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Unworthy Recipients and the Mercy of God *Dāna* as *bhakti* in the Sant Hagiographies of Anantadās*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the ideology of gift in the Sant hagiographies (*paracaī*) of Anantadās (16th/17th century). It is assumed that understanding author's implicit view of gift giving (*dāna*) is fundamental to unraveling the meaning of certain episodes of the *paracaīs*. These involve curious cases such as that of Kabīr abandoning his *dāna*-related duties or those of various Sants, for example, Pīpā, offering gifts to the brahmins (who are, nevertheless, depicted mainly as enemies of the *bhaktis*). The approach of Anantadās to *dāna* seems to differ significantly from the ideas expounded by the medieval Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Jain sources as it transcends the notion of the gift as being motivated by the socioreligious status of the recipient. It also proves the existence of a certain God-*bhakt* reciprocity. As such, *dāna* works on a soteriological level, as a devotional act aimed at creating a relationship with Hari, and on a proselytic level as a tool for expanding the religious community.

KEYWORDS: Sant, hagiography, gift, Kabīr, Anantadās, *dāna*, *paracaī*, *bhakti*

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Introduction: The ideology of *dāna*

The role of generosity, gift giving, and the relationship between donor and benefactor is of paramount importance in vernacular early Hindi texts originating from religious communities within the Sant tradition. The cycle of Anantadās's hagiographies (*paracāī*) (c. 1580–1610¹) of famous Sant figures is no exception.² Throughout the text, we find numerous episodes that express high praise for the Sant's acts of gift giving (*dāna*) and unparalleled, sometimes even excessive, generosity. It remains clear that *dāna* is a factor that defines relationships between individuals within the Sant bhakti milieu, but it is also instrumental in fashioning relations with people beyond this community, especially those traditionally considered as worthy receivers of gifts, the brahmins. The significant role of *dāna* in the regulation of interpersonal relationships as well as in the influence it has on the bond between man and God, together with the importance of generosity *per se* in defining the ideal image of a Sant in the work of Anantadās, prompts us to pose questions about the most vital functions of a gift. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the knowledge of the gift emerging from the *paracāī* cycle with the classic (Brahmanic, Buddhist, and Jain) theories (ancient and medieval) of *dāna* allows for a limited critique of the said theories, especially pertaining to the notions of reciprocity and selflessness, as well as to the characteristic of the recipient as necessarily endowed with certain religious esteem and authority.

My departure point is obviously the hermeneutics of the text, and so the inspiration for writing this article came directly not from any of the *dāna* theories themselves, but from the need to unpack the meaning(s) of the particular narratives in focus. Firstly, there is the case of three similar episodes of the *Kabīr-paracāī* (KP). In all of them, the weaver-poet is seemingly faced with the inability to fulfil

¹ Cf. Burchett (2019: 125). Anantadās himself dates the *paracāī* of Nāmdev to 1588 (Callewaert 2000: 48).

² When quoting from the *paracāīs*, I refer to the editions of the manuscripts in Callewaert (2000), except for the *Kabīr-paracāī* which follows Lorenzen (1992).

his obligations as a benefactor and, apparently unable to find a solution, flees the scene and goes into hiding. This behavior is very perplexing, as it remains in stark contrast to Kabīr's usual bold and uncompromising demeanor witnessed in the very same work. Secondly, there are numerous episodes in all of the hagiographies (especially in the *Pīpā-paracāī*—henceforth PP) that depict brahmins as frequent recipients of gifts presented to them by or on behalf of the Sants. It would even seem that at times Anantadās is comfortable with the traditional brahmin-oriented *dāna* theory. This, of course, calls for an elucidation as most of the time the author does follow a pattern of depicting brahmins as inimical to the Sants and voices a fair amount of stinging critique towards them.

In short, this article aims at inquiring into the ideology of the gift in the early modern hagiographies of famous Sants, taking into special consideration, first, the main types and functions of the gift, and second, the notions of reciprocity and authority of the recipient. This, I hope, will allow for the elucidation of certain ambiguous narrative episodes and *topoi* in the text itself. To extract a coherent discourse on *dāna* (Skt.) from the early Hindi narrative by Anantadās, we need to establish a proper context by briefly focusing on the notions of reciprocity and gift recipient status in selected theories. As it turns out, these theories—one set derived from western anthropology and the other, from ancient and medieval Buddhist, Jain, and *dharmaśāstric* sources—carry contrasting ideas about the notions at the heart of the *paracāī* narratives on gift giving.

General theories of gift

According to the well-established theory of gift in western academia, the notion of reciprocity is central to the discussion of gift giving. Marcel Mauss, in his seminal *Essai sur le don* (1924), shows that “common wisdom is mistaken in assuming gifts to be free, disinterested, and voluntary,” because they are never without self-interest, and always involve an “expectation of compensation” (Pyyhtinen

2014: 16). According to Mauss, gift giving is characteristic of pre-market economy societies where it serves the main purpose of the exchange of goods. The gift economy promotes the redistribution of communal wealth (e.g., to the religious specialists and/or to the poor) and fosters mutual aid. As it has a strong moral foundation, the gift in some “archaic societies” fosters long-term human relationships, thus supporting social interconnectedness and solidarity. On the contrary, in more advanced societies, one-time money- and moneyless transactions (barter and trade) tend to produce rather opposite social effects (Whitaker 2017: 10–11, 39–41).³ The views of Mauss on gift and its reciprocity have been subjected to substantial critiques by researchers calling for a more serious treatment of the gift as more autonomous (“pure gift”) and not necessarily bound by mutualism and exchange (Pyyhtinen 2014: 22–24, 148). However, to bring out distinct characteristics of the Indian theories through a negative comparison, we shall treat the classic Maussian view as a point of departure. This allows for a clearer view of the subject matter in the available Indian sources. There, we observe that the concept of *dāna* underwent an evolution from the ancient to the medieval period. However, its core features were largely retained in the early modern era, i.e., in the times of Anantadās. The relation of these patterns of gift giving to those found in western anthropology is complex, but its dominant features, which are of special interest for our purposes, are easily recognized as challenging ideas sketched above.

