



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The Gift and its Forms of Life in Contemporary India

Citation for published version:

Copeman, J 2011, 'The Gift and its Forms of Life in Contemporary India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5, pp. 1051-1094. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000205>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0026749X11000205](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X11000205)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Modern Asian Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Cambridge University Press. Copeman, J. (2011). The Gift and Its Forms of Life in Contemporary India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 45(5), 1051-1094 doi: 10.1017/S0026749X11000205

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



*The Gift and Its Forms of Life in Contemporary India**

JACOB COPEMAN

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD, UK
Email: jacob.copeman@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper seeks to document and interpret some of the many life forms of the gift of *dan* in contemporary India. It attempts to be both summative in reflecting on the recent extremely productive literature on *dan* and programmatic in identifying emergent themes and instances of *dan* that require more detailed analysis at present and in the future. The paper focuses in particular on highly public forms of *dan*, and examines the relationship between *dan* and modernist modes of philanthropy. It discusses the giving of *dan* online and biomedical variants of *dan* which foreground sacrifice. The paper is not a final statement but a call to focus attention on new terrains of *dan* and the continuing vitality of this distinctive set of exchange categories.

Introduction

Any statement to the effect that *dan*—archetypically an unreciprocated gift or donation, its origins believed to reside in Hindu law—is, in its contemporary Indian manifestations, mutable and subject to a variety of complex extensions, would be difficult to refute, but should be offered modestly: its current mutability is amply evident on a variety of levels: conceptual, geographical, as well as spiritual, but this, in itself, is hardly novel. If the *dan* variants discussed in the Dharmasastras of roughly 1000–1300 CE were characterized by ‘pliancy’ and openness to ‘stretching’,¹ then the new trends and variants to which this paper draws attention attest less to some

* For helpful comments on sections of this paper I would like to thank Manleen Kaur, Nathaniel Roberts, James Laidlaw, Jonathan Parry, Susan Bayly, Erica Bornstein and Deepa Reddy. I would also like to acknowledge encouragement received from Lawrence Cohen, Mishko Hansen and John Zavos, and thank those who gave me permission to cite their unpublished works.

¹ Maria Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Reflections on Dana* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 123–124.

putative divergence than to their continuity in this respect. This paper is concerned with new, or at least, relatively recent extensions of *dan* that have yet to be adequately documented or theorized. However, even to use the word 'new' is to conceptually restate an analytically unhelpful cultural narrative that globalization tells about itself: that of a radical break between 'before' and 'now'.² With this in mind it should be stated unequivocally that the 'new' variants discussed here attest as much to the *tenacity* of *dan* categories as to their transformation. Hence, the temptation to conceptually separate 'traditional' modes of *dan*, for example, caste-based, village-based, from more discernibly 'modern' manifestations (for example, biomedical-based, internet-based) should be resisted, or at least pursued with extreme care. Nevertheless, there *do* exist a set of contemporary *dan* extensions that both differ from and critically embody key aspects of established forms of *dan*—and these have received little attention from South Asianist scholars. It is these fragile *dan* 'coalitions', both modern and historical, both incipient and bearing traits of great antiquity, that this paper seeks to bring to the analytical fore.

I emphasize that *dan* is by no means the only form of gift exchange that matters in India—now or at any time. In the Hindu world, *bhik*, *dakshina* and *sangita* are important exchange categories, and various non-Hindu communities enact a multitude of non-*dan* gift transactions.³ Neither is *dan* a purely Indian phenomenon: an array of Buddhist forms of *dan* exist throughout south and southeast Asia.⁴ This paper, however, unapologetically focuses on Indian modes of *dan*—though these modes are hardly fixed rigidly to Indian territory, as will be seen. In thinking about the *Indian* gift, the present paper connects to a site of Indianist scholarship that has over the last 25 years

² Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, 'On Heterochrony: Birthday Gifts to Stalin, 1949', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2006), Vol. 12, p. 356.

³ The *sangita* is a 'small gift which is said to make up for a possible deficiency in the central gift'. (Peter van der Veer, 'The Concept of the Ideal Brahman as an Indological Construct', in G. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Manohar, 1989), p. 74). *Dakshina* is a gift frequently interpreted as a form of remuneration for a priest's services. *Bhik* or *bhiksha* is equivalent to alms.

⁴ See, for instance, Patrice Ladwig, 'Narrative Ethics: The Excess of Giving and Moral Ambiguity in the Lao Vessantara-Jataka', in Monica Heintz (ed.), *The Anthropology of Moralities* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009); Robert Simpson, 'Impossible Gifts: Bodies, Buddhism and Bioethics in Contemporary Sri Lanka', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2004), 10, 839–859; M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

been extraordinarily fertile. Building on the classic Indological works of Trautmann and Heesterman, anthropologists Jonathan Parry and Gloria Raheja, in particular, have demonstrated with great subtlety that Indian concepts of *dana*, or in Hindi *dan*, are by no means mere relics confined to ancient Hindu texts such as *The Laws of Manu*, but instead constitute a vital contemporary category of exchange that is saturated with associations connected with kingship, sacrifice, sinfulness, asceticism, merit, and caste identity.⁵ It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these classic 1980s studies of the gift.⁶

These contributions have informed a series of more recent studies of exchange practices in India by scholars such as Laidlaw, Babb,

⁵ T. Trautmann, *Dravidian Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); J. C. Heesterman, 'Reflections on the significance of the Daksina', *Indo-Iranian Journal* (1959), 3, 241–258; 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer', *Wien Z. Kunde Siid-Ostasiens* (1964), 8, 1–31; Jonathan Parry, 'Ghosts, Greed and Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priests', *Man* (1980), 15, 1, 88–111; 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', *Man* (1986), 21, 3, 453–473; 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', in Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (eds), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); 'India: Caste, Kingship, and Dominance Reconsidered' *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1988), 17, 497–522; 'Centrality, Mutuality and Hierarchy: Shifting Aspects of Inter-Caste Relationships in North India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1989), 23, 1, 79–101; 'On the Uses of Irony and Ambiguity: Shifting Perspectives on Patriliney and Women's Ties to Natal Kin', in Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁶ It is notable that non-South Asianists have looked to these scholars' depictions of *dan* as a source of inspiration in their analyses of non-reciprocal gift-giving in diverse contexts. In particular, Konrad, in her study of ova donors and recipients in Britain finds in the work of Parry, Raheja and Laidlaw rare instances of serious scholarly treatments of anonymous, asymmetrical giving. Konrad additionally draws on Raheja and Parry in delineating different registers of toxicity in gifts of ova. Also of note here is Derrida's reference in *Given Time* to Raheja's work in a discussion of the gift as being potentially a 'poisoned present'. Hibbets and Laidlaw have both noted how Derrida's uncompromisingly austere definition of a gift (in essence a gift, for it to be a gift—that is, immune from economic considerations—must be neither given nor received, or at any rate it should be *forgotten*) is perhaps fulfilled most fully by certain variants of Indic *dan*. Monica Konrad, *Nameless Relations: Anonymity, Melanesia and Reproductive Gift Exchange between British Ova Donors and Recipients* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), p. 139; James Laidlaw, 'A Free Gift Makes No Friends', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2000), 6, 617–634; Jacques Derrida, *Given time: 1. Counterfeit money* (trans. P. Kamuf), (Chicago: University Press, 1992), pp. 35–36; Maria Hibbets, 'Saving Them From Yourself: An Enquiry into the South Asian Gift of Fearlessness', *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1999), 27, 3, 437–462.

Osella and Osella, Säävälä, Snodgrass and Mines, many of which were written in dialogue with and drew inspiration from the earlier theorizations, whilst also attempting to refine various aspects of them.⁷ However, this fecundity, with its far reaching implications, has yet to be systematically reflected upon by Indianist scholars. The purpose of this paper is to take the first step towards such a reflection— theoretically and analytically— but to do so in ‘grounded’ fashion through the use of concrete examples drawn mainly from the author’s ethnographic research in north India between 2003 and 2005 on blood donation (*rakt-dan*). Written materials drawn from a variety of sources will also be analysed. Before addressing directly the issue of contemporary extensions and variants of *dan*, it is necessary to examine the prominent and sometimes controversial debates that have framed the question of *dan* in recent years.

Debating *dan*

Of particular importance in the debates subsequent to the 1980s’ studies by Parry and Raheja has been Laidlaw’s insistence that there is no single logic of *dan* shared by all participants and present throughout the whole of Indian society.⁸ The Jain alms-round in Jaipur, documented by Laidlaw, demonstrates this point nicely, because the *dan* offered by lay to renouncer Jains is explicitly ‘constructed contrastively, as deeply different from other forms of *dan*, and it is routinely understood by different participants in crucially different ways’.⁹ Indeed, the Jain practice only works as it does *because* the different participants (lay-giver and renouncer-receiver) understand it differently.

⁷ James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society among the Jains* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Laidlaw, ‘A Free Gift Makes No Friends’; Lawrence Babb, *Absent Lord: Ascetics and Kings in Jain Ritual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, ‘Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies in Kerala,’ *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1996), 30, 1, 37–68; Minna Säävälä, ‘Low Caste but Middle-Class: Some Religious Strategies for Middle-Class identification in Hyderabad’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (2001), 35, 3, 293–318; Jeffrey Snodgrass, ‘Beware of Charitable Souls: Contagion, Roguish Ghosts and the Poison(s) of Hindu Alms’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2001), 7, 4, 687–704; Diane Mines, *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁸ Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation*, pp. 294–295.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Several scholars have found the argument that there is a single logic of *dan* implicit in Raheja's, *The Poison in the Gift*, a reading that Raheja strongly contests,¹⁰ and that certainly could not be imputed to her subsequent works, which have emphasized the 'multivocality' of Indian gift exchange, with its 'multiple strategic possibilities'.¹¹ Nevertheless, a unitary concept of *dan* has come to assume the status for some scholars of a kind of special access route to Indian cultural logics. In *Absent Lord*, for example, Babb draws on the work of Parry and Raheja in seeing the principles underlying *dan* as a connective force underpinning such seemingly diverse ritual practices associated with Saiva Siddhanta, Buddhism and Jain ritual culture.¹² Finding the structural principles of *dan* present in various transfigured and yet readily identifiable ways in a number of seemingly divergent devotional contexts, Babb ultimately concludes that the ritual patterns he documents 'are neither Hindu nor Jain but variations on a deeper structure that is simply South Asian'.¹³

Perhaps the most notable treatment of *dan* as a special access route to Indian cultural logics is Quigley's *The Interpretation of Caste* which sees *dan* as providing a generalized mechanism of caste-ranking through 'impurity' transfers that connects with kingship and kinship models in the subcontinent.¹⁴ For Laidlaw, Quigley's approach epitomizes a fairly widespread problem in responses to the work of Parry and Raheja: a general acceptance of the idea 'that there is such a thing as "the Indian gift", grounded in a hegemonic ideology, which is shared by all participants and which structures relations in determinate ways'.¹⁵ Gregory, too, pays attention to the likelihood of dissenting perceptions with his emphasis on the possibility of 'rival

¹⁰ Personal communication.

