal) copper plate inscription (c. 1167 CE) of Ballālasena (reigned c. 1157-1178 CE) recorded the grant of a village as the *dakṣiṇā* to a brāhmaṇ, Ovāsudevaśarmaṇaḥ, the officiating priest of the performance of *hemāśva* (*hiraṇyāśva*) *mahādāna* rite by his mother Vilāsadevī on the occasion of a solar eclipse.³⁸ The Tarpandighi (Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal) copper plate inscription (1180 CE) of Lakṣmaṇasena (reigned c. 1178-1206 CE) mentioned about his grant of a village as the *dakṣiṇā* to a brāhmaṇ, Īsvaradevaśarmaṇaḥ, the officiating priest of his performance of *hemāśvaratha* (*hiraṇyāśvaratha*) *mahādāna* rite.³⁹

The Kolhāpur (Kolhapur district, Maharashtra) stone inscription (1182 CE) and the Kaśeli (Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra) copper plate grant (1191 CE) of the Śilāhāra king Bhoja II (reigned c. 1175-1212 CE) mentioned that his ancestor Gaṅḍarāditya (reigned c. 1108-1138 CE) performed sixteen *kratus* (sacrifices) beginning with the *tulāpuruṣa dāna*.⁴⁰ The Tālale (Kolhapur district, Maharashtra) copper-plates of Gaṅḍarāditya (1110 CE) recorded the performance of his ceremony of *pañcalāṅgala* on the occasion of a lunar eclipse.⁴¹

The Silimpur (Bogra district, Bangladesh) stone-slab inscription (undated) mentioned that Pāla dynasty ruler Jayapāla (reigned c. 1120-1138 CE) of the present-day Assam performed a *tulāpuruṣa dāna* rite and during its performance he offered nine hundred gold coins and a piece of land to a brāhmaṇ, Prahāsa, who refused to accept these gifts.⁴² Nārāyaṇa Upādhyāya in the introduction to his *Pariśiṣṭaparakāśa* mentioned about the performance of a *mahādāna* rite by the same ruler on the occasion of a *śrāddha* rite.⁴³

The Bhāṭerā (Maulabibazar district, Bangladesh) copper-plate inscription of Īśānadeva (c. 12th century CE), the ruler of the present-day Sylhet division of Bangladesh praised the *tulāpuruṣa dāna* by his father Govindakeśavadeva.⁴⁴

The Nagarī copper plate inscription of the Eastern Gaṅga king Anaṅgabhīma III (reigned c. 1211-1238 CE) praised him for the performances of *hiraṇyagarbha* and *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* rites.⁴⁵ The Asankhali (Mayurbhanj district, Odisha) copper plate inscription (1303 CE) of his descendant, Narasiṃha II (reigned c. 1278-1305 CE) mentioned the performance of *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* by his grandfather, Narasiṃha I (reigned c. 1238-1264 CE).⁴⁶ The Chāṭeśvara temple (Cuttack district, Odisha) stone-slab inscription mentioned that

Viṣṇu, a minister of Anaṅgabhīma III, performed the rite of *tulāpuruṣa* on the sea-shore near Puruṣottamakṣetra (Puri).⁴⁷

One of the introductory verses and the colophon of *Vivādaratnākara* of Caṅdeśvara Ṭhākura (early 13th century), who composed *Dānaratnākara*, informed that, he, as a minister of peace and war of the rulers of Mithilā, conquered Nepal and performed the rite of *tulāpuruṣa* on the banks of the Vāgvatī (Bāgmatī) in 1314 CE.⁴⁸

The epigraphical records of Anavema (reigned c. 1364-1386 CE), the Redḍi ruler of Koṅḍaviḍu, mentioned about his performances of the *mahādāna* rites of *brahmāṇḍa*, *kanakadharā* (*dharā*), *gosahasra*, and *kalpataru* (*kalpapādapa*).⁴⁹