Apart from the Vedic scriptures (*R̥gveda*, *Atharvaveda*), the pre-medieval Indian literature dealing with *dāna* is represented by

³ Reciprocity has been a prominent point in the discussion of gift giving in western anthropology and sociology, so much so that the principle of reciprocity, apparently deeply embedded in the western rationalized view of the free market economy, became “something of a *cliché*” (Yan 2020). Mauss’s views on this matter have been commented on, expanded, and critiqued by Raymond Firth, Marshal Sahlins, Jonathan Parry, Jean-Luc Marion, Anette Weiner, Pierre Bourdieu, Maurice Godelier, and Jacques Derrida, to name a few (Yan 2020, Whitaker 2017: 68–72).

the *dhārmaśāstras*, the *pūraṇas*,⁴ the *Mahābhārata*, as well as by diverse Buddhist and Jain canonical texts. In Vedic sources, *dāna* (and other Vedic terms synonymous with it, such as *tuṃjhati* and *maṃhati*) could be seen both as a ritual offering and as a means to distribute wealth among the community (Nath 1987: 82). Later, during the era of heterodox *śramaṇas*, *dāna* acquired the sense of charity exemplified by giving alms to mendicant ascetics, especially, monks, as testified in the Pāli literature. Around the beginning of the first millennium *dāna* was understood by the *dharmasāstras* as ritualized almsgiving practiced first by householders towards worthy religious specialists and, to a lesser extent, also to the poor and needy. For *Manusmṛti* *dāna* is one of the fundamentals of the moral and legal *dharma* and is treated as a duty of twice-born householders (4.227), an obligation allowing them to pay off the fourfold debt (*ṛṇa*) to gods, sages, ancestors, and all living beings. The duty of the brahmins is to accept gifts (10.75). Moreover, this *śāstra* diligently lists elements constitutive of a proper *dāna* (giver, recipient, *śraddhā*,⁵ the gift itself, the right place, and time), ranks brahmins as best among recipients (7.85), warns about donors whose gifts are not to be accepted (śūdras, musicians, prostitutes, etc.), and, finally, gives numerous examples of material and immaterial gains that can be obtained through gifting (Nath 1988: 13–18, 21, 37; Einicke 2018: 193, 199, 204, 217).

From the many notions connecting the above sources with the next phase of literature on *dāna*, the most crucial for our purpose is the question of reciprocity. However, we should also mention that in both ancient and medieval Buddhist, Jain, and *dharmasāstric* scriptures,⁶ Indian theorists see *dāna* as unilateral and asymmetric.⁷ As

⁴ Major examples: *Manusmṛti* (*Mānavadharmasāstra*) (1st–3rd century CE), *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (3rd–5th century CE), *Viṣṇusmṛti* (*Vaiṣṇavadharmasāstra*) (c. 8th–10th century CE), *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* (5th–6th century CE), *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (8th–10th century CE) (cf. Einicke 2018: 193–196).

⁵ Translated as ‘generosity’ by Einicke (2018: 198).

⁶ Examples of the *dāna* treatises from this period encompass, for example, *Kṛtyakalpataru*, a Brahmanic *nibandha* (compendium) on *dharma* (with the 5th

dāna is mainly directed at recipients of exceptional moral and social status, it does not support interdependence and solidarity. The gift is expected to be disinterested, and the receiver is not bound to reciprocate. However, the donor is not left unrewarded, but the reward lies beyond mutual human relations and takes the form of a spiritual merit brought about by the mechanism of karma. *Dāna* may be motivated by various intentions, although the given object *must* be obtained by legitimate means.⁸ Gifting can bring all kinds of desirable this-worldly gains,⁹ but a gift of the highest caliber—offered without the desire of reward to a worthy recipient—can even bestow liberation.¹⁰ The figure of the beneficiary is of the utmost importance. A perfect recipient is often seen by the medieval sources as a representative of the religious elite: a brahmin, a monk, or a nun. He or she must be endowed with spiritual authority and should necessarily evoke ‘trust’ or ‘esteem’ (*śraddhā*) in the benefactor. However, *śraddhā* is directed in such a case more towards objective values and qualities represented by the individual, who

chapter, *Dānakāṇḍa*, devoted to gift giving), composed by Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara around the 12th or 13th century; *Yogaśāstra* of the Jain author Hemacandra, an example of a *śrāvakācāra* (“lay conduct”) work from c. 1150 CE; and the *Upāsakajanālankāra* of Ānanda, a Theravāda Buddhist *saṅgha* (‘compendium’) on lay moral conduct (12/13th century) (Heim 2004: 4–5, 15, 18, 24).

⁷ Einicke (2018: 197), referring to *Dānakāṇḍa* and *Bhagavadgīta*, calls *dāna* a “strictly one-directional” operation in which the giver does not expect any reaction from the recipient.

⁸ According to *Dānakāṇḍa* (1.15) (Einicke 2018: 199).

⁹ The motivations for *dāna* in the ancient sources encompass, for example, fear, hope for a beneficial rebirth, and for obtaining wholesome mental states, in the case of Buddhism (*Āṅguttara-nikāya* VIII, 237–238), and fear, pity, and desire for profits, in the case of *Mahābhārata* (*Anuśāsana Parva* 138). As for the this-worldly benefits brought about by *dāna*, we may mention expiation of sins (*Manusmṛiti* 4.288), long life (*Gobhila Gṛhyasūtra* 12.2), freedom from disease (*Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva* 57.38), and the gaining of various objects, such as a house or a vehicle (*Vaiśiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 29.7–19) (Nath 1988: 26–29).

¹⁰ Liberation as the ultimate incentive for *dāna* is mentioned in the *Bhagavadgīta* and in medieval sources, such as the *Yogaśāstra* (507.9) of Hemacandra, the Brahmanic *Dānasāgara* (32) (c. 1168 CE) of Ballālasena, and in the Buddhist *Sārasaṅgha* (181) of Siddhattha (c. 13th century) (Heim 2004: 35–38).

stands for an ethos, ideology, community, etc., rather than towards the individual himself or herself. It is more objective and impersonal than *bhakti*, which, according to Hara (1964: 126–142), is more directly connected to a specific person and has emotional connotations.¹¹ As such, *śraddhā* serves a regulatory function that channels the emotional intentions of the donor towards respecting a tradition, identified with the donee (Heim 2004: 49). In this model, *dāna* always flows upward; the recipient is recognized as superior and is, therefore, beyond any possibility of critique, even if his/her faults are apparent. Furthermore, it is assumed that the appearance of the donee triggers an almost automatic response in the donor possessed of *śraddhā*: he/she is bound to give with joy and zeal to anyone who appears at the door and fits the category of a worthy receiver. The sources (e.g. *Dānakāṇḍa*) differentiate between giving out of *śraddhā* or *bhakti* to the eminent or out of compassion to the poor and needy of an uncertain moral status. In a system built on a hierarchy of moral esteem, generosity directed at those of low social standing was treated with some reserve. It was considered a separate category and differentiated from *dāna* proper, which was reserved for the worthy religious specialists. Giving motivated by compassion or pity was not discouraged but was seen to yield less merit. Only the Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures challenged these views and ascribed a compassionate motivation to *dāna*. They abandoned the rule of giving to those of high merit, favoring instead gifts to all beings (including animals) encouraged by compassion (Heim 2004: 79–81).