¹¹ Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*; David Gellner, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 119–124; C. A. Gregory, 'The Poison in Raheja's Gift. A Review Article', *Social Analysis* (1992), 32, 95–108; T. N. Madan, 'Auspiciousness and Purity: Some Reconsiderations', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1991), 25, p. 293; Raheja, 'On the Uses of Irony and Ambiguity', p. 79.

¹² Babb, *Absent Lord*, Chapter 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁴ Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation*, p. 294. Some years earlier Fuller also made the point that 'The Hindu theory of the gift, as elaborated in the classical texts, is not unitary'. C. J. Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 67.

cognitions of the [same] transaction', which he terms 'asymmetrical recognition'.¹⁶

Osella and Osella's study of giving practices in a Kerala village gives force to the arguments of Gregory and Laidlaw.¹⁷ Based on the viewpoints of both donors and recipients, it reveals that different parties to the same transaction may have very different conceptions of the same gift. Landowners view the customary annual feasts they stage for their field labourers as being unreciprocated, and see their gifts of food as transferring their faults to the eaters. Labourers, however, view the food as a sign of reciprocity for the work they do on the land, and conceive the food they eat as transmitting to them the landowners' good fortune. Hence, Osella and Osella suggest, 'a greater range of qualities may be detached and passed between people' than previously acknowledged in the literature on this subject.¹⁸

None of this is to suggest, however, that there are no emblematic or distinctive 'traits' recurrent within different varieties of *dan*. But recent work on Indian gift exchange has laid emphasis on a *dan* which is characterized by a multiplicity of form and valuation, with the different parties of particular *dan* transactions frequently evaluating its significance in dissimilar ways. What is required, then, is a nuanced perspective which notes both the remarkable persistence

¹⁶ C. A. Gregory, *Savage Money: The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange* (Chur: Harwood Academic, 1997), pp. 65–66.

¹⁷ Osella and Osella, 'Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies'.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62. Heim likewise downplays the transfer of inauspiciousness in regard to the Indological literature: 'The most systematic indigenous gift theory that we have, that is, the *dannibandha* literature, was quite simply not interested in the poison of the gift. . . . Such a conclusion should begin to nuance the views of scholars who have taken it as axiomatic that the giver always enjoys higher status than the recipient and that danger or inauspiciousness is always transferred in the South Asian *dan*', (Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*, p. 63). Despite arguing that a greater range of qualities may be transmissible than had hitherto been acknowledged, Osella and Osella maintain a causal relation between unreciprocated gifts and the passing on of poisons (in this they follow Parry; cf. Laidlaw). Snodgrass's study of the giving of alms to Bhat praise singers in Rajasthan is another valuable contribution to the literature on this theme. His aim is to question the centrality of 'contagion theories' of the gift's harmfulness, proposing that 'we be particularly attentive to alternative explanations for the dangers of alms as they exist in northern India'. Finding that Bhat singers couch their worries about receiving gifts in a spiritual rather than a contagious idiom, Snodgrass suggests that 'there is no singular "poison" in the Hindu gift, but a range of "poisons"'. Important though this point is, there remains the *a priori* judgment that a gift's content or effects, whether bio-moral or not, are likely to be harmful. Osella and Osella, 'Articulation of Physical and Social Bodies'; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 134–135; James Laidlaw, 'The Uses and Abuses of Theology: Comments on Jonathan Parry's *Death in Banaras*', *South Asia Research* (1996), 16, 1, p. 40; Snodgrass, 'Beware of charitable souls', p. 698.

and prevalence of particular themes in Indian giving (in particular idealized asymmetry and the perilous nature of transfers between donor and donee) *and* the fact that theories of the gift have been and continue to be subject to considerable alteration over time 'and the idea that gifts should be avoided is variously ignored, qualified and even contradicted in different sources'.¹⁹

Laidlaw also questions certain assumptions about the nature of the gift's transmissibility.²⁰ The paradigmatic content of *dan* in Indian anthropology is 'sin' or inauspiciousness. For instance, in the village of Pahansu in Uttar Pradesh, inauspicious gifts are given at many occasions during the yearly cycle of festivals as well as at a plenitude of life-cycle rituals, with the effect of endlessly reinforcing the dominance of a particular caste grouping (the Gujars). Whereas in Banaras, funerary gifts 'corrupt the recipient body and soul, and result in untold misfortune unless proper expiatory steps are taken'.²¹ Laidlaw's argument, however, is that the gift's spirit or 'poison' is 'not some unique or mysterious substance found only in gifts'. What has been taken to be a specific feature of *dan* was really a manifestation of 'the dangers attendant on social interaction in general'.²² Laidlaw gives the examples of cooked food, cloth and detached parts of the body as 'powerful media for the flow of bio-moral qualities between persons'.²³ According to this argument, Indian gifts should be considered a key context for transmission of 'spirit' rather than a specific manifestation of transmission with its own unique properties.

Since social interaction is by no means always harmful or dangerous in South Asia (indeed, in some cases quite the reverse as when the saliva of a sacred teacher is transferred to worshippers 'as a source of grace and power'),²⁴ it follows from Laidlaw's argument that *dan* need not necessarily poison or pollute. And yet this is a suggestion subtly present in Parry's own analysis of mortuary gift-giving in Banaras.²⁵ While Parry's study indeed centres on the sin and misfortune transmissible through *dan*, the model he elucidates at least

¹⁹ Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess*, p. 67.

²⁰ Laidlaw, 'A Free Gift Makes No Friends'.

²¹ Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*; Jonathan Parry, "The crisis of corruption" and "the idea of India: a worm's eye view", in I. Pardo (ed.), *The Morals of Legitimacy* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), p. 44.

²² Laidlaw, 'A Free Gift Makes No Friends', p. 630.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

²⁴ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 52.

²⁵ Parry, *Death in Banaras*.

implies the possibility of the reverse effect. For if gifts from mourners to Brahmins are imperilling because they are ‘saturated with the evil consequences of the donor’s conduct’,²⁶ then gifts from those who are of elevated, or enlightened status, such as ‘saintly’ spiritual teachers, might well be saturated with the morally edifying consequences of the donor’s conduct. In this light, Parry’s priests, in emphasizing the sin they accumulate from donors’ gifts, reveal less that the gift is an exemplary means of sin removal, than their own pessimistic view of their fellow Indians.

A recent essay by Huberman lends support to Laidlaw’s argument.²⁷ Huberman finds that the dangers attendant on exchange are not particular to *dan*, but hinge rather on a set of ‘highly pervasive cultural beliefs regarding the relationships between persons, their acts, sin, and its circulation’. Her exploration of the moral perils negotiated by the young boys who operate as commission agents (*dalals*) in the foreign tourist economy in Banaras leads her to challenge the view ‘that it is only the unreciprocated gift of *dan* that is believed to transmit inauspiciousness or sin to those who receive it’. Huberman also states that, ‘While [dangerous transmissibility and notions of sin and inauspiciousness] may become more pronounced in... contexts [of *dan*], they are hardly limited to them’.²⁸ This is a compelling point on several scores. First, the evidence she presents appears to bear out Laidlaw’s argument that the transmissibility associated with *dan* is far from being specific to *dan*. Second, the point is conceded that such transmissibility *is* frequently more pronounced in contexts of *dan*. What this enables us to see is that the positions of Laidlaw and Parry are perfectly compatible. Laidlaw correctly views the contagiousness of *dan* as partaking of a very general phenomenon and as present in an array of non-*dan* contexts. But Parry is also compelling and convincing in arguing for the distinctiveness of non-reciprocal *dan* in being a particularly *effective* mechanism of transmission, and also in claiming that this is so in a very wide variety of settings in South Asia.²⁹ The

²⁶ Ibid, p. 129.

²⁷ Jenny Huberman, ‘The Dangers of *Dalali*, the Dangers of *Dan*’ (n.d.).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mines recently documented the disposal of negative moral qualities through gift-giving in rural Tamil Nadu. Parry, too, in a study of narratives of corruption in the steel town of Bhilai, Chhattisgarh, suggests the fascinating possibility that the taker of a bribe is compromised in a structurally similar manner to the receiver of *dan*, with both *dan* and bribes requiring proper ‘digestion’ by those who receive them. Mines, *Fierce Gods*; Parry, ‘The Crisis of Corruption’, p. 44.

examples cited below concerning *rakt-dan* add further weight to Parry's claim.