The Kāleśvaram (Bhupalpally district, Telangana) pillar inscription (1397 CE) of the Vijayanagara prince Devarāya I (who later reigned 1406-1422 CE) recorded his performance of *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* at Mukteśvara temple in Kāleśvaram on the occasion of a ceremony to celebrate his conquests.⁵⁰ The Kāñcipuram (Kanchipuram district, Tamil Nadu) copper plate inscription (1521 CE)⁵¹ and Udayambakam (Kanchipuram district, Tamil Nadu) copper plate grant (1528 CE)⁵² of Vijayanagara ruler Kṛṣṇadevarāya (reigned 1509-1529 CE) and several other Vijayanagara inscriptions praising king Vīra Narasiṃharāya (reigned 1503-1509 CE) stated that he made gifts at various *tīrthas* and performed sixteen *mahādāna* rites – *brahmāṇḍa*, *viśvacakra*, *mahābhūtaghaṭa*, *ratnadhenu*, *saptāmbhodhi* (*saptasāgara*), *kalpakṣitiruha* (*kalpapādapa*), *kalpalatikā* (*kalpalatā*), *kāñcanīkāmadhenu* (*hiraṇyakāmadhenu*), *svaṛṇākṣmā* (*dharā* or *Suvarṇamedinī*), *hiraṇyāśvaratha*, *tulāpuruṣa*, *gosahasra*, *hemāśva* (*hiraṇyāśva*), *hemagarbha* (*hiraṇyagarbha*), *kanakakariratha* (*hemahastiratha*) and *pañcalāṅgali*. The Kaigonahalli (Mandya district, Karnataka) copper plate grant (erroneously dated 1462 CE) recorded his actual performance of *saptasāgara mahādāna* in the presence of Śiva in Śrīśailam.⁵³ The Amarāvati (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) stone inscription (1515 CE)⁵⁴ and Śrīśailam (Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh) stone inscription (1515 CE)⁵⁵ of Kṛṣṇadevarāya recorded his performance of *tulāpuruṣa* rite in the presence of the deity, Amareśvara in Amarāvati near Dharaṇikoṭa. The Śrīśailam inscription mentioned that his queens – Cinnādevī and Tirumaladevī also performed *ratnadhenu* and *saptasāgara mahādāna* rites respectively on this occasion. The Kāñcipuram stone inscription (1532 CE) of Vijayanagara ruler Acyutadevarāya (reigned 1529-1542 CE) recorded the performance of his *tulāpuruṣa*, *mahābhūtaghaṭa* and *gosahasra mahādāna* rites in the presence of Varadārāja along with his queen Varadādevī and prince Veṃkaṭādri.⁵⁶ His Kalahasti (Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh) stone inscription (1532 CE) mentioned about the several performances of *tulābhāra* rite of this ruler along with his same queen and prince in front of the deity, Hari in Kāñcipuram.⁵⁷

One of the Rajahmundry Museum copper plate inscriptions (c. 1416 CE) of the Eruva ruler Annadeva Coḍa mentioned his performance of *gosahasra* rite in the Vīrabhadra shrine in Paṭṭesaṃ village on the banks of the Godavari. This inscription also mentioned about his performance of the *saptasāgara* rite.⁵⁸

The Veḷanguḍi (Virudhunagar district, Tamil Nadu) copper-plate inscriptions (1598 CE) of the Vijayanagara ruler Veṃkaṭa I (reigned 1585-1614 CE) praised his vassal, the Nāyaka ruler of Mādurai, Vīrappa Nāyaka (reigned 1572-1595 CE) for his performances of the *mahādāna* rites of *hemāśva* (*hiraṇyāśva*), *hemagarbha* (*hiraṇyagarbha*), *tulāpuruṣa* with gold and jewels, *viśvacakra*, *brahmāṇḍa*, *gosahasra*, *kanakakariratha* (*hemahastiratha*), *kāñcanīkāmadhenu* (*hiraṇyakāmadhenu*), *saptāmbhodhi* (*saptasāgara*), *hiraṇyāśvaratha*, *mahābhūtaghaṭa*, *svaṛṇākṣmā* (*dharā* or *Suvarṇamedinī*) and *ratnadhenu*.⁵⁹ These inscriptions praised his successor Kṛṣṇappa Nāyaka II (reigned 1595-1601 CE) for his obligatory performance of the sixteen *mahādāna* rites. It also recorded his performance of the

rites of *tulāpuruṣa* and *hiraṇyagarbha* on the occasion of installation of a *maṇistambha* (pillar of jewels) in the Sundareśvara shrine in Mādurai.⁶⁰

Yajñanārāyaṇa Dīkṣita in his *Sāhityaratnākara* (XII.62-93) mentioned that the Nāyaka ruler of Tanjore, Raghunātha Nāyaka (reigned 1600-1634 CE) had performed several *mahādāna* rites on the day of his coronation, which included *tulāpuruṣa*, *hiraṇyagarbha* and *mahābhūtaghaṭa*. He performed *tulāpuruṣa* twice and distributed precious stones and jewels among the brāhman, even among those who were disabled. He made gifts of cows of gold. *Sāhityaratnākara* stated that his gifts even surpassed the presents prescribed by Hemādri in his *Dānakhaṇḍa*.⁶¹

