

**From Astrological Motive to Philanthropy Motivation: A Shifting  
Landscape in Tula Daan**

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## **Introduction**

In Palpa, Nepal, Ganga Higher Secondary School organized Shreemad Bhagawat Mahayagya, popularly called Mahayagya - an elaborate Hindu ceremony in which the story of Hindu scripture, Purana, is recited in simple terms - from Jan 2 to 9, 2017 to broaden and revitalize the school's curriculum by adding an aspect of technical education to its existing courses. The Mahayagya raised over 60 Million rupees donation where 67 individuals made Tula Daan of coins, that is donating coins equal to or more than the weight of one's own body (Source: <http://setopati.com/samaj/60760/>).

Upon seeing people making Tula Daan for the first time, it might seem strange. You might be wondering, what does Tula Daan mean and why do people make Tula Daan? You might even be thinking, why are people not making straight forward donation instead of weighing themselves in coins and donating that?

In the subsequent chapters I am explaining - what is Mahayagya and Tula Daan? What is the process of Tula Daan? What is driving it? Why do people undergo a complexity of Tula Daan in making donation? And of late, I'd like to explore how it is becoming more of a philanthropic activity rather than just an astrological practice, bringing a major shift in people's perspective about Tula Daan.

## **What is Mahayagya?**

Mahayagya is a very elaborate Hindu puja (a kind of worship) in which a pundit - a very learned sanskrit scholar - recites the story of Purana, one of the most

celebrated and ancient Hindu scriptures. The Mahapurana is compiled of eighteen different Puranas and each Purana tells a different story about life, death, the world, spirituality, cosmology, philosophy and so on. One of the most popular Puranas is Bhagawat Puran, which is often narrated in Mahayagya also called Shreemad Bhagawat Mahayagya. A raised stage is elaborately decorated with silver pots, flowers, clothes and posters of Hindu deities where a pandit sits and recites the story of the Purana in plain and simple terms, often accompanied by music and dance. The following picture gives an idea of how the stage and venue are decorated.



This ceremony draws hundreds and thousands of people throughout the event; each is motivated to make a donation no matter how big or small by evoking their compassion. Regarding the donation drawn by Mahayagya, the example late Pandit Narayan Pokharel seems relevant. According to *The Himalaya Times* (Jan 26, 2007), he helped raise over Rs 2.5 Billion (roughly equivalent to CAD \$45 Millions) during his career to build and revitalize schools, campus, hospitals and other social organizations. He modernized the concept of Mahayagya by bringing it to the common people. Each year, in Nepal alone, hundreds of Mahayagyas are organized to raise funds and engage locals in the cause. The popular forms of donation in Mahayagya are straight cash, donation of land and property, gifts-in-kind and Tula Daan.

### **Tula Daan and Its Process**

Tula Daan is a way of giving which is mostly practiced in Hindu communities amid a very special ceremony, usually in Mahayagya. The word “Tula” means a pair of scales and the word “Daan” refers to donate. Together, Tula Daan means making a donation of things equal to the weight of one’s own body. For instance, if a person who makes Tula Daan is 150 pounds, he/she donates 150 pounds of coins or the amount of money equal to the total monetary value of 150 pounds of coins. Even though coins are popular forms of donation, Tula Daan can be made with other objects like grains of rice, fruits, copper etc. In some cases, it might be a bag of food; in other cases it might be silver or in rare cases, it might be even a chunk of gold. Time, location, social class, social groups and motive determine the material of Tula Daan.

Regarding what could be donated in Tula Daan, Sanjay Agrawal in his book *Daan and Other Giving Traditions in India* writes, “apart from gold, Tula Daan can also be made with gems, silver, camphor, bronze, brass, lead, justa, rock salt, jaggery, clothes, fruits, wood, supari, flowers, honey, ghee, curd, grain, oil, sugar, sandalwood, kumkum, betel leaves, and sesame” (112). The excerpt clarifies that Tula Daan could be anything – basic need items to one of the most expensive commodities like gold. Looking at the object of Tula Daan it could be argued that donor groups are varied and different.

Those who cannot make Tula Daan of coins can make a Tula Daan of bronze and brass or fruits and flowers. Tula Daan, thus, is not necessarily a practice of super rich people. We can find several mentions of Tula Daan of gold in the ancient books. However, it is hardly heard or seen in recent years. Instead other commodities are more popular and are more affordable to other classes of donors.