So the question should not be: why is *dan* a mode of (in most but not all cases *dangerous*) transmission? Rather, the question becomes: why is *dan* such a pronounced mode of transmission? I put forward several suggestions. The most frequent manifestations of compromising social contact in the subcontinent are contingent or accidental: being pushed up against unknown others on a train or bus, touching the hand of the trader in the market, and so on. If such contact is frequently accidental, the contact entailed in *dan* rarely is: *dan* is highly *elaborated* social contact. For example, Mines notes that, in order to expel and transfer negative moral qualities in the village in which she worked in Tamil Nadu, and also in Pahansu, the Uttar Pradesh village studied by Raheja, these qualities are often 'transferred from persons to objects and then on to other persons'.³⁰ In Pahansu, 'transfers are effected through simple ritual procedures. . . such as circling an object around a person's body to remove an illness or other negative quality and then transferring it to another person or place'.³¹ Negative moral qualities are thus made finite and disposable through their objectification. As elaborated social contact, *dan* possesses a particular directedness—a 'vectorial' quality—that other forms of 'contagious' contact do not. In the cases discussed by Raheja, Mines and Parry, by virtue of both the giver's intentionality and the attendant ritual procedures, *dan* appears to objectify and make explicit those always-present and yet at the same time frequently latent fears concerning the flows of bio-moral qualities between persons. Through *dan*, one is brought fully face-to-face with the dangers of social contact.

There is, as will have been noted, something else that is distinctive about those cases of *dan* where transmission is held to occur: its making finite, and in consequence, its making disposable of sins, impurities or inauspiciousness. The ritual procedures mentioned above would seem to be critical determinants of this process of making finite. In order to illustrate the generality of the contagiousness of social contact I gave the example earlier of the sacred teacher whose saliva is a boon to his worshippers. When the saliva is transferred as a source of grace, there is no suggestion that the sacred teacher is himself emptied of grace and power. So *dan* is not identical with the theme of generalized infectious contact but is a significant variation on it. *Dan* represents a usage or

³⁰ Mines, *Fierce Gods*, p. 72.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68; Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*, pp. 85–86.

deployment of this generalized transmissibility in order that particular qualities may be expelled as well as infect—*dan* in this view may be understood as an attempt to hone and manipulate a more general template in order that the one who infects is simultaneously emptied.³² If this were to be accepted, then what is unique about the gift is not that it passes on bio-moral qualities, but that it purifies the giver.

Dan in public

I turn now to the life of *dan* in public—a key manifestation of *dan* in contemporary India that has yet to receive sustained analytical attention, perhaps due to the very specific nature of the ethnographic contexts that frame existing studies. Most prominently, an assortment of charitable and philanthropic organizations attempt to employ *dan* as an instrument to foster a public ‘giving culture’, which they see as either lacking or misdirected in its existing manifestations.³³ Critical to these attempts is the objectification of *dan*: its fixing as a ‘thing’ as a condition of its application. As seen above, the meanings of *dan* discussed in the literature vary greatly and are elaborated in strikingly contrasting ways. However, attempts to objectify *dan* so that it may be engaged in support of particular projects give rise to a process of disambiguation. To clarify I turn to Cohn who, in his well-known account of the census and cultural objectification, argues that the ‘Western educated class of Indians’ began in the twentieth century to ‘stand back and look at themselves’, making their own culture into a ‘thing’.³⁴ Once culture has been turned into a conscious object, states Cohn, it can be used for ‘political, cultural and religious battles’.³⁵ Following from this, I demonstrate below how an objectified—singularized, disambiguated, ‘generified’³⁶—*dan* is deployed by blood bank medics in the ‘battle’ to increase

³² Cf. Ann Grodzins Gold, *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 292.

³³ See Jacob Copeman, *Veins of Devotion: Blood Donation and Religious Experience in North India* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009), pp. 50–54.

³⁴ B. S. Cohn, ‘The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia’, in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 229.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁶ Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz, ‘On the Generification of Culture: From Blow Fish to Melanesian’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2001), 7, 509–525.

levels of voluntary blood donation. I would go so far as to suggest that objectified/applied versions of *dan* are one of the most significant ways in which *dan* is conceptualized and enacted in present-day India. That said, such versions cannot alone define what *dan* has become or is becoming. As will become apparent, the case of blood donation demonstrates the different ways in which the suppressed (or ambiguous) elements are continually creeping back in. There is, then, in addition to the key trend of disambiguation, a countervailing trend of *re*-ambiguation.

In its objectified, public life, *dan* can appear almost as a free-floating signifier, de-contextualized, and seemingly danger-free. Indeed, far from being morally imperilling, it functions in public largely as an unproblematic indicator of the genius of Indian charity—a kind of triumph of Indian culture. To take one of many possible examples: at a social service awards function in 2005 organized by the Rotary Club of Madras, Tamil Nadu Governor Shri Surjit Singh Barnala suggested that the Rotary movement—a prominent contributor to the national polio eradication programme—was heir to India's 'great tradition of voluntary service', as encapsulated in 'the virtue of *dan* or free gift'.³⁷

Characterizations abound of *dan* as a pristine philanthropic principle ripe for operationalization. In an essay entitled 'Philanthropic Perspectives of Hinduism', written with the express intention of

³⁷ <http://www.tnrajbhavan.gov.in/121205.htm> [ALL WEBSITES LAST ACCESSED 28 JANUARY 2010]. See also the recent edited book *Philanthropy and Cultural Context: Western Philanthropy in South, East and Southeast Asia*. The aim of the collection was to explore 'endogenous approaches to "giving" and to "build on [those] traditional/cultural patterns that are positive, and historically work in that culture'. The essays are 'excellent', as one reviewer put it, 'in suggesting how a better understanding of Hindu and Buddhist models of *dan* could benefit future philanthropic work in Asia'. Soma Hewa and Philo Hove, (eds), *Philanthropy and Cultural Context: Western Philanthropy in South, East, and Southeast Asia in the 20th Century* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1997); Sheila A. Robinson, 'Development and Philanthropy in the Context of South Asia' in Hewa and Hove (eds), *Philanthropy and Cultural Context*, p. 313; Yoichi Aizawa, 'Review: *Philanthropy and Cultural Context: Western Philanthropy in South, East, and Southeast Asia in the 20th Century*', *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1998), 57, 4, p. 1105. Also notable in this respect is an organization called Sampradaan: Indian Centre for Philanthropy, which publishes on themes such as corporate philanthropy and the role of religious organizations in social development. As the name itself suggests, this involves the superimposition of 'indigenous' (i.e. 'culturally appropriate') *dan* onto global philanthropic templates. <http://www.sampradaan.org>; Pushpa Sundar, *Beyond Business: From Merchant Charity to Corporate Citizenship* (Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 2000); Rakesh Kapoor and Amit Kumar Sharma, *Religious Philanthropy and Organised Social Development Efforts in India* (Delhi: Indian Centre for Philanthropy, 2000).

helping to foster an Indian ‘culture of giving’, Raju asserts that the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes ‘the ethical and moral imperatives of practicing philanthropy: *datavyamiti yaddaram diyate anupakarine* (The meaning of giving is that which is given without any expectations of return and without any strings attached) (*dan*)’.³⁸ Hindu law givers, claims Raju, ‘have built the philanthropic principles into life-cycle rituals and rites of passage. Every vital event of a person’s life is an occasion for giving and celebration’.³⁹ This de-contextualized, morally unambiguous depiction of *dan* is fairly typical of the philanthropy literature. The author’s insistence that philanthropic principles are embedded in Hindu life-cycle rituals might be considered in the light of those rituals documented ethnographically by Raheja for a village in Uttar Pradesh, during which the giving of *dan* transmits inauspiciousness from givers towards a class of often extremely reluctant receivers. Raheja notes that terror itself is one of the ingredients of *dan* in the village of Pahansu.⁴⁰ We might take it that Raju was not referring to *these* life-cycle gifts when declaring that ‘Every vital event of a person’s life is an occasion for giving and celebration’.

I emphatically do not mean to suggest that a rough (and indeed productive) convergence between philanthropy and *dan* cannot be made a reality in diverse lived contexts. Neither, after all, is one thing, and there are certainly points of conceptual overlap. In particular, virtually all ideologies of *dan*—historically, and in the present—emphasize disinterest and non-reciprocity. Likewise so do many *theories*—whatever else its variegated practice may suggest—of philanthropy, and what might seem at first glance like a particularly glaring divergence concerning the status of recipients—philanthropy insisting on their ‘neediness’, *dan* on their worthiness (seemingly quite different things)—might in fact better be viewed as a point of increasing convergence.

In her study of theories of the gift in the Dharmashastras, Heim presents an argument which appears to underscore this variance in respect of the status of recipients, noting that altruistic gifts given out of pity rather than esteem, while not prohibited, do not result in great quantities of merit, and frequently do not rate as *dan*.⁴¹ ‘It is not clear’,

³⁸ K. S. Sripada Raju, ‘Philanthropic Perspectives of Hinduism’, http://www.learningtogive.org/religiousinstructors/voices/phil_persp_of_hinduism.asp (n.d.).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*, pp. 152, 160.

⁴¹ Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*, p. 74.

writes Heim, 'how the ethics of esteem could accommodate an ethics of altruism'.⁴² If poverty and wretchedness signalled 'demerit and moral want owing to past wrongdoing', such people rated not as needy and therefore deserving but as needy and therefore *unworthy* recipients.⁴³ The importance of the worthiness of recipients is also signalled in more contemporary analyses: in the mortuary contexts discussed by Parry, the 'worthy vessel' is one who is extremely reluctant to accept the gift.⁴⁴ For the Jain communities documented by Laidlaw, *supatradan*—literally a gift to a worthy recipient, and transferred from lay to renouncer Jains—is perhaps the most elaborated and pre-eminent form of *dan*.⁴⁵

The emergent 'mobilisable' *dan* of the contemporary public sphere does not necessarily jettison this concern with worthiness and status, but instead makes need the index of a reformulated notion of worth.⁴⁶ For instance, I have sought to show elsewhere how *rakt-dan* (blood donation) has in many contexts come to possess superior virtue than other varieties of *dan* offering such as *pind-dan* (the gift of a ball of grains or rice to the departed) or forms of temple giving in part because it presupposes a need which cannot be guaranteed in the case of temple or mortuary priests who are often viewed with intense suspicion.⁴⁷ In this view, part of the virtue of blood donation as a mode of *dan* is that it possesses built-in means testing—a person (at least in theory) does not receive a transfusion if they do not need one: the transfusion recipient is needy and therefore worthy. The website <http://trueeventindia.com>, on a page promoting the giving of *dan* online (discussed further below), demonstrates that the conceptual operation which makes need the index of a reformulated notion of worth is not restricted to *rakt-dan*: 'It is imperative that all Daan should be given to Supaatra. Supaatra means whoever is worthy to get it. Donation to unworthy people for that particular Daan is wasting that thing, such as feeding any rich

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Parry, 'The Gift', p. 460.