The *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* IV.19 of Raṇachōḍa, inscribed on the stone-slabs fixed on the walls of a flight of steps at the banks of the Rajsamand Lake (Rajsamand district, Rajasthan) from 1676 CE onwards, mentioned that the ruler of Mewar, Uday Singh (reigned 1568-1572 CE) performed the rite of *tulā* (*tulāpuruṣa*) on the occasion of the consecration of the Udaisagar Lake.⁶²

The Jagannātharāya (Jagadīśa) temple, Udaipur (Udaipur district, Rajasthan) stone slab inscriptions (1652 CE) of the ruler of Mewar, Jagat Singh I (reigned 1628-1652 CE) recorded that he performed the rite of golden *tulādāna* (*tulāpuruṣa*) in the Oṃkāreśvara temple on the banks of the Narmadā on 22nd June, 1647 CE, on the occasion of a solar eclipse. He erected two *tulāstambhas* (pillars of the balance) to commemorate this occasion.⁶³ It also recorded that on 26th August, 1648, he performed the *mahādāna* rite of *kalpavr̥kṣa* (*kalpapādapa*) on the occasion of his birthday and on his successive birthdays in 1649 CE, 1650 CE, 1651 CE and 1652 CE, he performed the *mahādāna* rites of *kāñcanamedinī* (*dharā*), *saptasāgara*, *viśvacakra* and *ratnadhenu* respectively.⁶⁴ The performances of the *mahādāna* rites of *kalpavr̥kṣa*, *svaṇapṛthvī* (*dharā*), *saptasāgara* and *viśvacakra* on his four successive four birthdays are mentioned in *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* V.37-38 also.⁶⁵ The Jagannātharāya temple inscriptions recorded that on 13th May, 1652 CE, on the occasion of the installation of the image of Jagannātharāya in the temple, he performed *hiraṇyāśva*, *kalpalatā* and *gosahasra mahādāna* rites.⁶⁶ These performances are mentioned in *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* V.49 also.⁶⁷

One of the Jagannātharāya temple stone-slab inscriptions mentioned that Rāj Singh I (reigned 1652-1680 CE), son of Jagat Singh I, performed the rite of *tulā* (*tulāpuruṣa*) with gold and jewels at the Ekaliṅga temple soon after his ascending the throne in 1652 CE.⁶⁸ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* VI.32-36 mentioned that, Rāj Singh I performed the *mahādāna* rite of *brahmāṇḍa* at the Ekaliṅga temple in 1656.⁶⁹ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* VIII.44-45 mentioned that on 6th January, 1665 CE, on the occasion of a solar eclipse, he performed the rite of *hiraṇyakāmadhenu mahādāna*, costing about 2,000 Rupees.⁷⁰ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* X.5-9 mentioned that in 1670 CE, he performed two *mahādāna* rites of *mahābhūtaghaṭa* and *hiraṇyāśvaratha*. The *mahābhūta* pot was made of a hundred *pala* (= 38.8 gm) of gold and the cost of the *hiraṇyāśvaratha* was 1000 Rupees. Together, 11,670 Rupees was spent for these two rites.⁷¹ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* X.20-21 stated that in 1671 CE, he performed the rite of *hemahastiratha* on the occasion of his birthday. The golden elephant driven cart was made of 1,020 *tolā* (=11.66 gm) of gold.⁷² *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* X.33-36 mentioned that on 12th January, 1674 CE, on the occasion of a lunar eclipse, he performed two *mahādāna* rites of *kalpalatā* and *pañcalāṅgala*. The *kalpa* creeper was made of 250 *pala* of gold and the five ploughshares were made of 180 *tolā* of gold. Total expense for these rites of gift was 1028 *tolā* of gold.⁷³ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* XII.29-30 described that in 1674 CE, on a full moon day, he performed the rite of *svaṇamedinī*. The golden earth was made of 500 *pala* of gold, costing 28,000 Rupees.⁷⁴ *Rājaprasāsti Mahākāvya* XII.37-38 described that in 1675

CE, he performed the *mahādāna* rite of *viśvacakra* on the occasion of his birthday. The golden disc was made of 500 *pala* of gold.⁷⁵ *Rājaprasasti Mahākāvya* XVI.34 and XVII.9-33 narrated the details of his performances of *saptasāgara mahādāna* rite and golden *tulā* rite on 19th and 20th January, 1676 CE, on the occasion of the consecration of the Rajsamand Lake. Seven golden vessels, filled with salt, milk, clarified butter, molasses, yoghurt, clarified butter mixed with sugar and water were donated during the *saptasāgara mahādāna* rite. 12000 *tolā* of gold was donated during the *tulā* rite.⁷⁶ *Rājaprasasti Mahākāvya* XXI.26-27 described that in 1678 CE, he performed the *mahādāna* rites of *kalpadruma* (*kalpapādapa*) and *hiraṇyāśva* on the occasion of his birthday with 200 *tolā* and 80 *tolā* of gold respectively.⁷⁷