Quite in line with the Mahāyāna approach, Anantadās's take on *dāna* seems to diverge from the patterns of the classic theories. Although there are strong arguments supporting the general notion of

¹¹ Cf. Burchett (2019: 49). For a brief overview of the emotional aspect of *bhakti*, see Frazier (2013: 107–108). For a discussion of *bhakti* positioned between a “mode of personal devotion” and social engagement, see Burchett (2019: 5–8). Elsewhere Burchett (2022: 191–192) distinguishes between the two terms in Anantadās's *paracāṭs*, where it is *bhakti*, “implying a personally invested human relationship”, and not *śraddhā* (“absence of personal attachment”), that motivates the circulation of gifts.

a gift as unreciprocated, the importance of the status of the recipient is disputed, as is the ritualistic side of gift giving. Furthermore, it can be argued that Anantadās's position on gifting amounts to a subtle critique of the rigid hierarchical relations that dominate the *dāna* mechanism. Since it is obvious that hitherto the practice of *dāna* was used to preserve the *status quo* of dominant religious institutions that benefited from gifts and to maintain established power relations, point of view espoused by Anantadās is undoubtedly critical, thus supportive of a general heterodox position of Sants on matters of social relations.

Before we proceed to the *paracaīs*, we must acknowledge that Anantadās's Sants (from Nāmdev to Raidās) lived in the era when North India witnessed rapid development of a novel, syncretic, Indo-Islamic culture. Therefore, it is safe to assume that they would have been under some kind of Islamic influence (Burchett 2019: 73–74). Apart from being aware, maybe even receptive to Sufi teachings, the Sants operated in a political environment governed by Persianized, Muslim-dominated ruling classes (first, of the Delhi Sultanate, and later, of the Mughal Empire) that had their own specific gift giving practices (Siebenhüner 2013: 539, Morony 2011). To what extent Anantadās or his Sants were influenced by these practices is an open question. However, it seems that the clues provided by the *paracaīs* do not warrant an in-depth analysis in the context of the present discussion.¹² In fact, the texts prove that Anantadās, himself a Rāmānandīn (Callewaert 2000: 7, Burchett 2019: 157), was mainly concerned with the Vaiṣṇava-dominated *bhakti* milieu. Muslims in his work are the religious (*qāzīs* and *mulās*) and political (Sikandar Lodi) elites, criticized for representing oppressive social hierarchy and religious obscurantism, just like the brahmins (KP 6.11–16, 7.1–7). Similarly, when examples of Muslim ideas of gift giving appear, they are treated in a manner consistent with Anan-

¹² However, to contrast this statement, we might point to a feasible link between the Persian-inspired court custom of regifting to third parties (so that gifts “continue to go from one person to another”, Morony 2011: 41) and the Sant practices of gift redistribution (cf. below). The matter deserves further study.

tadās's generally anti-establishment social and religious critique. Therefore, he seems to be distancing himself from the gifting and patronage practices of the ruling courts. When Anantadās presents Kabīr as rejecting gifts offered by Sikandar [Lodi], convinced now of Kabīr's spiritual prowess, he may be doing so not only to teach a moral lesson, but also to disapprove of royal presents as well-known symbols of subordination,¹³ setting an example for Jangopāl and his hagiography of Dādū Dayāl (*Dādū Janma Līlā* [DJL, c. 1620]), in which Dādū refuses Akbar's gifts, perceiving them as a threat to the integrity and autonomy of his own self and his community (DJL 5.25; 7.17–18, 21, 24¹⁴). Another analogy with the DJL shows a similar case. Falling within the same category, both works might have served a similar purpose and were used by itinerant preachers (Callewaert 2000: 8) among audiences sensitive to an anti-establishment discourse. Designed to encourage the support of merchant patrons, not royal courts, the hagiographies functioned outside the context of the Muslim rule dominated public sphere (Zapart 2022: 7–10, 16, 20).

Dimensions of *dāna* in the *paracaīs*. Devotion of the “cowardly” Kabīr

We can now deal with the role of gift giving in the formative period of the Sant community, taking Anantadās's account of the life of Kabīr (1440–1518) as a representative example. Confronting the narrative portions of the KP with the classic *dāna* theory will allow

¹³ Here, the hagiographer possibly betrays some knowledge of Muslim court practices. At the Mughal court, a ritual exchange of gifts was used to control the hierarchy system and total dependence of the *manṣabdārs* (military commanders and civil officials possessing *manṣab*, a rank indicating social status) on the king. The ruler presented various gifts to the *manṣabdārs* and they were to reciprocate with a *pīśkaś*—a (more or less) obligatory, cyclical, and institutionalized gift that sustained a political relationship and indicated subordination (Streusand 1989: 139–145, Siebenhüner 2013: 538–541).

¹⁴ Numbering of the DJL follows Callewaert (1988).

us to examine the extent of changes in gift theory in a heterodox religious community of the early modern era. We will also examine how the ideology of the gift has influenced the process of forming Kabīr's authority.

Of the virtues of a true Sant, generosity comes second only to devotion. The fact that the communities of Sants were organized and expanded through institutionalized gift giving is well attested by the sources of Dādūpanth, such as the DJL of Jangopāl. By the same token, the authority and sanctity of a Sant was in a large part the effect of his generosity (Horstmann 2000: 518). Patrons of the Sants, recruited mainly from merchant classes, organized festive celebrations known as *mahochau* ('great feast'), which included religious performances, sermons, donations, and the distribution of food in the form of *prasād* (Horstmann 2000: 519, 522). During these festive occasions, Dādū is shown to act with unbounded generosity and selflessness by distributing all gifts and keeping nothing for himself (DJL 14.9). He serves only as a conduit by which all the donations are sanctified and then shared among *bhakt*s. Dādū remains the one who takes only to give (DJL 8.6).

