

# 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.

15th June, 2017  
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 janitaḥ 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> In Bādāmi (Bagalkot district, Karnataka) inscription (543 CE) of Cālikya Vallabheśvara (Pulakeśin I), he was described as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *sambhūta*’.<sup>3</sup> In the Mahākūṭa (Bagalkot district, Karnataka) pillar inscription (602 CE) of the Cālukya king Maṅgaleśa also, Pulakeśin I was mentioned as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *sambhūta*’.<sup>4</sup> The Viṣṇukunḍin king Mādhavarman III was mentioned as ‘Hiraṇyagarbha *prasūta*’ in his Ipur (Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) copper-plate grant (first set)<sup>5</sup> as well as his Polamuru (East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh) plates (612 CE).<sup>6</sup>

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 Hiranyagarbha/ 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 *hiranyagarbha 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.<sup>9</sup>

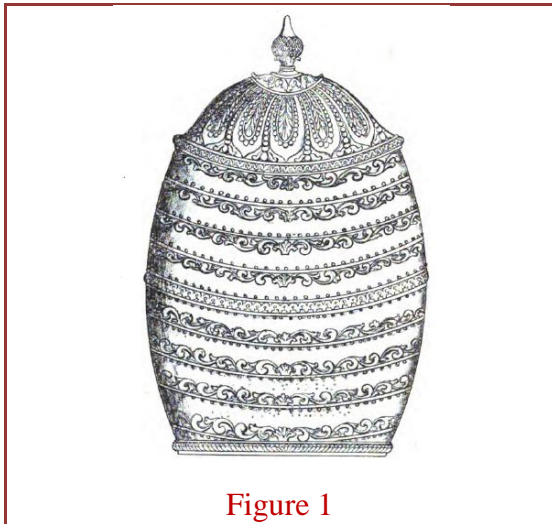


Figure 1

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 *dharmaśāstra* 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 *Pārameśvarasaṃhitā*, *Pādmasaṃhitā* and the *Paramasaṃhitā*, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup> 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 brāhmaṇs 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).<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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*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)<sup>6</sup>

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.

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## 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*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 *Ādityamaṇḍakaḥ* (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

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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*.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

*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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

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