Shyamaldas (1886) mentioned that, the next ruler of Mewar, Jai Singh (reigned 1680-1698 CE) performed the rite of golden *tulā* on 2nd June, 1691 CE, on the occasion of the consecration of the Jaisamand Lake.⁷⁸

King Mārtandavarmā (reigned 1729-1758) of Travancore performed *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* in 1749 and *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* in 1751. In 1753, he performed the other fourteen *mahādāna* rites at the cost of about 121,000 Rupees.⁷⁹ His successor, Rāmavarmā II (reigned 1829-1846) performed the rites of *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* and *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* in 1829 and 1834 respectively.⁸⁰ Rāmavarmā III (reigned 1860-1880) performed *tulāpuruṣa mahādāna* on 14th January 1870 with total expense of about 1,60,000 Rupees.⁸¹

The *hiraṇyagarbha* as a rite of great gift

From the evidences of the literature and epigraphic records, the rites of *hiraṇyagarbha* and *tulāpuruṣa* were the most meritorious rites of great gift, which were even mentioned in their eulogies by the descendants of the rulers, who performed one or both of these two rites. However, throughout its history from the seventh century CE up to the end of the nineteenth century, the *hiraṇyagarbha mahādāna* stood apart from the other rites of great gift, as its principal purpose remained the social acceptance of the royal authority through a ritual for rebirth. This significance perhaps not explicitly mentioned in the eulogical verses in the inscriptions of the late medieval period, but never lost.

Chapter 6

Dynamics of the ritual gift systems in South Asia

A rational estimate of the impact of the social, political and economic changes on the transformation of the rite of *hiranyagarbha* from an expiatory rite to a rite of great gift is only possible in the context of their impact on the evolution of the ritual gift system in South Asia. In South Asia, two distinct ritual gift systems, *dakṣiṇā* and *dāna* co-existed for more than two millennia. However, due to the numerous changes in social, political and economic conditions during this long passage of time, their popularity and nature varied in a great extent. Nath (1983) has summarized the dynamics of the South Asian ritual gift system in the historical context:

Dāna, therefore, can scarcely be regarded a static or isolated institution. It was broad based and dynamic; it served social, economic, political and other needs. It was never a mere religious rite. While retaining certain broad characteristic features, it underwent continual variation in keeping with the rapid changes overtaking society and economy, which it affected in no small measure.¹

The *dakṣiṇā* as a ritual gift system was born with the vedic sacrifices, as it was an essential component of a sacrifice to achieve the religious merit. Heesterman (1959) identified *dakṣiṇā* as a sacrificial gift and not a salary or remuneration in the Western sense. The nature of the *dakṣiṇā* in the early centuries of the first millennium before the Common Era is visualised by him:

Rather than a salary, the *dakṣiṇā* is to be considered a gift; it should be given freely without bargaining (ŚB 9,5,2,16) ...like the gift in general, the *dakṣiṇā* establishes, or is expressive of, a bond between the giver and the recipient; and it produces rich returns for the giver.²

The continuance of the significance of *dakṣiṇā* as an essential component of a sacrifice even in the last centuries before the Common Era is reflected in *Bhagavadgītā* 17.13, which stated:

*vidhihīnamasṛṣṭānnaṃ mantrahīnamadakṣiṇam /
śraddhāviraḥitaṃ yajñam tāmasaṃ paricakṣate //*

Translation: A *yajña* (sacrifice), in which, no injunction is followed, no food is offered, no *mantra* is uttered, no *dakṣiṇā* is given [to the priest] and [which is] devoid of faith is declared as *tāmasa* (worst).

The *dāna* as a gift system is probably as ancient as the *Ṛgveda*, but probably it was not developed as a ritual gift system almost till the end of the Mauryan period. The earliest reference to a ritual element for *dāna* is found in a late vedic ritual text, *Āpastambadharmasūtra* II.4.9.8, which stated:

sarvāṇyudakapūrvāni dānāni //

Translation: One should always [pour] water [on the hand of the donee] before making a gift.