⁴⁵ Laidlaw, 'A Free Gift Makes No Friends'.

⁴⁶ Kent too has found that among Sathya Sai Baba devotees in Malaysia (of mainly Indian origin), 'the ideal recipient of Sai charity is one with the greatest need and therefore, presumably, the greatest interest in the gift'. This is obviously contrary to Parry's assertion that 'the one who is prepared to accept... gifts is almost by definition unworthy to receive them'. Alexandra Kent, 'Divinity, Miracles and Charity in the Sathya Sai Baba Movement of Malaysia', *Ethnos* (2004), 69, 1, p. 47; Parry, 'The Gift', p. 460.

⁴⁷ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*, Chapter 3.

man has no purpose of donating food'.⁴⁸ Worthiness thus remains central, but has undergone a key shift in meaning.

A further point proceeds from this which relates to accountability. Modernist philanthropic and charitable organizations in India as elsewhere subscribe to protocols that insist on transparency, which can entail the tracking of donations, the screening of partner NGOs and other measures to promote 'trustworthiness'. As Bornstein has pointed out, this kind of NGO philanthropy defines a gift that is 'tied to the guarantee of a receipt', and as such forms a contrast with the disinterested and entirely alienable character of the *dan* that is described in scripture and scholarship alike.⁴⁹ If *dan* demands a total relinquishment at odds with accountability protocols, how can NGOs hope to mobilize it? Undeterred, AccountAid India, an organization dedicated to promoting accountability and good practice among NGOs, has produced a document called 'Accountability and Hindu Dan', which attempts to locate features of *dan* compatible with 'accountability'.⁵⁰ The document asks: 'What, then, is the accountability mechanism used in Hindu society to ensure that *dan* is used properly?' The answer focuses on the *selection* of the donee, arguing that, if worth has been determined through meticulous selection, then a need either to track the gift or receive a receipt for it simply does not arise—relinquishment and accountability are not only possible but positively complementary:

In our understanding the emphasis is on the proper selection of the donee. If the donee is selected carefully then the *dan* will be effective. There will be no need to monitor how the funds are actually used.⁵¹

So in this argument, accountability is built into *dan* but in a temporally different 'moment' to models which track the gift and demand to see results—efficacy is assured prior rather than subsequent to the gift. As noted above, Heim has questioned whether an 'ethics of esteem' can accommodate an 'ethics of altruism'.⁵² It

⁴⁸ <http://trueeventindia.com/daan-dharam/>.

⁴⁹ Erica Bornstein, 'No Return: A Brief Typology of Philanthropy and the Sacred in New Delhi', in Ruben L. F. Habito and Keishin Inaba (eds), *The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in Comparative Perspective* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp. 170–171.

⁵⁰ AccountAid, 'Accountability and Hindu Dan', *AccountAble* (2005), 112, Electronic document, <http://www.accountaid.net/>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*, p. 74.

has been demonstrated how need and worth may be collapsed into one another to create precisely the accommodation about which Heim is understandably sceptical. Once such an operation has been performed, the subsidiary query—can an aesthetic of relinquishment accommodate the bureaucratic protocols of accountability?—can be tackled: careful *pre-emptive* monitoring of worth-need allows the complete relinquishment of that which is given.

Despite the sophistication of such efforts to effect convergence, those seeking to mobilize *dan* as an instrument of philanthropy are nevertheless prime movers in a process of disambiguation. They reflect upon the antique, intricate history of giving and receiving *dan* and in so doing locate a *dan* as they would like it to be: benign, philanthropic, humanitarian—to employ Raju's term, 'celebratory'. This selective understanding of *dan* should not simply be dismissed as inauthentic, since such disambiguated understandings have themselves become an important manifestation of *dan* in contemporary India. The kind of 'first-order' articulation which values *dan* only inasmuch as it is amenable to operationalization⁵³ has a descriptive power: just as caste under British rule came in fact to be something like the British thought it was,⁵⁴ so the sheer prevalence in Indian public life of trouble-free equations between philanthropy and *dan* suggest that such articulations may be changing *dan* such that their description of it becomes true.

And yet there do remain strong elements of ambivalence and suspicion concerning *dan* in public representations. As noted above, *dan* frequently surfaces in public narratives as an exalted category—a kind of synonym for virtuous disinterest—and it is precisely this public reverence that can give rise to distrust: notably, characters of suspect morality have sought to associate themselves with *dan* in order to stake claims to virtuous disinterest. To take one notorious and tragic example: during the 2004 Lok Sabha election campaign, then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's constituency agent in Lucknow, Lalji Tandon, distributed free saris to voters on his birthday. In the rush to obtain the saris, at least 22 women were crushed to death. According to

⁵³ Deepa Reddy, 'Good Gifts for the Common Good: Blood and Bioethics in the Market of Genetic Research,' *Cultural Anthropology* (2007), 22, 3, p. 460.

⁵⁴ Paul Dresch, 'Ethnography and General Theory, Or, People Versus Humankind', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* (1992), 23, 1, p. 31; R. Burghart, 'Ethnographers and their local counterparts in India', in Richard Fardon (ed.), *Localising Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1990), p. 263.

one news report, Tandon responded to the inevitable accusations that he had been attempting to bribe voters by claiming that the saris were offered to the women as *dan* (without the expectation of the return of a vote in favour of Vajpayee). However, as the report notes, the official body with the formidable task of regulating electoral conduct took a different view of Tandon's behaviour: 'the Electoral Commission saw it as a violation of the model [electoral] code of conduct and slapped him with a showcase notice'.⁵⁵ Though he probably convinced very few, it is nonetheless evident that Tandon attempted to stake a claim to virtue by invoking the idea of *dan*. Indeed, the affixing of '*dan*' to a particular cause, concept or action frequently represents an attempt to assert a relation between it and virtuous disinterest.

Tandon's attempt to defend the distribution of saris to voters during an election campaign by retrospectively labelling the action *dan* indicates how and why perceptions of *dan* can switch all too easily from virtue to mistrust. There is a further way in which this can happen, and it is summed up well by *Tribune* columnist Vepa Rao in an article on 'How corruption comes from home'.⁵⁶ The practices of *danadharma* and 'special *puja-paath*' can directly facilitate wrongdoing and corruption, says Rao, because they are the means by which 'the priests suggest a way of "cleansing and purifying" in case of every wrong deed'. Both instruments 'bail us out regularly'. 'You can commit a crime, but amply "make up" for it later—*baad me dekha jayega!* This emboldens us'. Because the giving of *dan* can, in effect, redeem those acts against which it is defined and stands in opposition, it can also encourage them. The perhaps paradoxical point here is that attempts to mobilize *dan* depend on the very virtue through which this form of gift retains its dangerous ambiguity. Hence, ambiguity is likely to remain encoded even within its highly sanitized variants.

Rakt-dan

I have demonstrated above that one of the critical life-forms of *dan* in public resides in its objectified variants. Cultural practitioners attempt to cultivate conceptual convergences between *dan* and other phenomena—notably 'philanthropy'—in order to produce practical results. I have also provided some evidence, however, that objectified

⁵⁵ *DNA India*, 8 April 2007.

⁵⁶ *The Tribune*, 15 November 2006.

versions cannot alone define what *dan* has become or is becoming. Objectifications can be unstable, and the wrong convergences can arise. I turn now to a sustained example from my fieldwork in a variety of blood donation contexts in north India (2003–2005) in order to elucidate in greater detail these concomitant logics of objectification, convergence, and destabilization.

Conceptions of *dan* are at the heart of campaigns to foster voluntary blood donation in north India. Voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation—as opposed to the still prevalent modes of paid and family-replacement blood donation—is the international standard as advocated by global health organizations such as the World Health Organization and the Red Cross for reasons of safety.⁵⁷ As we have seen, *dan* is very frequently characterized as a gift for which no return can be countenanced.⁵⁸ Since blood donation was first practiced in north India, however, *rakt-dan* has been the euphemistic administrative label for all the varieties of blood donation: paid, replacement and voluntary. For many voluntary donors and blood bank staff, the use of ‘*dan*’ to denote paid and replacement donation was and is a disgraceful misapplication of a revered term and concept. However, the recent emphasis in India on the promotion of voluntary blood donation, necessitated by a 1998 legal ruling which forbade payment, has made the use of the term ‘*rakt-dan*’ seem less reprehensible to these donors and staff. This is because in the emergent voluntary system, donors should receive no payment and be unaware of the recipients of their donations. Voluntary donation thus promises to provide both the asymmetry and anonymity held to characterize many classical notions of *dan*.⁵⁹ Indeed, the anonymity and asymmetry of voluntary blood donation, on a conceptual level at least, present striking points of convergence between *rakt-dan* and key features of classical modes of *dan*.

Blood bank staff actively seek to translate this conceptual convergence into a highly practical one. Voluntary blood donation, they say, must conform precisely to the highest ideal of disinterested *dan* since it is seen to ensure the safety of donated blood. This is because

⁵⁷ Most medical opinion is now strongly opposed to both paid and replacement donation. Paying donors is said to provide an incentive to conceal disqualifying factors such as HIV/AIDS. Replacement donation is thought to pressurize patients’ relatives unduly, pushing many to seek paid donors to donate in their stead, and threatening those who cannot arrange for this kind of donation with denial of life-saving treatment.

⁵⁸ Parry, ‘*The Gift*’, p. 461; Laidlaw, ‘A Free Gift Makes No Friends’, p. 624.

⁵⁹ Gold, *Fruitful Journeys*, p. 9; Laidlaw, ‘A Free Gift Makes No Friends’, p. 623; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 75, 80.

of the medical policy axiom that offering donors incentives increases the likelihood that they will conceal risk factors which, if revealed, would disqualify them from donating.⁶⁰ The characterization of blood donation as a *dan* thus becomes an imperative for reasons of safety.