Right after providing initial information on Kabīr's spiritual formation (his initiation by Rāmānanda), Anantadās underlines that the weaver-poet saw himself as providing a service (*dāsatāna*) to the community of *bhakt*s. He used the money from weaving to support his family, but the rest was spent feeding the community (KP 2.1–2). It is fitting that the first test he is subjected to by Hari directly involves his devotion measured by the extent of his largesse. Hari arrives at Kabīr's doorstep in the form of an emaciated devotee, begging for some cloth to wear. Kabīr offers him a half of the piece he has, but Hari asks for the whole thing. The weaver responds by giving all that he has, without any delay (*gahara nahī lāyau* [KP 2.4]). However, Kabīr's reaction to his own munificent act is surprising: he does not return home and remains in hiding for three days, while the people of his family go hungry (KP 2.5). The matter is resolved by Hari himself, who brings food to the weaver's mother and his children. Having realized what has happened, Kabīr is

pleased with the grace (*kṛpā*) that Hari offered him (KP 2.14). David Lorenzen calls this hiding a “curious feature” and “something of an enigma”. While refraining from offering any kind of interpretation of Kabīr’s recourse, he suggests a psychological reading, according to which this, also the other two episodes, are supposed to tell us something about Kabīr’s “timid or even cowardly” character (Lorenzen 1992: 28). However, as Lorenzen himself notes, it is improbable that a hagiography posits its main character in an unfavorable light; therefore, interpreting the said behavior in the above way is rather dubious.

Let us now turn to two other scenes that follow a very similar scenario, before attempting to offer an alternative reading of Kabīr’s attitude. In the next episode, we see Kabīr after having organized a *mahochau*, during which, of course, he “kept nothing for himself, but gave everything away” (*kachū na rākhyau, sagarau dinhau*, KP 3.1¹⁵). He is confronted by angry brahmins and *sanyāsins* who were apparently not given food during the festivity. They try to force him to provide them with a *dāna* of food. Having nothing to offer, Kabīr leaves the house and hides away (KP 3.10). Hari, having assumed the form of Kabīr, takes over the role of the host, procures the goods, and feeds the guests. At the end, Kabīr expresses his gratefulness to God for taking care of him (KP 4.3). The third episode also involves brahmins, but this time they confront Kabīr indirectly by sending an invitation to a fake festivity that will supposedly be organized by him (KP 10.3–5). People from all over flock to the poet’s hut on the bank of Ganges. Seeing them, he withdraws and hides himself (KP 10.8). Once again, Hari takes the stage: he magically multiplies himself as many Kabīrs, distributes the goods and gives cloth to all the gathered Sants.

As these scenes revolve around generosity, gifting, and the aftermath of the donor-donee relationship, one is tempted to formulate an answer to Kabīr’s aberrant behavior from the point of view of the *dāna* theory, or rather from the position of its implicit critique. Let

¹⁵ If not stated otherwise, all translations from the source texts are mine.

us first note the peculiar status of the recipient of Kabīr's gift in the first episode. In the eyes of the weaver-poet, this man is a fellow *bhakt*, someone in dire need, and possibly of low caste. His true identity, that of a God in disguise, remains hidden from the donor, but is enough to make the listener/reader wonder about the meaning of his status in the light of the traditional *dāna* theories. I would argue that Anantadās deliberately designed this episode to put forward a subtle critique of the most vital element of *dāna* theory that is grounded in, and thus promotes, social inequality. Is not the whole scene, with Kabīr giving his last piece of cloth to the emaciated *bhakt-cum*-Hari, something of a mockery of the traditional *dāna* mechanism that impels one to give to esteemed persons of a recognized high moral and social authority in order to acquire merit? Even if we interpret this episode as being about compassion, the unusual status of the donee remains a factor that undermines the understanding of Kabīr's reaction along traditional lines. Similarly, Hari's response to Kabīr's act also allows one to doubt whether pondering the recipient's status is at all justified in the given context.

We will return to the matter of reciprocity below, but it must be realized that the sensitive matter of the "right" status is not completely bypassed by the text and it seems to be invested with some meaning. When testing Kabīr, Hari did, after all, take on the form of a *bhakt*, not an ascetic or a brahmin. Whether Kabīr gives cloth to the God in disguise, organizes a *mahochau* that leaves him resourceless, or finds himself the host of a surprise gathering of devotees, every time this involves (directly or indirectly) the community of *bhakt*s/Sants, who are a part of the "natural" milieu of the weaver-poet. Now, if we could look at Kabīr not as a donor, but as a recipient, we would discover that in Anantadās's hagiography, the gift and subsequently, the patronage play a socio-regulatory function. As noted by Horstmann (2000: 520), in order to fulfil his role, the Sant must remain impoverished, and, indeed, Kabīr is said to refrain from gifts of "gold, silver, and fabrics" (KP 4.7). Most probably he does not reject the gifts in the name of the community but simply does not take anything for himself, and, as noted above (KP 3.1), shares

everything that has been offered with others.¹⁶ However, we are told that Kabīr accepts specifically such gifts that are offered by the devotees (*harijana*) with feeling (of love?) (*bhāva sahata*, KP 4.8) (one might wonder whether they are accepted for personal use). In the very same *pada* Anantadās underlines that Kabīr desists (*tyāgai*) the persistence (*haṭha*) of king (*rājā*) and his subjects (*parajā*) to patronize him; similarly, he rejects the lavish gifts of Sikandar Lodi bestowed on him after proving his saintly authority to the sultan.¹⁷ Here, I think, it would be justified to once again bring to attention the parallel of the topos of court patronage rejection from the DJL, used by Jangopāl to stress that in order to retain the autonomy of the nascent Dādūpanthī community, Dādū decides to keep the royal patrons at bay (Zapart 2022: 10–11). We can see that *dāna* and patronage are utilized as tools to determine the extent of the Sant community and to delineate and protect its *bhakti*-centered value system. This means that the choice of patron, as well as the choice of the beneficiary of *dāna*, affects both the structure and the saintly status of the community, and therefore it has the capacity to determine its economic and ideological character. Bearing in mind that to determine the purposefulness of a gift, a superior position of the recipient is not necessary, what then does it mean to have the status of a Sant-*bhakt* in the *Kabīr-paracāī*? By the logic of comparison with the traditional *dāna* theory, it seems, first, that being a Sant means being worthy of receiving gifts (the perfect donee) and worthy of giving (the perfect donor); second, it means having authority which does not rest on social prestige and birth, but on the adherence to the *bhakti* ethos. For that reason, *bhakt*s are the preferred subjects on both sides of the transaction (at least on the prescriptive

¹⁶ Burchett (2022: 191–192) observes that gifting in Anantadās’s narratives serves a social and ethical role of creating a community built on a constant circulation of gifts and sharing that obliterates notions of ownership and reciprocation.