Olivelle (2000) placed the upper limit of the composition of the *Āpastambadharmasūtra* at early 3rd century BCE.³ A passage in *Gautamadharmasūtra* 5.18-19, another vedic ritual text, whose upper limit is placed by Olivelle (2000) at the mid-3rd century BCE,⁴ added another element of making the donee wish the donor well (*svastivācana*) to the ritual of *dāna*:

svastivācya bhikṣādānamappūrvam / dadātiṣu caivaṃ dharmyeṣu //

Translation: One should give the alms after [the donee] is made to wish him well and after [pouring] water [on the hand of the donee]. The same is [applicable] for other righteous gifts.

Decline of popularity of *dakṣiṇā* in the post-Mauryan Period

The social status of the donor and the donee in the two gift systems of *dakṣiṇā* and *dāna* remained significantly different since a very early period. The *dakṣiṇā* to the officiating priests after the performance of a vedic rite, solemn or domestic, could be offered only by the host of the sacrifice, known as the *yajamāna* (literally, ‘the sacrificer’). Hence, the donors were limited to the males of the ‘twice-born’ social groups, who were only entitled to host a vedic sacrificial rite. Only a priest (or a group of priests), who is (are) eligible to perform such vedic rites, could be a donee to receive the *dakṣiṇā*. In contrast, in case of *dāna* gift system, at least till the last centuries before the Common Era, anybody could be a donee or donor, irrespective of the social class and gender. This difference was one of the principal social factors for the reversal of popularity of the ritual gift systems of *dakṣiṇā* and *dāna* among the most of the social groups in the post-Mauryan South Asia. In fact, the *dāna* was the only ritual gift system for the adherents of the Buddhism and Jainism in this period.

Due to various economic and social transformations, the popularity of the vedic sacrifices started declining in the post-Mauryan South Asia. As *dāna* began to emerge as a ritual gift system during this period, *Mānavadharmasāstra* I.86 (repeated in *Śāntiparva* 231.28 of the *Mahābhārata* and *Parāśarasmṛti* I.23) claimed that, while, the *yajña* (vedic sacrifice) was meritorious in the earlier mythical era, *Dvāpara*, the act of *dāna* (making gifts) is only meritorious in the current mythical era, *Kali*:

*tapaḥ param kṛtayuge tretāyāṃ jñānamucyate /
dvāpare yajñamevāhurdānamekaṃ kalau yuge //*

Translation: It is stated that the *tapaḥ* (austerity) is supreme in the *Kṛtayuga*, knowledge in the *Tretāyuga*, *yajña* (sacrifice) in the *Dvāparayuga* and *dāna* (gift) alone in the *Kaliyuga*.

Within a short period, *dāna* was transformed into a rite for religious merit (*dānadharma*) and only the brāhmaṇs were made suitable as donee. However, unlike the vedic sacrifices, objects of gift could be given to any brāhmaṇ irrespective of their involvement in the performance and the *dakṣiṇā* for performing the *dāna* rite could be given to almost any brāhmaṇ, as anybody could perform such rites.

The rise in popularity of *dāna* and *mahādāna*

From the post-Mauryan period upto the early medieval period, the social class of the ruling dynasties in the Lower Deccan and Far South remained quite different from the northern India and Upper Deccan. Two major post-Mauryan dynasties in northern India, the Śuṅgas and Kāṇvas were brāhmaṇs. The Gupta rulers were also probably brāhmaṇs. The rulers of the small kingdoms in northern India, which became independent after the decline of the Maurya Empire, were either brāhmaṇs or kṣatriyas. The Mitra rulers of Kauśāmbi were either brāhmaṇ or kṣatriya, as they performed the vedic solemn rites. The rulers of Ayodhyā were brāhmaṇs. The early rulers of the Deccan, Sātavāhanas were brāhmaṇs. Even the later rulers of the Upper Deccan, Vākātakas were also brāhmaṇs. Hence, whenever required, they hosted a vedic solemn rite like *āsvamedha*, *rājasūya* or even *vājapeya* to establish their royal authority and in some cases, they made gifts as the *dakṣiṇā* for this rite. However, the local brāhmaṇs could not associate the lineage of most of the rulers of the post-Sātavāhana Lower Deccan and Far South, who belonged to the marginal social groups, with any ‘twice-born’ clans of ancient India documented in any *śāstra* (normative text). Hence, it was almost

impossible for these rulers to perform a vedic solemn rite to obtain their royal authority equal to a 'twice-born' ruler. Due to this peculiar social condition, the *dāna* rites, or more specifically *mahādāna* rites, which were mostly performed according to the rules of the *Purāṇas*, became the only possible means to achieve their royal authority. This is the most significant reason for the rise of *dāna* (including *mahādāna*) as the principal ritual gift system in this region for the royal donors. Aiyangar (1941) identified the reason of the growth of the importance of the *dāna* rites as:⁵

The importance of *Dāna* grew with the rise of non-Kṣatriya dynasties, and the increasing opulence of devout Śūdras, to whom the way of *yāga* was not open.