The efforts of blood bank staff to elucidate and publicize this convergence (to make it a living convergence as well as a formal one) reflects Healy's point that the duties of blood banks are not merely technical. Their task is

to elicit blood donations from donors, to elaborate the meaning of the donation, and to specify the nature of the gift and the obligations that flow from it. This work involves both logistical and cultural effort. The result is a practical system of procurement and distribution, but also a moral order of exchange.⁶¹

It is here that *dan*, as an explicitly moralized asymmetrical mode of giving, becomes a resource for staff in their attempts to not just get the public to donate blood but to get them to donate it in the way they want. Blood donation is thus extolled in publicity materials as being a great *dan* (*maha-dan*).⁶² *Rakt-dan* is sometimes depicted as a variant of *anna-dan* (the gift of food) which is given mostly to wandering ascetics or to the poor. *Anna-dan* and *rakt-dan*, of course, are both gifts of sustaining substance.

One donor recruiter, employed by a large government blood bank in Mumbai, though persuaded that notions of '*dan*' do need to be employed in order to bolster both the quantity and quality of donations, nevertheless finds the employment distasteful, the suggestion being that the public should not need to be taught what it should already know as part of an 'archive of inceptive moral knowledge'⁶³: 'Yes, I tell them it's *dan*, *pavitra-dan* [sacred donation] blah blah blah. *Bas*'. Another recruiter, from Kolkata, explained the 'uses' of *dan*: '*dan* is a sacred word. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Hinduism all teach *dan*, or free gift. If we [recruiters] and religious leaders teach that blood should be given as *dan*, then it becomes very useful to the blood donation cause'. Yet another recruiter says of *dan*: 'we need

⁶⁰ Richard M. Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (London: LSE Books, 1970).

⁶¹ Kieran Healy, *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Organs* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 17.

⁶² On *maha-dan*, see Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*, Chapter 5.

⁶³ Tim Allen, 'Violence and Moral Knowledge', *Cambridge Anthropology* (1989), 131, 1, p. 48.

to build on this cultural idiom to teach people to give blood without any expectation'. One doctor, founder of a Delhi NGO concerned with promoting voluntary blood donation, complained to me about the giving of incentives such as mugs and t-shirts to donors. He was adamant that 'blood donors must have the wish to give a *dan* with nothing in return. If people donate with expectations of receiving a gift, this is impure, selfish (*swarth purn*) blood'. The doctor's reference to 'impure, selfish blood' reflects doctors' conviction that convergence between non-reciprocal *dan* and voluntary donation is critical for reasons of safety: 'impurity' here seems to allude to the taking of a gift by donors being a contravention of both asymmetrical *dan* and (consequently) of the protocol meant to ensure the safety of donated blood for transfusion recipients. There is a profound indivisibility of the practical and the ideal in doctors' appeals to *dan*: for what is 'right' according to the ideal of *dan* as a mode of enacting high-minded asymmetrical exchange is also that which is practical and necessary in order to ensure the gift's safety for vulnerable recipients: virtue ethical and consequentialist forms of ethical reasoning are also subject to convergence.

I emphasize that blood bank staff do not speak with one voice about the importance of *dan*, some even contravene the generally agreed position about the need for asymmetrical giving by advocating the offering of material incentives in order to increase donor numbers.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, there is clearly a determined attempt by blood bank staff in Delhi and beyond to employ ideas about *dan* as a means to help foster voluntary giving in the place of paid and deal-like family-replacement donation. Doctors mobilize the accessible public *dan* variant which, though drained of the dangerous transmissibility inherent in many modes of *dan* recorded in Indological and anthropological literature,⁶⁵ still reflects Parry's summation of the ideology of *dan* as being 'that of the "pure gift"'. It is a voluntary and disinterested donation made without ostentation or expectation of *any* kind of *this*-worldly return, whether material or immaterial'.⁶⁶ Parry goes on to demonstrate very effectively the different ways mortuary *dan* contravenes this ideology in practice. If the giving of *dan* is capable of removing (and *transmitting*)

⁶⁴ See Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*, p. 167.

⁶⁵ Trautmann, *Dravidian Kinship*; Heesterman, 'Reflections on the significance of the Daksina', 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer'; Parry, *Death in Banaras*; Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*; Mines, *Fierce Gods*.

⁶⁶ Parry, 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', p. 66.

the donor's sin, as Parry shows that it is in the Banaras mortuary contexts he documents, then a critical paradox emerges: a gift capable of purifying its giver appears 'to subvert its own ethic of disinterested generosity'.⁶⁷ It is suggested now that the *dan* applied by blood bank staff—an 'authorized' version, sanitized of any trace of sin, poison or purification—despite widespread acceptance among donors and staff alike, is unstable and subject to disruption by 'unauthorized', suppressed *dan* elements. *Dan* is re-ambiguous in practice. Moreover, its authorized mode is subverted in a manner directly comparable with the way in which the ethic of disinterested generosity is breached in the Banaras case: through purification of the donor. Once again, the ideology of the gift's *purity* is compromised by virtue of the fact that it is also *purificatory*.

Given their potential to threaten life through passing on infection, blood donations can, on one level, seem to literalise contagion theories of the Indian gift. Indeed, terrible disease is understood by Banaras priests to be the ultimate effect of accepting pilgrims' gifts: 'The sin emerges as excrement vomited at death; it causes the body to rot with leprosy, seeps into the hair (which is why it is necessary to be tonsured on many ritual occasions), and on death it makes the corpse particularly incombustible'.⁶⁸ However, I do not wish to merely draw an analogy between the transmission of infection from pilgrims to priests (leprosy, primarily) and that which is all too often transmitted from blood donors to transfusion recipients (AIDS, hepatitis, malaria, and so on). Rather, I argue that what Parry calls the 'cultural idiom' of *dan*-based transmissibility can, in dramatic fashion, exceed the idiomatic and become a fact of matter—that is, converge with, and indeed be the cause of, actual infection.⁶⁹ Contagion theory causes literal contagion, with potentially perilous consequences for transfusion recipients.

The situation is acutely ironic given that, as I have explained, disambiguous versions of *dan* are employed by some doctors in the hope of *improving* the safety of donated blood in India. To such doctors, *dan* holds the promise of being the culturally appropriate antidote to the serious problem of the giving of blood with expectation. An official, 'authorized' convergence between *dan* and blood donation is thus pursued by doctors for reasons of safety. What I am suggesting, however, is that an unauthorized convergence between *dan* principles

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 68–69.

⁶⁹ Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 136.

and blood donation is precisely the source of an unacknowledged threat to safety. The cultural form meant to help alleviate the problem of infected blood comes to exacerbate it.

Evidence suggests that in certain circumstances the expelling of sin, as identified within forms of classical *dan*, surfaces as an aim of *rakt-dan*. Bearing in mind Parry's analysis, such an understanding would appear to make blood donation attractive to precisely those it most needs to repel (those who have 'sinned' in the conventional senses of engaging in sexual promiscuity or drug use). Non-material 'karmic' sin potentially coalesces here with actually transmissible infection. If both the non-material accumulated sins of past actions and medically detectable infection were transmissible through *rakt-dan*, the attempt at removing the former would heighten the risk of the transmission of the latter—with obviously destructive consequences for recipients. This casts in a new light Parry's observation that *dan* is 'saturated with the evil consequences of the donor's conduct'.⁷⁰ As noted above, while the transfer of 'sin' documented by Parry is understood by his informants literally to result in leprosy for recipient 'cess-pits', the practice is still ultimately treated by the anthropologist as a 'cultural idiom', and understandably so. However, the personnel involved in collecting, treating and testing donated blood, together with transfusion recipients, are in an analogous and yet profoundly different sense to Parry's informants, also vitally concerned with the gift's purity or otherwise. The retention of the 'sinful' aspect of classical *dan* within the 'modernist' context of *rakt-dan* might result in other 'literal' transmissions of infection.

According to numerous blood bank staff and several of his devotees whom I met in Mumbai, the Maharashtrian guru, Narendra Maharaj, encourages his followers to give blood at mass donation camps organized by his *seva dal* (service volunteers) precisely in order for them to remove their sins (*paap*). A Delhi-based blood bank doctor provided me with a more detailed example. She told the story of a Sikh man whose wife was suffering from mental illness. He was told by his guru to give three gifts from his body as a means of restoring her sanity. As a Sikh, he did not consider giving his hair. He subsequently attempted to give blood at a Delhi blood bank on three consecutive days. Three months, however, is the officially sanctioned length of time meant to elapse between donations. The man was recognized by blood bank personnel attempting to give for a second time on the second

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 129.

day and barred from making further donations. There is the strong suggestion here that he was attempting to give three gifts of medically utilisable blood as a means of removing the inauspiciousness afflicting his family.⁷¹

This example shows the incomplicancy of *dan* in the face of attempts to apply it in a 'stripped down' form. Objectification is key to understanding the attempts of blood bank staff to oversee a convergence between blood donation and *dan* and most cases of *dan* in public. However, proffered convergences remain unstable. The suppressed elements of *dan*, though marginalized in theory, often remain compelling in practice.

***Kuch sawal dan ke bare me: mobility and reflection. Or:
'NRI Attention!!!'***

In another example of the 'application' of *dan*, the English National Health Service is actively seeking to assist the migration of *dan* concepts to Britain as a means of boosting organ donation among Indian-origin Britons. Paralleling the examples given above of attempts to mobilize *dan* as a means to advance philanthropy, the National Health Service invokes the concept as an 'authentic' cultural idiom to *prove* to a reluctant British minority community that it is in their 'culture' to donate generously. The National Health Service has produced publicity material which informs South Asian immigrants: 'There are many references which support the concept of organ donation in Hindu scriptures. Daan is the original word in Sanskrit for donation meaning selfless giving. In the list of the ten Niyamas (virtuous acts) Daan comes third'.⁷²

What this example demonstrates is the increasingly 'uncertain translocality' and 'extra-territorial' nature of *dan*.⁷³ In a further example, Reddy has recently shown how *dan* is mobilized as a giving-template by Houston Indians asked to provide genetic material for research purposes.⁷⁴ In one sense, the situation is not at all novel: *dan* has, of course, travelled before, and I do not wish to obviate

⁷¹ Cf. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift*, p. 154.