¹⁷ Cf. the case of Nāmdev who rejects a gift of gold from a non-devotee merchant. The Sant deplors him for the desire to give in order to obtain religious merit and not ‘for the sake of Rām’ (*rāma hetī*) (*Nāmdev-paracāī* 2.24).

level).¹⁸ However, as gifts in the *paracaīs* are presented to a very diversified crowd, we need to pinpoint a more universal level of *dāna*, which brings us back to the second episode with the unfed brahmins and to the notion of reciprocity.

The focal point of the second episode is obviously Kabīr slipping away from the scene. In his demeanor we see the desperation and embarrassment of a man who has nothing left to give but feels strongly committed to giving. This shows the strength of the cultural obligation to present *dāna* to those deemed as worthy, which is not diminished by the fact that the worthy ones are openly hostile toward their benefactor. Depicting the brahmins in this way and Kabīr as a desperate but willing benefactor is, of course, intentional as it makes the weaver-poet appear a particularly benevolent and moral individual. However, knowing the value system of Sants and seeing how the narrative unfolds it is doubtful if the obligation to present *dāna* would be a sufficient motivation for a Sant to try to feed a group of “worthy by default” brahmins and that it would make him feel ashamed of not being able to succeed. I believe that the real impulse behind Kabīr’s willingness to offer *dāna*, must be sought in the motif of the supernatural response of Hari. God is put on the scene, not because the Sant is anticipating him, but to underline that it is God’s presence in the *bhakti*-oriented life of the Sant that encourages him to offer any kind of *dāna*, especially to the brahmins. In other words, as all the actions of a Sant are directed towards God, so is *dāna*, and, in fact, it is Rām who is the actual recipient of all gifts.¹⁹ This makes the practice of *dāna* a personal and emotionally engaging affair and eventually shapes gift giving into the practice of *bhakti*.

¹⁸ As beneficiaries, Sants have a documented history of accepting both royal and merchant patronage. The Dādūpanth community of the 17th and 18th centuries provides good examples (Horstmann 2000: 539–558).

¹⁹ The idea of God being the sole recipient of all sacrificial acts (*yajña*) is well attested in the *Bhagavadgīta* (*ahaṃ hi sarvayajñānāṃ bhoktā ca prabhur eva ca* [9.24]. “I am the enjoyer and lord of all sacrifices.” Cf. also 9.16 and 9.23).

The notion of reciprocity springs to mind here, as it seems that a divine intervention must have a fitting cause and in all three episodes the reaction of Hari is distinctly related to *dāna*. In the first, Hari “repays” Kabīr for his generosity, in the second for the very intention of feeding the brahmins. In the third, he simply helps the weaver to fulfill an act of service for the gathered *bhakts*. Nowhere is it mentioned that Kabīr expects God to intervene, as the pious acts of the Sants are not carried out to bring rewards.²⁰ Kabīr himself is shown as simply “doing his thing”, that is, cultivating his mind (“meditating on the feet of Rām”, KP 2.16, *dohā*) or “setting his heart on the name of Rām”, KP 3.7) and... practicing generosity. For Anantadās it is precisely this selfless service to God and the community that opens the possibility of divine intervention. To become a *bhakt*, one must be generous to the extent of offering everything one has. As Kabīr himself states, “great is the one who consumes wealth by sharing” (*badau ju bāṭi bāṭi dhana khāi*, KP 6.5). We find numerous examples of a similar attitude especially in the *Pīpā-paracāi*. It is by excessive generosity (giving ‘all you have’ [*sarabasa*]) directed to the *bhakts*, but eventually to all living beings (*sakala ātmahi*) that one becomes a true devotee (PP 29.9–12). Proper *dāna* directed to the *bhakts* is so important that it is allowed to be procured even by immoral means (*ṭhagi mūsi*, lit. by ‘cheating and stealing’) (PP 33.14–16)! But most importantly, Anantadās acknowledges the possibility of God responding to generosity when offered that what is most valuable (PP 15.23), or, similarly, that service to the community (by offering one’s “body [*tana*], mind [*mana*], and wealth [*dhana*]”) is a way to make God show his mercy (*nivājasī*) (*Dhanā-paracāi* [DP], 7.1). Thus, the fruit of religious life and the otherwise unreturned gift is reciprocated as a spiritual boon in the form of Rām’s mercy. This would be an equivalent of the

²⁰ According to Kabīr himself, abandoning worldly hopes (*jagata kī āsa*) (for benefits) is a way to attain the favors of Rām (*Kabīr Granthāvali*, quoted in DJL 10.27) (Callewaert 1988: 66). Cf. the well-known notion of a selfless action, understood as a desireless sacrifice to God that does not produce karmic effects, in *Bhagavadgīta* 3.9; 5.10; 9.27.

karmic response for *dāna* acknowledged by the medieval sources mentioned above (Heim 2004: 37).