The motive of making Tula Daan seems to be guided by astrological reasons. People think that making Tula Daan has an abundance of health benefits. Highlighting the health benefits of Tula Daan, astrologer Vipin Kapoor in his blog post argues “Tula Daan is a special ethical astral remedy” which can be “performed when an individual suffers from certain incurable disease. ... Tula Daan is extremely helpful in propitiate auspicious or anukool planet and to mitigate any ill placed or inauspicious planet (unfavorable) planetary influences.” People believe that making Tual Daan would drive away bad energies and

thereby help regain health and wellbeing. Some even take it as a panacea to every problem.

The process of Tula Daan is complex, yet creative. Usually it takes place amid a special puja in Mahayagya, which is held in public places like schools, university campuses, and temples. The venue, where Tula Daan takes place, is decorated with silver pots, clothes, flowers and poster of Hindu deities. The weighing scale where a donor sits against the materials to be donated is also decorated. People making Tula Daan fast on the day of the donation. However, water, tea, milk or fruits are permitted.

At the time of Tula Daan, the donor sits on one side of manual scale and on the other side of the scale, bags or coins or materials to be donated are kept. The scale keep balancing, people start cheering, the donors perhaps are overtaken by a distinct realization of self awakening. This very moment of Tula Daan holds a special significance in the life of donors. It is a moment to be seized, lived and observed. Following is a photo in which a woman is sitting on a scale to make Tula Daan.



One of the thoughts of Hindu philosophy argues that humans are born empty handed and die empty handed. It is believed that there is no greater donation than making Tula Daan. Given this thought, making a Tula Daan is a symbolic gesture that one has donated all he/she has in life, freeing life from within and leaving nothing to be worried, repented, or lamented for because life is about embracing spirituality. A short unformatted video Tula Daan can be watched at <https://www.facebook.com/ketifakaunesutra/videos/1055103051184084/>.

One of the things I wanted to explore through this research paper was to know why people make Tula Daan. What is driving it? Is it the astrological motive or philanthropic motivation that is driving it further? With these curiosities in mind, I

interviewed a total of 10 individuals who had made Tula Daan at some point of their lives in Nepal. I have presented findings below. And I should admit that since this research is conducted relatively in small pool of people, the findings can not be broadly generalized. However, it gives a clear indication that where the giving tradition of Tula Daan is heading.

### **Astrological Motive to Philanthropic Motivation: A Changing Perspective in Tula Daan**

Tula Daan has astrological roots. According to Hindu religious books, initially people would make Tula Daan to mitigate any inauspicious planetary influences on them. Some people still believe that that Tula Daan is a remedy to cure incurable diseases. The primary motive was to get relief from negative energy and making oneself healthy.

However, in recent decades, Tula Daan is becoming more and more of a philanthropic activity rather than just a mere astrological practice to avoid bad planetary influences.