⁷² [http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/insideldn/insideout/series5/wk3/donors/donors/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/insideldn/insideout/series5/wk3/donors/donors.shtml)
shtml

⁷³ Susan Bayly, 'Imagining "Greater India": French and Indian Visions of Colonialism in the Indic Mode', *Modern Asian Studies* (2004), 38, p. 705.

⁷⁴ Reddy, 'Good Gifts'.

the 'pre-existing translocalities' of *dan*.⁷⁵ And yet, it hasn't travelled like *this*—caught up within the 'new mobilities of people, capital, technologies, images, and ideas that characterise globalisation'.⁷⁶ Anthropologists have long drawn attention to 'the prominence of identities less attached to place, or less attached obviously',⁷⁷ and *dan* evidently partakes of wider processes of the loosening of identification between particular concepts and given geographical areas.

To take the example of the Give India organization (<http://www.giveindia.org>), whose purpose is to facilitate, via its website, donations to a variety of accredited NGOs working in the subcontinent: though it does not itself utilize the idiom of *dan* as a means of attempting to secure contributions, its feedback section contains testimonies from donors who invoke the concept. For instance, it publishes a thank you note from a British Indian donor: 'Thank you very much for the feedback that GIVE team has given to me. . . My elders used to tell me that DAAN (Donation) is the path to salvation'.⁷⁸ The suggestion is that the donor considered his gift a *dan*; if so, it was evidently a highly mobile *dan*, mediated by the GiveIndia website and transferred via credit card between continents. The Chennai ISKON temple also invites web-mediated donations to fund its daily round of *anna-dan* for the poor, so that one can, wherever one is physically present in the world, directly enable the giving of *anna-dan* in one particular part of it.⁷⁹

But this brand of mobile, virtual *dan* has not gone uncontested. In 2009 Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister, Sushil Kumar Modi, announced a plan to introduce online *pind-dan*, so that Indians abroad would be able to give *pind-dan* to their deceased forebears without actually having to visit the great Hindu pilgrimage centre of Gaya, where the offering is customarily made.⁸⁰ This kind of gift, given via Brahmin ritual specialists, usually consists of a round ball made of a mixture of rice and wheat flour and sesame seeds, and is offered in Gaya a year after the

⁷⁵ Bayly, 'Imagining "Greater India"', p. 703; Ladwig, 'Narrative Ethics'; Simpson, 'Impossible Gifts', Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*.

⁷⁶ Catherine Waldby and Robert Mitchell, *Tissue Economies: Blood, Organs, and Cell Lines in Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁷⁷ Dresch, 'Ethnography and General Theory', p. 29.

⁷⁸ <http://www.giveindia.org/common/spotlight/newsletter/september-2005.htm>. I am grateful to Erica Bornstein for drawing my attention to this website.

⁷⁹ <http://www.iskonchennai.com/Donations/anna%2520dan%2520donation.htm>.

⁸⁰ *Hindustan Times*, 3 July 2009. The classic anthropological studies by Parry (*Death in Banaras*) and Raheja (*The Poison in the Gift*) both contain lengthy sections on *pind-dan*.

death of a family member, or in the Hindu calendar month of Ashvin, to ensure their salvation. The state tourism department's 'online *pinda daan* package' would reportedly involve a videoconferencing facility in order to 'simulate the physical presence of the devotee', who would in the conventional procedure shave his head and take a dip in the local Baitarni pond.

Gaya's *pandits* did not react positively to the announcement. They complained about the government's 'interference', considering it an 'attack on an age-old religious service'. The initiative, they claimed, was 'the brainchild of those who have no knowledge of this ritual'. A large measure of the *pandits*' hostility was connected to a fear that the state was muscling in on their monopoly trade as intermediaries with the world of the sacred: 'It's an assault on our religion', said one *pandit*. 'The government is also trying to rob us of our livelihood'.⁸¹ However, the *pandits* framed the majority of their criticism in theological terms: 'We fail to understand the motive to introduce online *pinda daan*. It is not possible because a devotee's physical presence is necessary to perform the rituals'.⁸² The protesting *pandits* thus retained an insistence on the *immobility* of *dan*. Their argument was that virtual *pind-dan* is theologically incoherent: "'Asking Hindus to perform *pinda daan* online is akin to asking Muslims to do the Haj online without visiting Mecca", Vishnupad temple managing committee member Shivkumar Bhaiya says. Some find the idea "absurd"—for many of the rituals cannot be performed virtually. "*Pinda daan* involves taking a bath in the Falgu. Can you do it online", asks Gaya Bharat Sevashram Sangha head Swami Agamamananda'.⁸³

Despite the *pandits*' obvious pecuniary imperative, the theological argument about the importance of presence and place finds a strong reflection in the literature on *dan*. To take just one example: Gold recounts a pilgrimage undertaken by a man from a Rajasthan village to Hardwar and other special 'crossing places' following the death of his father.⁸⁴ Having submerged his father's old walking stick in the Ganges at Hardwar, the pilgrim purchased two others: one to take home, and another to give to a beggar in Pushkar. Once in Pushkar, however, the son had difficulty finding a beggar who would accept

⁸¹ *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), 19 July 2009.

⁸² *Hindustan Times*, 3 July 2009.

⁸³ *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), 19 July 2009.

⁸⁴ Gold, 'Sinking flowers at Hardwar', in T. N. Madan (ed.), *Religion in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 128.

it—Gold is uncertain as to whether this was because of its uselessness or its inauspiciousness.⁸⁵ Clearly, however, the son's giving actions bore little relation to the recipient's need, being far more influenced by the time (the aftermath of his father's death) and place (Pushkar) of the offering.

The pilgrim's giving actions in Hardwar are congruent with the *pandits'* emphasis on the spatio-temporal circumstances of giving, which also finds a reflection in Ramanujan's well-known description of South Asian 'context-sensitivity', where there is 'a constant flow... of substance from context to object'.⁸⁶ At the same time, according to Ramanujan, modernity brings with it a movement from the context-sensitive towards the context-free.⁸⁷ Virtual *dan* appears to embody just such a movement, thereby appearing to conflict with the context-sensitivity of established giving practices. The *pandits*, with the help of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), defeated the government, which is reported to have abandoned its plan several months after the initial announcement.⁸⁸

But it was a hollow victory. Websites not affiliated to the Bihar government continue to offer the service. The <http://trueeventindia.com> website, for instance, specialises in performing rituals in differing parts of India on behalf of those—such as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)—who, in the words of TrueEventIndia, 'are unable to perform their Religious, Social and Emotional duties, due to Personal, Professional or any other reason'. In addition to a variety of forms of *puja*, TrueEventIndia offers *pind-dan* services for Gaya, Banaras and Allahabad. The company appears cognisant of the predicament of those Non-Resident Indians whose 'psychic life [resides] in many spaces at once'⁸⁹—indeed, it advertises itself as an 'incredible concept of taking care of people's emotions', a veritable 'emotional courier'—connecting this understanding to another prevalent image of the Non-Resident Indian—his presumed association with 'flows of wealth'.⁹⁰ As

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ A. K. Ramanujan, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1989), 23, p. 52.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

⁸⁸ http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/bihar-scraps-online-prayer-for-ancestors_100228757.html.

⁸⁹ Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 10.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

one banner on the website states: “NRI Attention !!!” Pind Daan in India Through Us’.

The website follows a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format, with answers provided to questions such as ‘Is it Important to do Pind Daan?’, ‘How I’ll benefit from Pind Daan?’ and ‘What you need for Pind-Daan?’. Needless to say, the necessity of performing *pind-dan* is underscored in the answers:

as per Vedas no work can be performed or taken to the heights of success without the blessings of ancestors and Pind Dan is the only religious and spiritual way to help the restless deceased souls come to peace. It is said that all obstacles in life are smoothened once you perform Pind Daan ritual for your parents or ancestors. There are sudden and quick positive changes observed in life. According to our clients they have observed improvement.

The most critical FAQ, however, is that concerning the theological credibility of a *dan* without presence: ‘Is it really possible that someone else can perform rituals/prayers on my behalf and still I get the religious credit for it?’. Given the differing financial stakes it should not be surprising that the answer provided completely contradicts the ‘line’ taken by *pandits* in Gaya: ‘Absolutely. According to Garuda Purana, and many Religious books, anyone can perform religious rituals on your behalf. It would be considered successful and all the credit will be yours, as if you performed them’.⁹¹ Just as there are clear precedents that lend credence to the *pandits*’ insistence on the importance of the spatio-temporal circumstances of the gift, an array of examples exist that are perfectly compatible with the assertion that presence *is not* necessary for accruing the benefits of a ritual. Pocock’s Gujarati Brahmin informants, for instance, have been known to employ low-caste people to sacrifice animals on their behalf in order to propitiate an angry god.⁹² Shunning both participation in and presence at the sacrifice, it was imperative that the Brahmin remain ‘non-violent’ and avoid pollution. But there was no doubt that it was the Brahmin who would ultimately receive the benefits of the sacrifice.

Clearly the internet has precipitated a set of debates about *pind-dan* which reveal a preponderance of differing views and real uncertainty about what constitutes ‘good practice’ in respect of *dan*.

⁹¹ <http://trueeventindia.com/category/pind-daan/>. The Garuda Purana forms part of the body of Hindu texts known as ‘smṛiti’ and consists of instructions relayed by Vishnu to his carrier, Garuda, the king of birds.

⁹² David Pocock, *Mind, Body and Wealth: A Study of Belief and Practice in an Indian Village* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), p. 66.