God as the only receiver of gifts

If we assume that Hari is the only beneficiary of gifts, it does not matter to whom the material gift is really directed: *dāna* follows *bhakti* and both land at Hari's feet.²¹ This approach could help to explain the rather frequent appearances of brahmins in the work of Anantadās. Often portrayed as enemies of the Sants, in the *paracāṭs* brahmins are depicted as either demanding and coercing donations or as unfortunate, needy individuals. In both cases, they are perhaps not acknowledged as worthy beneficiaries of *dāna*, but nevertheless still dependent on it. This fact, as well as the self-proclaimed position of the brahmins, is used by Anantadās to present the Sants as exceedingly generous and empathetic individuals who, although practice giving to the brahmins, do it for the sake of Rām *bhakti*.²² God as accepting gifts brings us to a metaphysical paradox that, in turn, determines the soteriological dimension of *dāna*. It is clear to Kabīr that whatever gift he can offer Rām, it is his already (Vaudeville 1997: 256). Pīpā also exclaims that everything belongs to God

²¹ According to Heim (2004: 44), in the *dharmasāstras* *dāna* can be motivated *either* by 'esteem' (*śraddhā*) or by 'devotion' (*bhakti*). In the *paracāṭs*, while the matter is not entirely clear, I would argue in the favor of conflating both factors. Even if the esteem-driven aspect of gifting could motivate Sants (God surely possesses esteem in the eyes of the *bhakti*s), it seems clear that, at least on a psychological level, devotion is considered a sufficient incentive for generosity and dominates over *śraddhā* or even completely obliterates it.

²² Brahmins are especially often mentioned in the *Pīpā-paracāṭ*; cf. the case of a despairing brahmin who commits suicide over losing Pīpā, his sponsor, but is revived by Rāmānanda (PP 9.1–19); of Pīpā giving an oxen that did not belong to him to a brahmin in need (26.13–28); of Pīpā helping a robbed brahmin (31.19–32); or of the same Sant offering his whole wealth (*sabu darabu*) to a brahmin who is impoverished (32.11–13) (note "the complete confidence [*bharausai*] in Hari" as the justification of this act). For an account of the most telling appearances of brahmins in the *paracāṭs*, see Callewaert (2000: 13–16).

(PP 26.16) and his generosity rests on the assumption that for a pure-minded Sant offering something that does not belong to him (oxen gift, PP 26.13–28) is not a breach of morality; quite the opposite: the ability to select the right gift determines the strength of one's *bhakti* and denotes a close relationship with God.

If God is indeed the sole receiver of *dāna*, no gift offered with the right intention can ever be wasted, regardless of the status of the beneficiary. The most blatant example of this attitude is to be observed when Pīpā offers a gift to robbers who have just looted his house (PP 28.19–20). When chasing after the robbers to give them the 22 coins they have overlooked, Pīpā considers the benefit (*paramahitū*) of this situation. This benefit appears to have a two-phase dynamic, as observed above: first, Pīpā shows an unconditional largesse that wins him Hari's favor/grace, due to which he changes the gift into a proselytic tool that allows him to convert the robbers (PP 28.27);²³ it is inferred that as long as there is the intention to serve Rām (PP 8.24), even material offerings to immoral recipients can bring spiritual merit and a promise of a spiritual reward.

Another way of looking at the donor-recipient dynamics is through the notion of debt. A brahmin repays the debt to the Gods by performing ritual sacrifices, and to *ṛṣis* by studying the *Veda*. A householder, in turn, pays off his debt to the sages (i.e., learned brahmins) through *dāna*. To put it differently, when offering *dāna* to the brahmins, the householder is simply “discharging an already existing debt” (Nath 1988: 205). It would be natural to see the analogy to the Sant's gifts to Rām in the *deva ṛṇa*, but this kind of debt was envisioned to be paid off by sacrificial rites, so it does not fit easily into the anti-ritualistic ethos of the Sants. However, the debt to *ṛṣis* seems a more likely candidate as, according to *Manusmṛiti*

²³ Cf. different episodes following a similar scenario: robbers steal Pīpā's buffalos and are converted by the force of his unexpected generosity (PP 17.14–19); also see the episode of Pīpā and the yoghurt selling girl who (together with her family) becomes a convert after receiving an excessive payment from the Sant (PP 27); finally, see the case of the lustful merchant who becomes a *bhakt* after having been ‘offered’ Sītā, Pīpā's wife, as a ‘gift’ (PP 20.14–16).

(1.100), it is the brahmins who are considered the (self-proclaimed) owners of all things in existence,²⁴ and therefore they can be put in a position analogous to that of Rām in the *paracaīs*. The Sants would be, of course, seen as the ones with a debt to settle.²⁵

Thus, the concept of *ṛṇa* may serve as yet another hermeneutical instrument to reinforce the hypothesis of the Sant *dāna* as being directed solely to God. It is perhaps best applied to the *Trilocan-paracai* (TP), which is built around a single event. One day, Hari, in the disguise of a scruffy-looking man, arrives at the doorstep of Trilocan to offer him service. Hari is motivated by love (*prīti*) (TP 3), but he also wants to put the Sant to a test, just as he did with Kabīr. He promises to serve Trilocan under two conditions: he must pay him due respect (*ādara*) and satisfy his endless hunger (TP 12) (the Hari-servant is “always hungry and never satisfied” [*bhūkhau rahau, na kabahī aghānau*, TP 8]). Once again God demands to be cared for by a Sant, but this time the gifting is not left unreciprocated, and the narrative establishes a straightforward mutualism between the giver and the receiver. Even if this *paracai* hints at a direct, material “a gift for a gift” transaction, the spiritual element is still present: after all, Trilocan can expect a reward for doing good bhakti, not for caring for his servant. As the owner of all gifts, the God-servant capitalizes on his right to be fed. Caring for him is like paying off the debt for the very possibility of performing bhakti. Moreover, this transaction between God and the *bhakt* lasts as long as the debt is settled: the moment Trilocan’s wife expresses her doubts, Hari disappears (TP 23–24). Even if God is the sole owner of all things (gifts included), as the only receiver of *dāna* he remains somehow ‘dependent’ (*ādhīna*, TP 17) on the *bhakt*s. In what way? I assume that here the matter is closely related to the economy (or circulation) of a gift, as sketched above. Endowed with

²⁴ “Whatever exists in the world is the property of the Brahmana; on account of the excellence of his origin the Brahmana is, indeed, entitled to all” (Bühler 1886: 26).