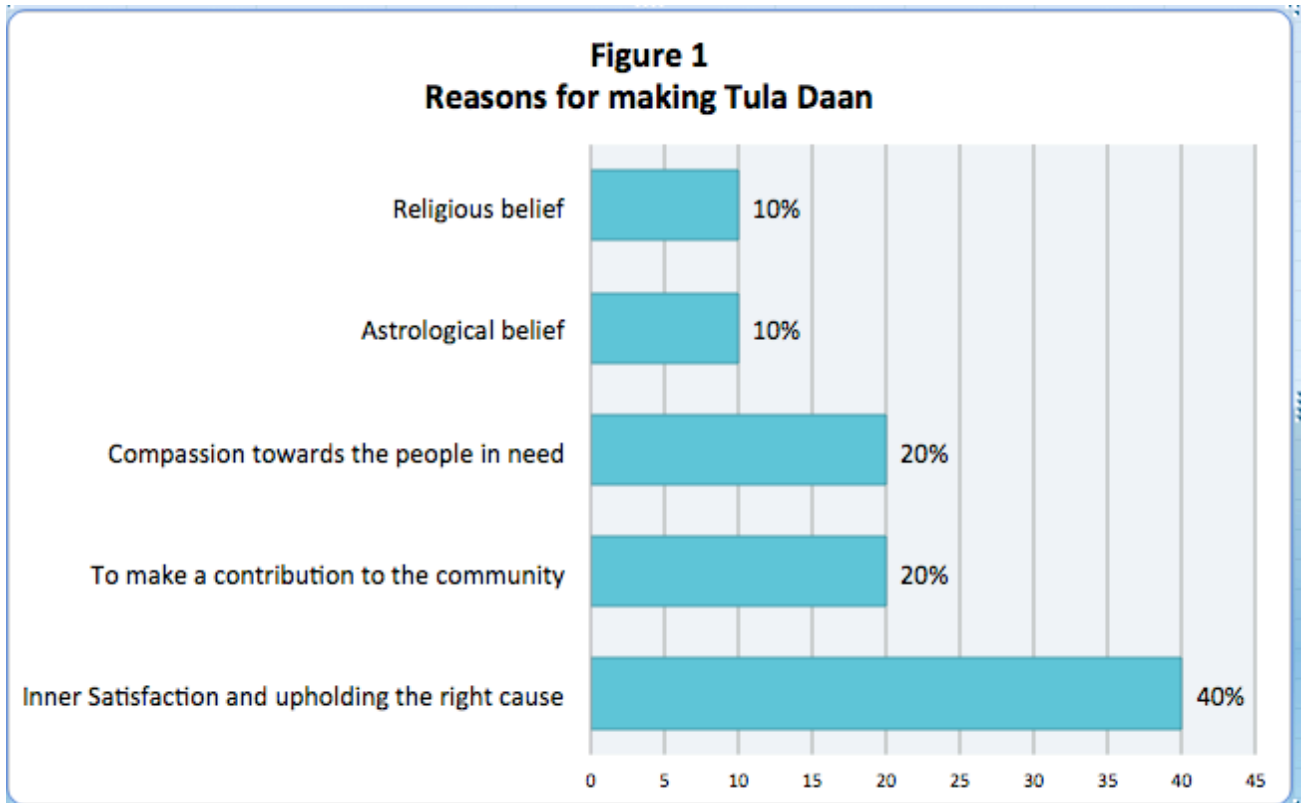
I looked into a couple of Mahayagyas in Nepal where a significant number of people have made Tula Daan of coins. In a Mahayagya conducted by Daraithati Higher Secondary School, Nepal, 61 individuals made Tula Daan of coins. The event generated over 45 Million rupees in donations that includes the the revenue of Tula Daan as well. Each Tula Daan roughly draws 10,000 to 50,000 Rupees. In the similar case, a Mahayagya was organized in 2014 in Trehathum,



Nepal to raise funds to buy an ambulance. The event was successful in raising the total donation close to 2 Million rupees including Tula Daan made by 51 individuals. In another event, Latamandu Higher Secondary School drew Tula Daan from 82 individuals in 2016. Each year hundreds of Mahayagyas are observed and the list goes on and on.

When Pandit Deebandhu Pokharel, who raised over 320 Millions rupees from one Mahayagya in 2009, was asked what moves people in Mahayagya so that they are ready to make donation, he explained that the story of the Puranas stir and revitalize the compassion that is sitting latent in the human mind. As a result, they are ready to give for self-satisfaction, social development, and the success of future generation. (Interview at *My Life My Belief* with Bijaya Kumar on Dec 18, 2009).