If there was no question about the legitimacy of a *dan* given online then TrueEventIndia would not have deemed it necessary to argue, defensively, in favour of its legitimacy. The irony is that the initiatives proposed by TrueEventIndia and the Bihar state government are both *highly* contextual. After all, neither scheme proposed *pind-dan* on the banks of the Thames or Mississippi. The sites of *pind-dan* remain Gaya and other important pilgrimage centres such as Allahabad and Banaras. Context is retained, but without presence. Or put differently, the 'giving context' evaporates—rendered virtual—but all the better to furnish or access the 'receiving context', the specificity of which is in fact underscored.⁹³ It is precisely because the locations (contexts) of Gaya and Banaras are so indispensable that Non-Resident Indians will go (or are presumed to be prepared to go) to such lengths to access them from thousands of miles away. Online *dan* would appear to eviscerate the intense co-presence of donor and donee which, as stated above, I judge to be critical to a contact-driven process of removal and transmission of sin/inauspiciousness. So one wonders whether the sin gets eviscerated too; or might it be transmissible through the digital architecture of the internet? If *dan* were to be understood as 'non-transmissible' as a result of these interventions, then perhaps Gaya's donee *pandits* need not be so upset after all!

The proposal to introduce online *pind-dan* forced Gaya's priests to reflect afresh on what *dan* is and is not, with *pandits* insisting on its immobility and the importance of presence and TrueEventIndia insisting on precisely the reverse. A more general observation concerning *dan* and the internet follows, namely, that the internet has stimulated new reflection about *dan*, and has developed into an important arena of debate, learning and critical re-engagement in respect of it. I substantiate this claim through examination of two further websites.⁹⁴

⁹³ This rediscovery of context, even as *dan* is made virtual, is reflective of Ramanujan's further important point that in India the context-free is liable to be assimilated as just another context. Ramanujan, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?', p. 57.

⁹⁴ Reliance on internet sources is notoriously problematic—identities are unreliable and webpages have a habit of changing or disappearing. Postill writes of 'the heavy burden of suspicion in a cyberspace teeming with urban legends, hoaxes and rumours': 'Internet and SMS users can often modify contents without leaving a trace, an ability that casts a long shadow of societal doubt over the trustworthiness of digital representations. Doubts over the veracity of a forwarded email or SMS text can arise at any point in its social life cycle'. A degree of suspicion must also, of course,

In 2009 a column was published on the website of the *Hindustan Times* financial supplement *Mint* headlined: 'Why Indians don't give back to society'. There is a longstanding Indian tradition of self-excoriation concerning the perceived unwillingness of middle class (especially Hindu) Indians to contribute substantially to worthy social causes. With its origins probably lying in colonial attempts to redirect Indian gifting routes from festivals and temples towards disaster relief, schools and other more 'worthwhile' causes,⁹⁵ self-criticism in respect of this 'lack' is an established feature of the Indian public sphere. To take one recent example, in the days following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed more than 180,000 people in coastal regions across South and Southeast Asia, one Indian newspaper columnist commented on the 'inability of privileged Indians to help their brethren in need', asking: 'Is it something to do with the individual spiritual pursuit of the Hindu tradition that makes our compassion so limited?'.⁹⁶ The *Mint* column is characterized by similarly pained introspection, concluding ultimately that India is a Hobbesian society with low levels of interpersonal trust. But of greater concern here are the several comments posted by readers of the piece.⁹⁷

A number of posts provide compelling evidence of the many ways in which Indians *do* contribute to social causes. Moreover, several respondents invoke *gupt-dan*⁹⁸ (secret donation) in order to explain how a perception of defective social-mindedness hides a more generous reality. I quote from an ambivalent comment posted by 'Arun':

remember how Indian beggars ask for alms 'Tum ek lakh dogey, wo dus lakh dega' (If you donate one lakh, God will give you ten times), beggars seem to know better of Indian psyche :-). Our sense of charity is related to personal good not that of the society. But I would like to differ with writer also, we have tradition of 'Gupta Daan'. Where many western philanthropists brag on a dais that they have pledged \$20 billions to a cause... Indians prefer to give silently, selflessly, without any motive or paybacks.

be retained in reference to the internet sources drawn on here. John Postill, 'What is the point of media anthropology?', *Social Anthropology* (2009), 17, 3, p. 335.

⁹⁵ See Douglas Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy: The Politics of Gift Giving in a West Indian City', *The Journal of Asian Studies* (1987), 46, 2, 339–360.

⁹⁶ Tavleen Singh, 'A Wave of Indifference', *Sunday [Indian] Express*, 2 January 2005.

⁹⁷ <http://www.livemint.com/2009/07/02203128/Why-Indians-don8212t-give-b.html>.

⁹⁸ *Gupt-dan* refers to a gift given in secret. This form of gift is particularly revered because it is immune from the 'immediate reward of an increase in a donor's public status, and people say that because of this the unseen reward which comes as merit or good *karma* will be greater'. Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation*, p. 297.

Gupt-dan is thus mobilized as a counter to the quite familiar public accusation that India does not possess a socially favourable 'giving culture'. Another response, by 'Prasad', is worth quoting at length:

Over-simplification sir, tch tch got it wrong!.. Our Upanishads and Vedas lay stress in an individual being a contributor and never a *bhoktha* – an enjoyer. A *grihastha* should do *pancha maha yagnas* throughout your life which includes *daanam* and contribution to the life forms and ecology.. Also you may not be aware that Hindu scriptures lay stress that a *daanam* should be done completely un-announced unlike it is in the rest of the world, left hand should not know what the right hand has donated! It is a sin to gloat on helping the needy.. Indian charity is not done through trusts and endowments and significant part is done completely anonymously. You should ask how many housemaids get their children's education funded by their employers. Ask hospitals what kind of response they get when an ad is placed to help a kidney transplant patient. All this is done off record. Well if you want Western type of charity, then do understand it is also for ensuring more mileage for their business empires too. I wish to stop, all the best.. .

According to this argument, agonized reflections about how Indians 'do not give' are grounded in a misunderstanding consequent on the secret way in which Indians prefer to make offerings. *Dan* may thus be invoked online as a response to the hurt national sentiments of the religious patriot; its public life partly consisting of claims that *dan* is frequently *not public*.

A further significant online presence is found at <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com>, which allows users to post and answer questions on a broad range of themes such as sexuality, astrology, fashion and health.⁹⁹ It also possesses a 'ritual procedures' category, in which can be found a remarkable array of *dan*-related queries. Significantly, anyone can provide an answer. The preponderance of queries about the nature of *dan* demonstrates that it is by no means only anthropologists who are saddled with a 'will to meaning'.¹⁰⁰ Those who seek clarification about various modes of *dan* are not content, as Staal might have put it, to view *dan* as 'pure activity, without meaning or goal'.¹⁰¹ They seek to understand the meaning and relevance of *dan* in their everyday lives.

Several questions concern *kanya-dan*, the gift of a bride. Most answers to the question 'What is kanyadaan?' proclaim the inestimable virtues

⁹⁹ *Sawaal* is Hindi for 'question'.

¹⁰⁰ Vassos Argyrou, *Anthropology and the Will to Meaning: A Postcolonial Critique* (London: Pluto, 2002).

¹⁰¹ Fritz Staal, 'The Meaninglessness of Ritual', *Numen* (1979), 26, 1, p. 9.

of this kind of gift, and these responses are considered below. But focus for the moment is on a more critical answer, which demonstrates that, though valorizations of *dan* predominate, the idea that *dan* is a triumph of Indian culture is not universally shared: 'kanyadaan means to give gift. As goan daan [donation of a cow], same is the kanyadaan. But in modern age no value of these daan'. The author's disparaging remarks remain unelaborated; we are simply instructed that *dan* is to be dismissed as anachronistic. A similarly curt assessment was recently articulated by the CEO of the Indian operation of the charity ActionAid, whose approach has been to incentivize giving. His ActionAid telemarketers tell donors: "And, madam, with that [donation] you can get tickets to a movie, a holiday package, a discount coupon for a meal in a restaurant, or a Reliance Infocomm cellphone." Bottomline: If you've got money for charity, [ActionAid India] can make it sweat for you'.¹⁰² To mobilize *dan*, according to this model of solicitation, would make little sense. As the CEO put it: '*Daan*, or donation, has always been a part of the Indian culture, but it has always been mindless'.¹⁰³ Such an evaluation is particularly interesting in the light of attempts, discussed above, to find and exploit common ground between concepts of *dan* and modern philanthropy. The ActionAid CEO instead views *dan* as a hindrance to the brand of marketized philanthropy he promotes (presumably due to the confusing illogicality, according to the theory of 'economic man', of a cultural form whose quintessence, for the idealist, remains disinterested), and seeks therefore to *separate* rather than to advance convergence between the different conceptual entities.

Such criticism is obviously contrary to the dynamic of reverence and stabilization that I earlier proposed constitutes a large measure of the life of *dan* in public, attesting to a further important facet of contemporary *dan*: the noteworthy level of debate and reflective scrutiny to which it is subject.¹⁰⁴ These examples of disparagement might conceivably be connected to the internalization by the metropolitan and political class of present-day liberalizing mores, but it remains a fairly marginal counter-trend, and in any

¹⁰² *India Today*, 23 May 2004.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ I do not suggest by this that debate about uses, misuses and differential valuations of *dan* is an entirely novel phenomenon—it most certainly is not. See, for instance, Kasturi on heated debates in north India in the early twentieth-century about which categories of person constitute worthy recipients of *dan*. Malavika Kasturi, "Asceticising" Monastic Families: Ascetic Genealogies, Property Feuds and Anglo-Hindu Law in Late Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* (2009), 45, 3, 1082.

case *dan* has for decades intermittently found itself to be the subject of criticism: the social theorist, Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887–1949), for instance, saw *dan* as arbitrary and undisciplined. In Sarkar's view, charity bestowed 'according to personal or religious virtue or duty' must be replaced by professional techniques of care and the governmentalization of helping services.¹⁰⁵ 'Unruly' *dan*, then, has been pitted against institutionalized care provision. As noted above, however, present-day institutions of provision tend to approach the matter differently, viewing *dan* not as a hindrance but as a resource; *dan* is stabilized as a less unruly force and made to assist the institutions it has on occasion been considered to compromise.

