

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CHARITY AND SOCIAL HARMONY: THE TEACHINGS OF YOGI VEMANA**

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Yogi Vemana's philosophy of charity stands as a beacon of non-violent means for social equality amidst the turbulent history of violent revolutions for attaining it. As a prominent Telugu poet and yogi, Vemana advocates charity, particularly food donation, to foster harmony between the rich and poor. His teachings highlight the spiritual significance of generosity, suggesting that true wealth lies in giving rather than accumulating material possessions. Vemana's verses celebrate the selfless acts of historical figures and stress the importance of humility in charitable actions. Vemana believes that charity leads to spiritual growth and divine favour when done with pure intentions and detachment. His teachings on spiritual growth and divine favour resulting from charity make us feel spiritually enriched and favoured. Through his poetic discourse, Vemana encourages proactive generosity, illustrating that the impact of altruism transcends the material realm, enriching both the giver and receiver. His timeless message urges a compassionate approach to wealth, advocating for charity as a sacred duty that enhances societal welfare and individual spiritual enlightenment.

Keywords: *Altruism, Charity, Donation, Generosity, Social Equality, Spiritual Growth, Vemana.*



Yogi Vemana, a prominent Telugu poet, believes charity is the way to bring equality among people. There are different philosophies in the world meant to bring equality. Some philosophies believe in violent methods, such as the united poor killing the rich who made them suffer. Violent revolutions appear in many countries, such as France, Russia, and others, where such violent revolutions destroy the monarchies. Nevertheless, in India, these changes happened without violence. The 565 princely states under British rule accepted democracy after our independence. India is a land of yogis who believe in non-violence. Vemana, being a yogi, also advocates charity as the means for social equality. This article explores Vemana's ideas on charity. Charity is the way shown by the ancient Indian scriptures for attaining merit and for removing the result of one's past sins. Thus, charity is beneficial for both the giver and the receiver. Charity always results in the welfare of society, which leads to harmony among the rich and the poor. Vemana also states specific ideas on charity, which bestow peace to both the giver and receiver in this world and the other world. His teachings on charity and its enduring impact inspire us to continue the noble act of giving, knowing that it leaves a lasting legacy of harmony and welfare.

He, who rescues the wretched from misery,
Doth deserve to be adored here itself.
How can his fortune hereafter be
Described in words worthy of himself?
(Murty 94)

Among all the good qualities, Vemana gives the most importance to charity. Charity also prioritised annadana, which provides food to needy people. Food is considered to be the gift of God and even as

God by scriptures. Vemana also supports this view and says food is ambrosia, even for gods like Hari and Hara. It makes everyone energetic in this Kali Yuga (iron age.) He considers the best charity "of all the charities, feeding the poor". (Rangacharya 44)

In Vemana's perspective, the significance of food transcends mere sustenance; it embodies the solution to life's adversities and serves as the essence of existence itself. In his assertion that "Food put an end to difficulties; food alone is the dwelling of life, beyond all other things," Vemana underscores the paramount importance of nourishment in human existence. Food not only satisfies physical hunger but also holds the power to alleviate various challenges and obstacles that life presents. By emphasising the centrality of food, Vemana underscores its indispensable role in sustaining life and overcoming hurdles, portraying it as the ultimate refuge and sustenance for humanity.

In ancient times, when journeys were arduous endeavours undertaken on foot or by bullock cart, travellers relied on the benevolence of others for sustenance and shelter along their routes. These essential waystations, known as *chatrams* (inns), were establishments constructed through the generosity of individuals who understood the importance of extending hospitality to weary travellers. Supported by the charitable contributions of the community, these inns provided nourishment and lodging and a sanctuary for travellers to rest and rejuvenate amidst their travels. Vemana, a staunch advocate for such acts of charity, extolled the virtues of those who contributed to constructing and maintaining these vital establishments. He proclaimed that the benefactors of such noble deeds



would be rewarded abundantly by the divine, their acts of kindness echoing throughout their lives, blessing them with wealth, prosperity, and joyous experiences. Vemana believed that the benevolent legacy of these charitable acts would accompany the donors wherever they ventured, their altruism casting a perpetual shadow of divine favour upon their lives. (Brown 803). Through his words, Vemana not only celebrated the tangible benefits of charity but also underscored its profound spiritual significance, affirming that generosity begets blessings that transcend the material realm.