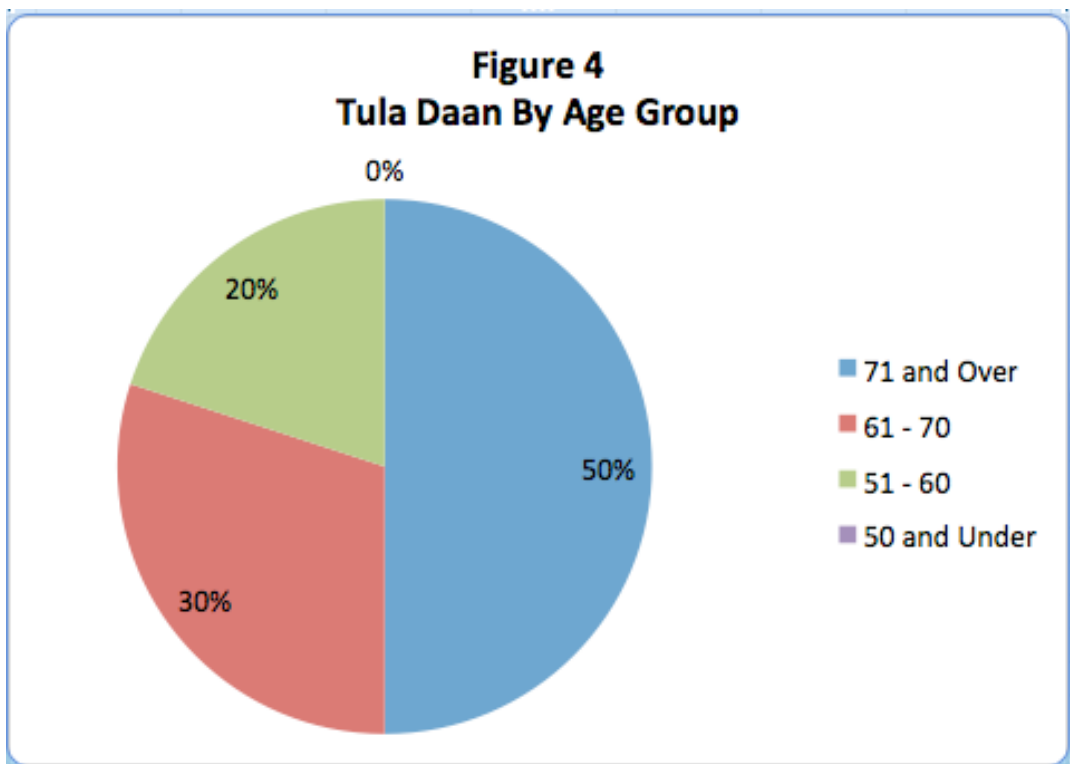
One of the questions during the process of interview the I asked to people was what motivated them to make Tula Daan. Their responses are broadly categorized in five groups and presented in the following chart (Figure 1):



Despite its roots in astrological benefit, a fairly vast majority of people chose reasons other than astrological ones as a motivating factor for making Tula Daan. 1 out of 10 chose astrological reasons and another 1 out of 10 people replied for religious reasons. 8 out of 10 made Tula Daan solely because they wanted to help people in need or wanted to make a contribution to their community or it was deeply self-satisfying and they were upholding the right cause. When asked how she felt after making Tula Daan, Lalmati Khatri who made Tula Daan to Rudrepipal Primary School, Baglung, Nepal, replied, “I felt free from within ... like a free kite flying into the open sky.” One could sense her self-contentment in her metaphorical answer.

Based on the replies received from different respondents it can be argued that a shift is taking place in the giving tradition of Tula Daan. That is to say, more and more people are making Tula Daan as a gesture of philanthropic activity rather than astrological practice.

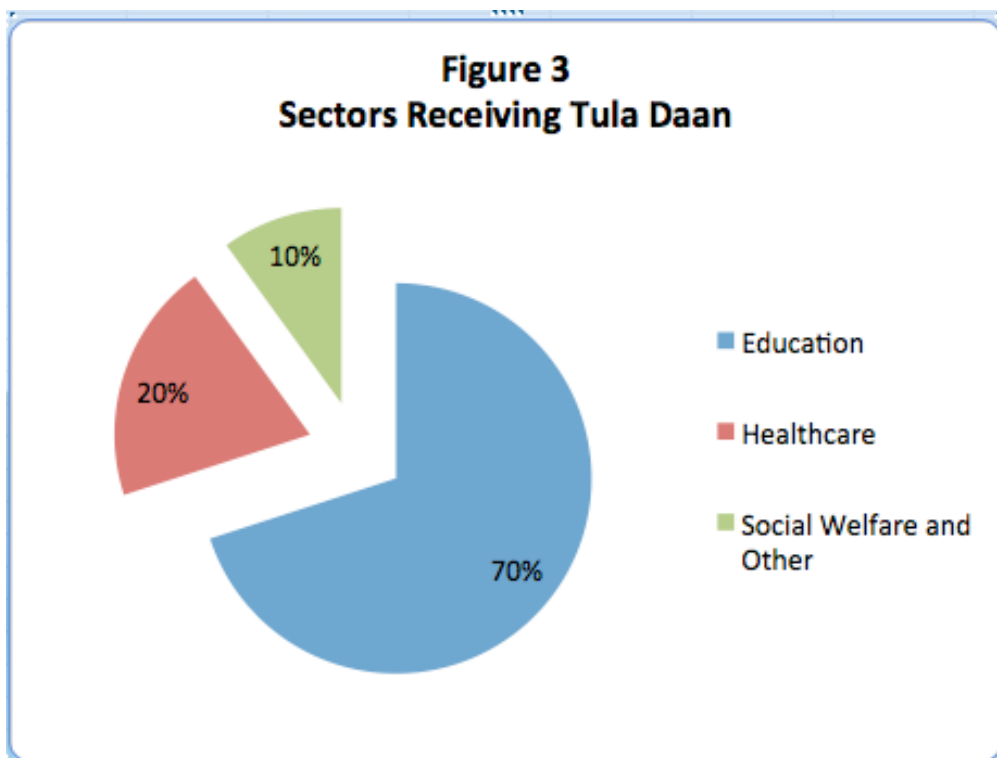
Another aspect of Tula Daan I wanted to explore was what age group of people mostly makes Tula Daan. I divided age groups into 4 categories - 50 and under, 51 - 60, 61 - 70 and 71 and over. The result came as presented in the figure 4 below:



There is a saying in Nepali “old is gold” which holds true in light of the age group of Tula Daan donors. In this research, 50% of respondents were over the age of 71; 30% fell between 61 and 70; 20% between 51 and 60, whereas no

respondent identified himself or herself below the age of 50. So it can be said that the older the better in determining the prospect of Tula Daan.

Apart from age and motivation behind Tula Daan, the research was also curious what sector Tula Daan is mostly made to. Their answers were grouped under 3 broad sectors - education, healthcare and social welfare & other. The figure 3 below shows what percentage of donors made Tula Daan to which sector:



7 out of 10 replied that they made Tula Daan to schools or campuses, 2 to healthcare and the rest to social welfare and other. These findings show that education is the most popular sector where most of the donors made Tula Daan to. However, societal values, geographical location and timing cannot be ignored. In the context of Nepal, people highly value education and it is not surprising to see this value reflected in Tula Daan too.

## **The Scope of Tula Daan in Hindu Communities in Canada and America**

The demographic flow of Hindu populations into Canada and America is ever increasing. According to Statistics Canada, Hindu population represented 1% of total population of Canada in 2001. It increased to 1.5% in 2011. The interesting thing is every province in Canada marks the increase of Hindu population, Ontario being the highest increase one from 1.99% in 2001 to 2.99% of total population in 2011. The research conducted by Pew Research Center, Hindu Population in America marks a 0.3% increase from 2007 to 2014. In 2007 it represented 0.4% of the total population whereas in 2014 it jumped to 0.7%. Along with the demographic shift, Hindu communities in different cities are coming together to establish many non-profit organizations, build temples, organize Mahayagyas and so on.

As the researcher has already highlighted that Mahayagya is one of the most viable options where Tula Daan can be performed, Hindu communities have already started observing such Mahayagyas, especially in the States. Although no Tula Daan has been made so far. Shree Pashupati Foundation, USA organized a Mahayagya in 2011 that generated over \$1 Million from around 600 donors from Hindu Nepales communities to help support community building. A significant number of people from America and Canada attended the event. Such events indicate a possibility and scope of Tula Daan in the Hindu diaspora.

When people move from one place to another or more specifically from one country to another they not only bring skills and experience but also also bring

with them a distinct set of norms and values, rituals and routines, customs and cultures. Hindu people are no exception to this. The giving traditions of Hindu communities are deeply rooted in Hindu values and philosophy, in other words Hindu culture. The cultural power is so influential that it can influence philanthropic activities. And philanthropic activities can be a bridge between charities and communities to foster a deeper relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its complex procedures, Tula Daan is one of the most engaging philanthropic activities where donations come as a spontaneous expression of philanthropic gesture from donors. More and more people are making Tula Daan as a way to enjoy their giving rather than reaping astrological benefits, which is a clear indication that the giving landscape of Tula Daan is becoming more fertile with philanthropic activities.

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