The impact of the economic transformations in ancient South Asia immediately before the early medieval period on the rise of the new sub-genre of the ritual gift system for the royal donors, known as *mahādāna* also cannot be ignored. In peninsular India, increase in trade and commerce and extension and growth of agrarian economy in the early centuries of the Common Era resulted in a change of the objects of the royal donations. This change of the objects of gift was noticed by Thapar (1978). She has summarized the nature of this change:

With the granting of land other gifts assumed lesser importance with the exception, of course, of gold which retained its economic value. A special category of gifts was evolved based on gold and referred to as the *mahādānas*. These were made on very special occasions such as can hardly be listed in the normal course of gift-giving. Among the more commonly referred to *mahādānas* were the Tulapurūṣa (weighing a man against gold) and the Hiranyagarbha (the symbolic rebirth through a golden womb often performed during coronations). It is significant that this latter ceremony is particularly associated with those who were claiming *kṣatriya* status. Usually sixteen objects are listed among the *mahādānas* including trees, cows, horses, chariots, vessels, all made of gold, and such objects were gifted to the priests on the conclusion of the ceremony. A golden cow studded with the precious stones was a long way away from the ten thousand head of cattle which the Ṛgvedic priests acclaimed as a gift. The *mahādānas* are clearly of another category and another time.⁶

The *dāna* and *mahādāna* in the early medieval period

The complete transformation of *dāna* and *mahādāna* as the rites for religious merit possibly took place only in the 7th or 8th centuries of the Common Era. Actually, as mentioned before, this transformation commenced in the post-Mauryan period with the decline of the popularity of the vedic sacrificial rites, both solemn and domestic, including the sanctifying life-cycle rites and the rise in popularity of the purāṇic and tāntric (or āgamic) rites. In northern India, most of the vedic solemn rites and majority of vedic domestic rites became obsolete before the arrival of the early medieval period and most of the brāhmaṇs engaged in the priesthood were no more conversant with the ancient vedic rites. A few isolated *śrotriya* brāhmaṇ social groups, who were still conversant with the performance of the vedic rites, migrated to the Deccan and the Far South, as there were hardly any wealthy *yajamāna* (host) available for them in northern India. Pathak (1959) was surprised by the absence of epigraphic records for the performance of vedic solemn rites like *aśvamedha* and *rājasūya* in the early medieval northern India:

These congregational sacrifices particularly which partook of royal characteristics such as *Aśvamedha*, *Rājasūya* etc. were little heard of during early medieval period in Northern India. Is it not strange that sacrifices which were performed just before this period and even during this period in south, were not at all celebrated here after the seventh century A.D.?⁷

However, even in the Deccan and the Far South, only a few isolated instances of the performance of the royal solemn vedic rites are recorded during this period. Several late purāṇic texts prohibited the performance of both *aśvamedha* and *rājasūya* in the *Kaliyuga*. The *dakṣiṇā* gift system during this period was integrated with the fast expanding purāṇic and tantric rites.

By the beginning of the early medieval period in South Asia, possibly due to the receiving land grants and holding administrative posts, a large section of the brāhmaṇs became the owners of the lands of various sizes and yields. Many brāhmaṇs were also involved in usury. The *dakṣiṇā* was no more a means for sustenance for these landholder and moneylender brāhmaṇs. It remained the means of sustenance for only the rural brāhmaṇs, who were part of the ‘*jajmani*’ gift exchange system. This has caused the final replacement of the *dakṣiṇā* by *dāna* as the dominant ritual gift system. Soon, *dakṣiṇā* was included as a component of the *dāna* rituals.

In the early medieval period, Hindu theological position was that the performance of the *dāna* rites destroys the sins of the donor, irrespective of the social class or gender. *Matsyapurāṇa* 274.4 stated that the performance of a *mahādāna* rite destroys all sins of a donor. In the earlier periods, the religious purity of body could be achieved only by performing one or more expiatory rites and those rites were also mostly restricted only to the members of the three elite social classes. In the early medieval period, *dāna* as a ritual gift system, gave the opportunity to a larger strata of the South Asian society beyond the members of the ‘twice-born’ social classes to earn respect as pious, irrespective of their social background. This point was explicitly clarified by several *dharmasāstra* texts (*Atrisamhitā* 46, nearly identical to *Likhitasmṛti* 6 and *Jātūkarnya*, cited by Aparārka):

*iṣṭāpūrtau dvijātīnāṃ sāmānyau dharmasādhanau /
adhikārī bhavecchūdraḥ pūrte dharme na vaidike //*

Translation: The *iṣṭa* (vedic sacrifices) and *pūrta* (acts of charity) are the common *dharma* (obligatory duties) for the ‘twice-born’ social classes. The śūdras are eligible for the *dharma* of *pūrta* (acts of charity), not for the vedic rites.