²⁵ Note that in *Manusmṛiti* (6.94) for the twice-born being ‘free from debt’ (*aṇṇa*) is one of the prerequisites for becoming a renunciant.

the capacity to perform *bhakti* resulting from regulating their debt to Hari (or bestowing gifts), the Sants are able to perform generous deeds (for example, during communal feasts) and act on Hari's grace to expand the community. Needless to say, the debt to Hari is essentially unrepayable, because it is infinite; therefore, the act of repaying (by *seva*, *bhakti*, and *dāna*) could be seen as perpetual, never finished, and as unbound as Hari's grace that has put the whole process in motion. We can only speculate that Anantadās wanted to draw on the concept of *ṛṇa* to further bind *bhakti*s to their practice and to Hari, while distancing himself from the ritualistic, brahmanical roots of the notion of the fourfold debt.²⁶

The Sant's behavior in the dynamics of the gift is similar to the notion of God "producing" *prasād*: he is to receive, sanctify, and then give away.²⁷ We must examine this process more closely. Every gift of a Sant is directed to Rām (when Anantadās claims that "Pīpā honors God in others")²⁸ [*pīpā pujai ātma deū*], this also ap-

²⁶ The notions of dependency and debt brings us to areas of possible further inquiry. It would be interesting to investigate the idea of God being dependent on his devotees (TP 17) and "returning" what has been given to him (PP 15.23) as a possible analogy to the Vedic *yajña*. In Vedic sources, men were given a duty that was to be fulfilled through ritual action (which regulated their debt to the *devas*). Gods were summoned to act for the benefit of the sacrificers and part with gifts only they could bestow (e.g., prosperity and health) (Geaves 2008: 1024). In other words, "men sustained gods, so that gods could sustain men" (Dhavamony 1974: 109). Thus, there appear some questions that deserve further study. Is it so that modified by the Upaniṣadic understanding of sacrifice as the internalized practice of *tapas* and filtered through the attitude of nonattachment, as prescribed in the *Bhāgavadgītā* (17.11), in the Sant milieu the ritual sacrifice was substituted and performed through internal worship, but also through the circulation of gifts bearing a salvific capacity? To what extent does the God-*bhakt* dependency—acknowledged in the Sant milieu, where ritual action was entirely abandoned—retain an affinity to the Vedic patterns and could be seen as a form of *exchange* analogous to the Vedic sacrifice?

²⁷ Cf. Pinkney 2008: 628.

²⁸ Translation by Callewaert 2000: 229.

plies to honoring through *dāna* [PP 19.14]²⁹); if it has the right intention, it is reciprocated as grace, power, or Hari’s protection (*rakhavārā*, lit. ‘protector’) (KP 10.1); only then the gift (in random form) becomes spiritually charged and can be conceptualized as offered by Hari through the Sant (to an individual of random social standing). As such, the gift denotes liberation and can be used for pedagogical and/or proselytizing purposes (see below). In other words, the one who knows that Rām is the ultimate giver and has an intimate relationship with Rām (who “speaks through the bodies of devotees” [*bhagavanta bhagatana kai ghaṭi bolai*, KP 13.11]) can bestow the highest form of gift in God’s name. And since God created everyone equal, as Kabīr himself repeatedly stresses (Vaudeville 1997: 216, 218), giving and generosity cannot conjure any form of social or moral hierarchy.

Dāna and renunciation

Anantadās often underlines the straightforward interdependence of *dāna* and *bhakti* in terms of their intensity: the deeper the devotion, the greater the generosity (and *vice versa*). A Sant who exceeds in devotion should also exceed in his/her commitment to *dāna*.³⁰ For this reason, Pīpā instructs Sūraj Sen, who wants to be initiated, on the necessity of “offering his wife and all of his possessions” (*nāri sahita sarabasa de*) to the guru (PP 16.15–16; 17.1–6). In the canonical *dharmasāstric*, Buddhist, and Jain sources there was a general consensus that *dāna* can mean ‘giving up’ (*tyāga*) in the sense

²⁹ For the notion of perceiving God as internalized and universal, which supports “impartiality of mind” (see below); cf. also DP 2.9 when Dhanā is said to see God as *āmarāma*.

³⁰ Cf. the episode in which Pīpā and his wife find a pot full of money and immediately spend it, since giving away everything one has (*tanu, manu, dhanu*) is a measure of love (*prīti*) (PP 33.12; 33.14); also, the description of Pīpā as practicing *bhakti* while giving away *tana, mana, and dhana* (PP 19.15) (see also KP 2.4 and 3.1 above). In the same vein, Dhanā is described as giving his house (*ghara*), wife (*gharanī*), possessions (*sampati*), and the whole wealth (*darbu*) to Hari (DP 2.10).

of renunciation (Heim 2004: 39). In the *paracaīs dāna* is also marked by the giving up of one's social standing (PP 5.6; 7.16) and by maintaining an egoless position.³¹ Both virtues, *dāna* and renunciation, are necessary for one who wishes to become a *bhakt*, therefore Pīpā advises a generous but lustful merchant that taking on the path of *bhakti* means “giving up everything” (*sarabasa arapai*) and “serving all devotees” (*bhagatana kī sevā*) (PP 20.14–19). Here, the particular context reveals that the spiritual aspect of “giving up” is rather secondary and that for a well-off householder renunciation should mean primarily the practice of *dāna*. However, even at this “mundane” level, *dāna* understood as a kind of “qualified renunciation” is a way to cultivate *bhakti*. Consequently, for a Sant like Kabīr or Pīpā, we can presume that the more generosity resembles self-renunciation, the greater the possibility for a Sant to act on the salvific power bestowed by Hari (in response to *dāna*).

At this point, it would perhaps be stimulating to consider if the ethos of renunciation could serve as a hermeneutical tool for unpacking the three Kabīr-fleeing-from-the-scene episodes. If Anantadās highly values Pīpā, who abandoned his kingdom to become a *bhakt*, for giving up (*chāḍī*) the caste (*jāti*), clan (*pāṭi*), and family (*kula*) (PP 7.16), it might be possible that Kabīr's atypical behavior is for Anantadās an opportunity to show the complete detachment of the Sant from all things worldly. There is an internal logic at play here, as the stake of renunciation rises together with its objects. Each time, when he is right in the middle of doing mundane business, Kabīr escapes responsibility and symbolically casts off the chains of, respectively, family ties, social relations (represented by the brahmins), and finally even of the community of *bhakts*. The only thing that remains unrepudiated is his bond with Hari. Maybe by incorporating the three puzzling episodes Anantadās attempted to restate the well-known truth that no worldly business, no matter how

³¹ Cf. PP 3.2 on the necessity of being like a dead man and remaining under the protection of Rām (*mṛtaka samāna sarana hoi rahiye*). See also PP 24.3: the one who is detached (*nyārā*) (as a consequence of offering everything to Hari) has God as his/her protector (*rakhavārā*).