Vemana highlights the exemplary generosity of Guntupalle Muthadu, renowned for his selfless food donations to the underprivileged. According to Vemana, Guntupalle Muthadu's unwavering devotion to Lord Shiva and his acts of philanthropy elevated him to a divine status, where he became inseparable from the deity himself. Through his proclamation, Vemana asserts the profound spiritual significance of food donation, suggesting that it serves as a pathway for individuals to attain proximity to the divine. Guntupalle Muthadu's embodiment of noble virtues manifested through his charitable deeds and reverence for God, is a compelling example of how generosity and devotion can lead one towards spiritual enlightenment and union with the divine. (Brown 550)

In the Taittiriya Upanishad, the Guru imparts invaluable wisdom to his departing students, emphasising honouring one's parents, teachers, and guests as divine manifestations. Echoing this sentiment, Vemana articulates a similar perspective in his poetic discourse, asserting that those who regard guests as embodiments of God and extend

even the smallest gesture of compassion by offering them sustenance can attain extraordinary strength, even capable of confronting and overcoming Yama, the formidable God of death. (Brown 1174). Vemana's verse underscores the profound significance of hospitality and generosity, portraying them as acts imbued with divine potency, capable of bestowing spiritual empowerment upon those who practice them with sincerity and benevolence. Through his words, Vemana illuminates the transformative power of compassion and selflessness, portraying them as formidable weapons against the inevitability of mortality itself. His teachings on the transformative power of kindness and selflessness empower us to practice these virtues.

Vemana emphasises the innate nature of generosity, likening it to the natural processes observed in the world around us. He suggests that just as honey forms within a hillock and rubies are found within hills, the act of bestowing kindness and generosity should arise spontaneously within human beings. Drawing a parallel to how fire emerges from a stick when friction is applied, Vemana highlights the inherent capacity within individuals to give to others. (Brown 626). Through his analogy, he encourages humanity to embrace the instinctual urge to provide for others, implying that generosity should flow effortlessly from the depths of one's being, much like the natural phenomena observed in the world.

Vemana encapsulates the essence of enlightened stewardship and compassionate generosity in his verse. Vemana extols the wisdom of an individual who, with discerning insight, allocates their wealth in a balanced and altruistic manner. By dedicating one

share of their wealth to the earth, symbolising a commitment to environmental sustainability and the nurturing of the planet, one share to others, reflecting a commitment to supporting the well-being and prosperity of fellow human beings, and one share to the poor, demonstrating a deep-seated empathy and solidarity with the marginalised and disadvantaged, this individual embodies the principles of equitable distribution and compassionate giving. Vemana asserts that such a person, who radiates with the virtuous glow of selfless generosity, will find their ultimate reward in the afterlife, ascending to heavenly realms where their benevolent deeds shall be eternally honoured and revered. (Brown 647). Through this proclamation, Vemana imparts timeless wisdom on the transformative power of mindful stewardship and philanthropy, affirming that true wealth lies not in accumulation but in the selfless sharing of blessings for the betterment of all.

Vemana further underscores the importance of bestowing upon others a mindset of detachment, recognising that the wealth one possesses is not truly theirs but meant for the betterment of society through acts of charity. Vemana emphasises that genuine generosity is a willingness to give freely and joyfully, without hesitation or reluctance, and without harbouring negative thoughts or objections. He implores his audience to heed this message, suggesting that the ultimate act of charity is performed with pure intention and an open heart, transcending personal attachment or selfish desires. Through these lines, Vemana inspires a profound shift in perspective, urging individuals to embrace the

transformative power of selfless giving to enrich both their own lives and the lives of others.

True charity is that given
With detachment, without hesitation,
Without saying 'no';
Listen Vema the beloved one.
(Rangacharya 79)

Likewise, Vemana celebrates the profound wisdom and spiritual elevation that accompany acts of generosity. He suggests that those who freely give of themselves gain access to a wealth of knowledge and insight that transcends formal education. Vemana implies that even the gods admire those who practice generosity, acknowledging the inherent virtue and divinity in such actions. By asserting that generosity facilitates the acquisition of various forms of knowledge and learning, he underscores the transformative power of altruism in enriching one's life on multiple levels. Furthermore, Vemana reassures his audience that no negative consequence or harm comes from acts of generosity, affirming its universal value and positive impact on the world. Through his poem, Vemana invites individuals to embrace the practice of generosity as a pathway to spiritual growth, wisdom, and divine favour. "To the liberal man, the vessels of the mundane egg will fall into his hand. The demigods will become his dependents. Liberality becomes the residence of all modes of knowledge. Through liberality, no grief can befall us in the world." (Brown 603)