In the early medieval period, the donors of the *mahādānas*, from the evidences of the copper-plate and stone inscriptions, were restricted to the members of the royal families and some of their ministers. From these epigraphic records, the objects of gift can be identified as gold and in some cases, precious stones, in addition to the piece of land, for which the records were made. However, while the beneficiaries are mentioned in these grants, the identification of the suppliers of the wealth, which was distributed through the *mahādānas* is not very clear.

The *dāna* and *mahādāna* since the late medieval period

Composition of a large number of *nibandha* texts on the *dāna* rites in the late medieval period signifies the importance of the *dāna* rituals in the Hindu religious life during this period. Aiyangar (1941) in his introduction to the *Dānakāṇḍa* of *Kṛtyakalpataru* enumerated fifty-eight late medieval and pre-modern *nibandha* texts on the *dāna* rites.⁸ As more and more rulers from the marginal social groups in the farthest corners of South Asia, like Malabar and Barak Valley started seeking social acceptance for their authority, the *mahādāna* rites, especially *Hiraṇyagarbha* became more significant. However, at the same time, in Bengal, where the Islamic rulers were in power for several centuries, the rites for great gifts lost popularity. Govindānanda (early 16th century CE) in his *Dānakriyākaumudī* stated that, the sixteen *mahādāna* rites beginning with *tulāpuruṣa* and ten *acaladāna* (gift of the mounds of grains) rites described in the *Matsyapurāṇa* has been left out of his text as these rites cannot be accomplished by anybody except the emperors. He advised to refer to the specialized *paddhati* (procedure) texts for *mahādāna* rites for their performance.⁹

The dynamics of the *hiraṇyagarbha* rite

The theological percept of the rite of *hiraṇyagarbha* transformed continuously throughout its journey in time, without any change in its core elements, to align itself with the contemporary theological percept on purity as well as religious merit. With the rise in the religious merit of the *mahādāna* rites in the early medieval period, it shed its mould of a vedic sacrifice and became a purāṇic rite for great gift within one or two centuries. However, the principal beneficiary of this great gift was always the preceptor or teacher of the ruler.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Fleet 1880: 102
2. Hultzsich 1923a: 329
3. Panchamukhi 1956: 8
4. Sircar 1939: 51
5. Hultzsich 1923b: 336
6. Subba Rao 1931: 20
7. *Kṛtyakalpataru, Brahmācārikāṇḍa*: 77
8. *Kṛtyakalpataru, Brahmācārikāṇḍa*: 78
9. Eliade 1958: 56-57
10. Velu Pillai 1940: 571

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1. Caland 1929: xv-xvi
2. Caland 1929: xvi
3. *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra*: 91
4. *Pārameśvarasamhitā*: 263-264
5. *Pādmasamhitā, Caryāpāda*: 257-263
6. *Pāramasamhitā*: 113-117

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1. *Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa*: 90-95
2. Modak 1993: 471, 473
3. *Caturvargacintāmaṇi, Dānakhaṇḍa*: 182, 255, 282

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1. *Caturvargacintāmaṇi, Dānakhaṇḍa*: 225-227
2. Hazra 1940: 45, 176
3. Hazra 1940: 180
4. *Kāmikāgama*: 1020-1022
5. Raman 1972: 5
6. Krishna Sastri 1923: 301
7. Bhandarkar 1926: 238
8. Bühler 1883: 89
9. Rao 1979: 20
10. Inden 2000: 246-247
11. Sircar 1958: 253
12. Sircar 1958: 257
13. Vriddhagirisan 1942: 107
14. Sathianathaier 1956: 81
15. Sathianathaier 1924: 358
16. Sathianathaier 1924: 367, 369
17. Menon 1878: 170
18. Velu Pillai 1940: 571

19. Galletti 1911: 110
20. Velu Pillai 1940: 571
21. Velu Pillai 1940: 571
22. Mateer 1871: 170-172
23. Menon 1878: 56-57
24. Velu Pillai 1940: 571
25. Galletti 1911: 110n
26. Guha 1921: 137-138