lofty, can bind a Sant who needs to maintain a position of indifference and impartiality.³²

In the verses attributed to Dādū Dayāl (*Dādūvāñī*), as well as in the Dādūpanthī sectarian scriptures (DJL), impartiality is denoted by the term *nirpakha*, known by the Dādūpanthī author Rajab (*Sarvāṅgī*) and Kabīr as *samatā* or *samasarasa* (Callewaert 1978: 328). In the Dādūpanthī sources *nirpakha* has three semantic layers indicating internal worship, “nonsectarianism” (one path to God transcending a particular orthopraxis, Chandra 1992: 34), and nondifferentiation (seeing all things as having equal value). In *paracāīs* the idea behind *nirpakha*, understood as non-differentiation, has a particularly strong presence, but is expressed by words such as *samatuli* (‘of equal value’) (PP 29.12), *barābari* (‘equal’) (PP 7.16), and *samadiṣṭi* (‘seeing as equal’, ‘impartial view’) (PP 18.1; 15.2: kings and beggars as equals; DP 2.9). For a Sant to have an impartial mind is to distribute equally to any kind of recipient. Furthermore, keeping such a view of reality would surely be adequate for a Sant-renunciator, and since *dāna* can be a form of “giving up”, then all the *dāna*-related *Kabīr-paracāī* episodes in question may be read as advertising an uncompromising, God-centered renunciation presented in this manner to create the saintly authority of Kabīr.

Before any closing reflections, let us briefly systematize the main functions-*cum*-dimensions of *dāna* in the *paracāīs* of Anantadās from the material gathered thus far. The first two are closely related to the Sant’s declarative heterodoxy. First, the social dimension of *dāna* is visible due to its role in regulating the extent of the community (centered on antiritualistic and antihierarchical notions), while its proselytic dimension regulates the expansion of the community. Heading towards a more abstract territory, we have the metaphysical dimension together with the soteriological dimension, because the claim that Rām/Hari is the sole owner of all gifts and the receiver of

³² This position can be seen as the individual, psychological dimension of the topos of autonomy as witnessed in the DJL (cf. Zapart 2022: 10).

dāna is meaningful only with the assumption that gifting is ultimately an act aimed at liberation.

Concluding remarks: *dāna* as *bhakti*

Considering the medieval “dharmaśāstric”, Buddhist and Jain theories of gift outlined at the beginning of this article, Anantadās’s take on *dāna* is as unconventional as it is deeply rooted in the *bhakti* ethos. Seen in this way, it constitutes an intuitive and non-systematic reworking of the mentioned approaches to gift giving. Anantadās considers all the most vital elements of these theories but appropriates them in such a manner that they become impossible to unravel without acknowledging their entanglement with the ideals of *bhakti*. For example, when matters of (traditional) social and religious status appear—embedded or not in the context of *dāna*—they are often a disruptive element that is obliterated by the egalitarian spirit of Rām *bhakti*, so much so that Callewaert (2000: 22) notes that “seeing all individuals as equals and giving up honour and status (...) are favourite themes of Anantadās”. For that reason, to fully appreciate the author’s position, one needs to assume that in his work gift giving denotes egoless and devotional acts driven by a spirit of renunciation. As such, every gift is intended for the deity, independently of the identity and socioreligious status of the “physical” recipient. Therefore, regardless of whether gifts are offered to non-devotees, people of low moral status, individual *bhakti*s or *bhakti* communities, or even if the gift itself is obtained deceitfully, for the benefactor *dāna* serves as a means of cultivating individual devotion aimed at creating an intimate relationship with Hari. The potential of gifting to transcend cultural norms allows the Sants to present gifts to brahmins, even if they are perceived as representing values alien to the Sant ethos and are ascribed the role of persecutors of the *bhakti*s. Thus, at least at a declarative level, the ideal of *dāna* is to be of service to an egalitarian social vision, albeit theologically grounded.

Even if directly not reciprocated, *dāna* remains a circulatory process. In the *paracāis* the gifting workflow has the salvific power of Rām as its real driving force. Therefore, when considering this process, some form of reciprocity needs to be taken into account. A gift is surely not designed to commit the immediate recipient, but to put into motion a movement of grace (or mercy, kindness) (*kṛpā*)³³ of Hari. This circular flow of *kṛpā* can be described briefly as follows: the Sant, a donor, chooses deserving recipients (whose social and religious status, birth, and even morality are of secondary importance), but directs his real intent to please Hari, the real donee; Hari responds by sanctifying the gift, endowing it with his grace and returning the gift, now fashioned into a salvific tool; the Sant can now act as a conduit of grace and offer a material gift (of random form, often accompanied by moral teaching) endowed with salvific power.

All in all, we can see that the bhakti-oriented ideology of gift-giving (*dāna*), although understood necessarily as renunciation achieved with an impartial mind, can be taken as the key to unraveling the three episodes of the *Kabīr-paracāi*. For Anantadās *dāna* and generosity are the foundations of the *bhakti* ethos, given their community-forming and proselytic potential, but it is the unmediated relationship of the Sant with Hari that is given precedence. This is manifested by the divine interventions that occur when the obligation of *dāna* becomes too burdensome for Kabīr. In the first episode, having offered *dāna*, Kabīr is left without material means, but the devotional intent of his gift evokes Hari's mercy (*dayā*) (KP 2.6). In the second and third episodes the stress is also laid on the relationship with Hari, but Anantadās seems to voice an implicit critique of the very obligation of *dāna* when treated instrumentally, as a means of extortion and deceit. Anantadās makes the brahmins use *dāna* as an offensive weapon, which can mean that he wishes to express his distrust towards *dāna* as a form of hierarchy-based coercion. In this vision, we can find an alternative explanation of the behavior of

³³ Also rendered as “compassion” by Lorenzen (1992: 98, 117).

Kabīr (at least in the second and third episodes): it is the obligation of *dāna* turned into violent oppression that could have forced the Sant to run away. Regardless, the weaver-poet still prevails owing to his pure devotion. Thus, it seems that Anantadās may be trying to suggest that if *dāna* is to lose its coercive potential, it must necessarily be rethought as an inherent part of the *bhakti-mārga*.

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