In antiquity, before the advent of banking systems, people safeguarded their wealth by burying it underground within their homes, believing it to be a secure measure against theft. However, Vemana astutely observes the impermanence of such



practices, noting that money buried in the earth ultimately becomes lost or inaccessible over time, possibly displaced by the natural rotation of the earth. Similarly, money kept outside risks being stolen or lost to others. Vemana extends this critique even further, suggesting that the wealth spent on sustenance merely sustains the physical body and offers no lasting benefit. Instead, he asserts that "What is bestowed alone remains ours." (Brown 1064), emphasising the enduring value of altruism and selfless giving as the sole possession that truly belongs to the individual. Through his verse, Vemana imparts timeless wisdom, urging individuals to prioritise acts of benevolence and charity as the most meaningful expression of wealth and fulfilment.

Vemana provides a profound reflection on the impermanence of worldly possessions and the enduring impact of charitable acts. By highlighting the transient nature of material wealth, relationships, and status symbols, he emphasises the ultimate insignificance of these possessions in the face of mortality. Instead, Vemana places paramount importance on the lasting legacy of altruism and generosity. He suggests that the only thing that genuinely accompanies individuals beyond the realms of life is the benevolence they have extended to others through acts of charity. In doing so, Vemana underscores the transformative power of giving, implying that the impact of selfless deeds outlasts the transient nature of worldly attachments. This perspective challenges individuals to prioritise acts of kindness and compassion, recognising them as the most enduring and meaningful contributions to the world. "The villages (mahals) we possess shall not follow us in death, nor shall our jewels, our wife,

children or friends accompany us. The alms we have bestowed shall alone follow us." (Brown 548)

Vemana further encapsulates a profound perspective on the nature of ownership and charity. He challenges the notion of possessiveness, suggesting that considering all earned wealth exclusively one's own is folly. Vemana posits that actual ownership lies in giving freely, implying that material possessions only hold value when shared generously with others. By likening accumulated wealth to leaves on a tree, he means that possessions are transient and ultimately insignificant in comparison to the act of selfless giving. Vemana advocates for a shift in mindset, emphasising the liberating power of charity and the intrinsic value of generosity over possessiveness. He invites individuals to transcend selfish notions of ownership and embrace a philosophy rooted in compassion, empathy, and altruism.

If you think what you earn belongs to thee.

With such foolish concept none can agree.

That alone is thine which you give as free,

The rest belongs to thee as leaves to a tree.

(Alikhan 67)

There is a well-known story of King Sibi, who is known for his charity in Mahabharatha. Through the example of King Sibi sacrificing a part of his body to save a dove from a hawk, Vemana highlights the extraordinary lengths one can go to serve others. He underscores the transformative power of charity, suggesting that acts of selflessness and compassion elevate individuals to positions of honour and esteem in society. By contrasting the fate of the wicked with the praise bestowed upon the charitable, Vemana



emphasises the universal recognition and admiration accorded to those who exhibit kindness and altruism. In doing so, he champions the intrinsic value of benevolence and underscores its capacity to inspire admiration and reverence among humanity. "King Sibi cut a piece out of his body to give for a dove to a hawk. He became the topic of the report and attained fame. They will not esteem him who is wicked, but will praise him who is charitable." (Brown 927)

Vemana praises Karna, well-known for charity in the epic Mahabharata. He highlights Karna as a manifestation of noble character. Vemana underscores Karna's greatness by emphasising his dedication to bestowing gifts upon others. By doing so, Vemana suggests that Karna's generosity and benevolence set him apart as one of the most significant individuals in the world. Vemana's admiration for Karna's charitable deeds reflects his belief in the intrinsic value of selflessly helping others. Through Karna's example, Vemana conveys the message that true excellence lies not only in personal achievements but also in the positive impact one can have on the lives of others through acts of kindness and charity. "Carnudu was noble; Who in the world is greater? He meditated bestowing gifts; no man knows of the excellence of him who doth no good to others." (Brown 676)