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1. *Malamāsatattva*: 484
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3. *Dānacandrikā*: 14
4. Sarma 1948: 333-334
5. Hazra 1954: 79
6. Mahalingam 1955: 26-27
7. Hazra 1940: 185
8. Hazra 1940: 52
9. Nath 2000: 412-413
10. Hazra 1963: 395
11. *Dānasāgara*: 7
12. Aparārka: 313-344
13. Sircar 1958: 256, 257
14. *Caturvargacintāmaṇi, Dānakhaṇḍa*: 166-345
15. Sukhtankar 1918: 102
16. Shama Sastry 1941: 435
17. Hultzsich 1895: 61
18. Ramyya 1912: 325
19. Eggeling 1887: 549
20. Eggeling 1887: 550
21. Jarrett 1948: 305-307
22. Hazra 1940: 169n
23. Sircar 1939: 60
24. Krishnan 1970: 30
25. Krishna Sastri 1923: 301
26. Bhandarkar 1908: 33, 37
27. Mirashi 1970a: 237
28. Kolte 1970: 19, 20n2
29. Mirashi 1970b: 271
30. Dikshit 1940: 107
31. Barnett 1916: 330-331
32. Kielhorn 1892: 146
33. Mirashi 1955a: 294
34. Mirashi 1955b: 304
35. Sahni 1918: 197

36. Niyogi 1959: 249-250
37. Majumdar 1929: 63
38. Majumdar 1929: 74
39. Banerji 1914: 10
40. Mirashi 1977: 260, 270
41. Mirashi 1977: 211
42. Basak 1916: 292
43. *Karmapradīpa*: 2
44. Chaudhuri 1910: Dvitiya 30
45. Sircar 1958: 255
46. Sircar 1960: 123
47. Chhabra 1957: 127-128
48. Kane 1930: 370
49. Sarma 1948: 334
50. Venkataramanayya 1970: 202
51. Venkateswara Ayyar 1918: 171-172
52. Venkateswara Ayyar 1916: 128
53. Gopal 1977: 465
54. Lüders 1903: 21
55. Narasimhaswami 1972: 62-63 (Telugu version); Shama Sastry 1941: 514-515 (Kannada version)
56. Narasimhaswami 1972: 11-113 (Telugu version); Shama Sastry 1941: 565-566 (Kannada version)
57. Shama Sastry 1941: 568
58. Venkataramanayya 1952: 46
59. Gopinatha Rao 1922: 315
60. Gopinatha Rao 1922: 316
61. Vriddhagirisan 1942: 107
62. Chakravarti and Chhabra 1957: Appendix 17
63. Vyas 1942: 74
64. Vyas 1942: 76-77
65. Chakravarti and Chhabra 1957: Appendix 21
66. Vyas 1942: 79-80
67. Chakravarti and Chhabra 1957: Appendix 22
68. Vyas 1942: 83
69. Chakravarti and Chhabra 1957: Appendix 24-25
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Jayanta Bhattacharya (born 25th November, 1963) is a graduate in Mechanical Engineering. His ardent love for the cultural anthropology of South Asia, especially the history of evolution of the rites and rituals celebrated by the people living in this vibrant region is reflected in his first two works, *Hindu Rites of Passage: A Historical Overview* (2015) and *The Karmapradipa of Katyayana* (2015), both published as the e-books.

In this current work, *The Rite of the Golden Womb*, evolution of a unique rite for social acceptance has been detailed in the social, economic and political context, with the help of literary and epigraphical sources. This work has tried to focus on the nature of social acceptance of the royal authority in the ancient and medieval South Asia through the prism of this unique rite, known as the rite of the golden womb - *Hiranyagarbha*.

The valuable research have been made on the gift system in ancient, medieval and modern South Asia and their evolution with the changes in social and economic changes by the modern scholars like J.C. Heesterman, Ronald B. Inden, Vijay Nath, Annette Schmiedchen, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, Maria Heim and others. Some of the rites of the great gifts have been studied in details, adding the data from the epigraphic records. This study has taken help of these studies to explain the place of this rite in the South Asian gift economy.

This work is intended to follow the passage of the rite of the golden womb through the time. It has aimed for a historical overview of this unique rite, which remained as an expiatory rite in its core, metamorphosed by the puranic ritualists as a rite of great gift and performed by the rulers from the marginal social groups in different regions of South Asia almost up to the modern period as a rite for their acceptance in the Brahmanical social order.

The author welcomes criticisms and suggestions from the readers to improve this study. He can be reached via email at jbhattacharya1963@gmail.com.