Vemana offers a nuanced perspective on the nature of charity and humility. He distinguishes between two types of charitable acts: tangible assets, such as land, and those stemming from personal gestures or efforts. Vemana suggests that while it may be acceptable to publicly declare the donation of material possessions like land, other acts of charity

should be kept private. By advocating for humility in charitable actions, he underscores the importance of sincerity and selflessness in giving. Vemana implies that true charity arises from a genuine desire to help others rather than seeking recognition or praise. Thus, he encourages individuals to practice humility and discretion in their acts of generosity, emphasising the intrinsic value of selfless giving over external validation or acknowledgement. "It is lawful to tell all men in the court that you have made a gift of land. But of any other gifts of your hand, you are never to tell others that you have given it." (Brown 301)

Vemana further highlights the profound value of giving, even for impoverished people. Vemana suggests that one's lack of wealth does not diminish the act of giving; instead, it is an inherent virtue that transcends material conditions. He points out that even if a beggar who survives on alms shares a portion of what they receive with others, their own resources may seem to diminish, but the spiritual and moral wealth they gain is immeasurable. Vemana's perspective underscores the idea that true charity comes from the heart, and this selflessness enriches the soul, regardless of one's material status.

Though you are a beggar and beg alms,
If you give alms from those alms,
Through your alms will diminish. (Moorty and Roberts 65)

Vemana challenges the notion that those who accumulate wealth through laborious efforts and willingly share it with others during times of celebration should be labelled as miserly or hard-hearted. Instead, he suggests that such individuals exemplify the true essence of compassion and



benevolence. By emphasising giving during festive occasions, he underscores the importance of sharing one's blessings with others, especially during times of joy and abundance. Vemana implies that genuine generosity stems not from mere abundance but from a compassionate heart willing to share even in times of personal achievement and happiness. Thus, he advocates for a holistic understanding of charity that transcends material wealth and encompasses a spirit of empathy and kindness towards others. "Shall those who while they have wealth labour and toil and in the feast days (on happy days) bestow on others what they ask, shall these be called hard men?" (Brown 535)

Vemana poignantly illustrates his perspective on charity as a proactive and preventive measure rather than a reactive one. He emphasises the importance of foresight and prudent action through the metaphor of boiling vegetables and picking out straws afterwards. Vemana suggests that it is senseless to attempt to rectify a situation after the fact when foresight and preparation could have prevented it altogether. By likening the act of giving to charity to the straws that should have been gathered before boiling, he implies that charity should be practised proactively before one faces destitution or loss. Moreover, Vemana underscores the futility of offering charity once all possessions have been lost, indicating that true charity involves giving material resources and empowering individuals to avoid deprivation and hardship. Thus, he advocates for a deeper understanding of charity as a proactive and compassionate response to the needs of others, rooted in foresight, empathy, and prevention. "After you have boiled vegetables, is it

possible to pick out the straws? Sense would teach you to gather them before boiling. After you have lost all you possessed where is charity (dharma)." (Brown 1176)

Vemana urges the rich to assist the poor during their hey-day, highlighting the fleeting nature of prosperity. Vemana states that the rich who do not help the needy in time cannot aid others when they lose their riches, suggesting that their ability to give diminishes along with their riches. By emphasising the inevitability of wealth and poverty in the life cycle, he underscores the impermanence of material possessions. Vemana's message resonates with a deeper truth about the human condition: life's journey is finite and unpredictable regardless of one's financial status. In this context, Vemana advocates for the rich to utilise the opportunity to serve the needy.

Help not the poor the rich in their hey-day.

What have they to give when wealth goes away?

Wealthy or poverty doth consume life's span
As fate provides no third season for man. (Ali Khan 98)

Vemana's teachings on charity reflect a deep understanding of the transformative power of selfless giving. His verses illustrate that true wealth lies not in the accumulation of material possessions but in sharing and uplifting others. By advocating for charity to achieve spiritual growth and social harmony, Vemana offers a timeless message that resonates across cultures and generations. His emphasis on the importance of food, humility, and proactive generosity challenges us to rethink our relationship with wealth and to embrace a more



compassionate and empathetic approach to life. Through his wisdom, Vemana inspires us to see charity as an obligation and a sacred duty that enriches both the giver and the receiver, fostering a more just and harmonious society.

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