So there are and have been dissenting voices, but deferential attitudes remain predominant in public representations of *dan*. Online discussions about *dan* are, of course, a manifestation of *dan* in public, but there is a qualitative difference between representations of *dan* online and elsewhere in the public sphere. The relative anonymity of online discussants distinguishes them from the public figures quoted in newspapers and charitable publications whose *raison d'être* is to marshal *dan* as a template for philanthropic activity. These spokespeople provide quotes fit for public consumption and overlook 'unsavoury' or unruly aspects of *dan*—theirs is a 'politically correct' *dan*. The anonymity of online discussion, however, means that this does not hold in quite the same way on the internet. Furthermore, contributors tend to be neither experts nor 'public figures', despite the public nature of the conversation. Structural features of the online arena thus enable it to convey a sense that the state of *dan* is less settled and delimited than its articulators elsewhere in the public sphere would have it. I offer three examples.

- (1) Posts on <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com> declare the critical importance of giving *dan* during solar eclipses in order to remove its malevolent effects. This recalls Parry's discussion of particularly virulent forms of *dan*—he mentions that gifts, given in order to counter evil planetary influences, are especially perilous for recipients.¹⁰⁶
- (2) Another post asks: 'What is "tuladaan?" Why is it done?' The respondent states: 'Tuladaan is done to appease Saturn (Shani).

¹⁰⁵ See A. Chatterjee, 'Welfare, Personalism and Hegel in the Colonial Night: The Forgotten Writings of Brajendranath Seal', Unpublished essay (2007). Available at: <http://www.opensubscriber.com/message/reader-list@sarai.net/7362752.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Parry, 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', p. 67.

Under *tuladaan*, foodgrains equivalent to your weight can be given to a Brahmin. If the Brahmin accepts this *daan* you would get the result of that *daan*'.¹⁰⁷ *Tula-dan* has been described by Parry as perhaps the most dangerous of all forms of *dan*, being the most explicit in connecting the negative aspects of the donor with that which is given: 'the donor is weighted against some valuable commodity which is thus equated with his "gross body" (and is consequently said to contain his blood, marrow, and excrement), and which is then gifted in *dana*'.¹⁰⁸

- (3) Finally, tackling the question of purification directly, a question asks: 'Does a donation (*daan*) purify you from sins?' The answers provided are equivocal. One response declares: 'Yes and no both, based on *bhavna* [sentiment] of the donor'. Another states: 'I can't say by doing *daan* your sins are washed away. Depends on how big the sin is. Suppose u don't give food to your parent whatever u do u always end up in hell'.¹⁰⁹

These questions concerning *tula-dan*, sin and giving during an eclipse clearly evince less reticence about the ambiguities of *dan* than we have seen elsewhere in the public arena, and as such connect more strongly with the dangerous complexities of *dan* as detailed in the ethnographic record. Consider for a moment the critical third question: 'Does a donation (*daan*) purify you from sins?' The psychologist, August Flammer, has developed a theory of question-asking

¹⁰⁷ <http://sawaal.ibibo.com/puja-and-rituals/what-tuladaan-why-done-215180.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Parry, 'On the Moral Perils of Exchange', p. 75. *Tula-dan* remains a popularly given gift, even amongst so-called 'modern' families in metropolitan areas. It may be given both on the birthdays of male children who are weighed against particular varieties of grain and more generally on Saturdays in order to remove the evil influences of Saturn. It has also been combined with *rakt-dan* to create a kind of conjunct *dan*. Gujarat donor recruiters related to me the practice in that state of weighing idols of Krishna against donated blood. 'A 6-foot Krishna might be 200 units', said one of them. Also in Gujarat, a blood donation event called '*Rakt Tula*' was staged in 2005 at the sixtieth birthday celebrations of the guru Swami Adhyatmananda. This involved his disciples donating a quantity of blood equivalent to the guru's body weight (http://www.diyajiva.org/adhyatmananda/DJ_souvenir.pdf). Most frequent of all is the weighing of politicians at political rallies against the blood of activists. At a 'May Day Blood Donation Camp' in Rajasthan, 104 Congress workers are reported to have donated blood equivalent to the body weight of Shri B. D. Kalla, President of the Rajasthan Pradesh Congress Committee (<http://www.congressandesh.com/june-2005/june2005.pdf>).

¹⁰⁹ <http://sawaal.ibibo.com/puja-and-rituals/donation-daan-purify-you-from-sins-407190.html>.

with specific reference to the information-seeking question.¹¹⁰ According to Flammer, while an information-seeking question clearly concerns a lack of information, it also presupposes some available knowledge on the part of the questioner. This is partly in order that the question appears 'reasonable', but knowledge 'about' the knowledge to be obtained is also required in order to indicate the location of the information required.¹¹¹ So, paradoxically, 'in order to ask what one does not know, one already has to know'.¹¹² Following from this, the question about *dan* as a possible means to purify sins indicates a level of knowledge (albeit partial) about *dan* being precisely a means to purify sins. Even if the answers provided are equivocal, the very fact that the question is asked demonstrates that ideas about the expulsion of sins via *dan* remain compellingly present.

Flammer presents two additional key postulates about information-seeking questions that can help further illuminate the significance of the third question concerning *dan*: 1. 'The class of missing knowledge, about which questions are asked, also includes knowledge at a low level of confidence'; and 2. 'The need to clear up contradictory knowledge refers to a special case of missing knowledge'.¹¹³ Now, *dan* is frequently characterized as a gift for which no return can be countenanced. (Elsewhere on the website, the answer to the question 'What is a good donation?' is specified as: 'giving without expecting anything in return'.) This perhaps helps to explain why there might be a low level of confidence about the idea expressed in the question that *dan* might purify sins. For, if *dan* purifies, it then constitutes its own counter-prestation; thus appearing to 'subvert its own ethic of disinterested generosity'.¹¹⁴ The question thus seems to be indicative of the need to clear up contradictory knowledge about *dan*: the fact that it is expected, on many an occasion, to be both 'pure' and to purify.

The internet thus provides a space for reflection and debate about *dan*, and gives expression to the persistence of the ambiguities it encodes. The point about reflection is consonant with Miller and Slater's observation in respect of their fieldwork in Trinidad that the internet has afforded many Trinidadian internet-users a new level of

¹¹⁰ August Flammer, 'Towards a Theory of Question Asking,' *Psychological Research* (1981), 43, 407-420.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 410.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 412, 411.

¹¹⁴ Parry, 'Ghosts, greed, and sin', p. 105; 'On the moral perils of exchange', p. 75.

participation in theological debate and dispute.¹¹⁵ Just as the idea of giving *pind-dan* online may be looked at askance because it appears to bypass proper priestly channels, the fact that anyone registered with <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com> may answer questions concerning the nuances of *dan* bypasses the conventional educational role of the priestly class.¹¹⁶ It is also argued here that structural features of the internet enable a freer expression of unruly aspects of *dan*, but this section concludes with a qualification: though the possibility of a purifying *dan* is freely debated on the website, I found no mention of the effects of this for recipients. While the removal of sin via *dan* does not necessarily involve its transfer to a recipient,¹¹⁷ the focus on the purity of donors and the concomitant obviation of recipients in each of the questions examined should make one cautious about representing the internet as a refuge of a more unruly *dan*. There is something to be said for such a representation, but the tendency on the sawaal website to retain a notion of expulsion while jettisoning (or at least failing to acknowledge) the possibility of transfer to recipients is suggestive of the trend to subject *dan* to decontamination. *Dan* online, then, is re-ambiguous, but without necessarily being immune to concurrent processes of sanitization.

From *kanya-dan* to 'bio'-*dan*: reactivations

The majority of *dan*-related questions on <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com> pertain to *kanya-dan*, and several answers are helpful in pointing to emergent themes and contemporary yardsticks of valuation in respect of *dan* more generally. Critical here is the association between *kanya-dan* and biological life in terms of the physical person who is given (i.e. the daughter-virgin for marriage) and her prospective generative role in the family she joins. Because of this association, *kanya-dan* possesses connections with, and may in part help us to comprehend, what is perhaps the greatest present-day site of dynamism and proliferation in respect of *dan*: its contemporary biological variants, of which *rakt-dan* is a prominent example. Indeed, 'bio'-*dan* is a site of proliferation to rival Vinoba Bhave—a one-man escalator and re-designator of *dan*,

¹¹⁵ Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 180–181.

¹¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 191.

¹¹⁷ See Säävälä, 'Low Caste but Middle-Class', p. 314.

a key agent of its renewal who revisited classical giving-templates in order that they be made to bestow meaning afresh in accordance with Gandhian aims and targets.¹¹⁸

The superiority of *kanya-dan* among the many forms of *dan* is asserted in several responses to the question ‘What is kanyadaan?’ and scholars have commented on the generality of this evaluation.¹¹⁹ But what is it that makes *kanya-dan* pre-eminent? I referred above to the question ‘What is a good donation?’ One answer is as follows: ‘There may be various variable “DANA” donations like “jivan-dana,” “vidya-dana,” “anna-dana,” “dhan-dana,” “bhoo-dana,” “rakta-dana,” “shrama-dana,” and many more. BUT FOR A HINDU: “KANYA-DANA” IS SUPER, CONSISTING OF ALL’.¹²⁰ Here is the idea that *kanya-dan* encompasses other varieties of *dan*, and that this capacity of containment makes this form of *dan* pre-eminent. A respondent to the question, ‘What is Kanya-daan?’, also situates this mode of gift as containing other modes: ‘Kanya Dana includes vidya dana, shram dana, dhan dana, anna dana. . .’.¹²¹ Though in the first post cited above

¹¹⁸ Vinoba Bhave’s campaigns were the site of some of the most high-profile proliferations of *dan* in recent centuries. Gandhi’s ‘moral heir’, it was Vinoba Bhave who in 1951 initiated the *bhoo-dan* (gift of land) movement which sought to encourage landowners to donate land for the landless. Bhave was not original in elaborating a concept of ‘gift of land’—the Dharmasastras focus lengthily on the gift of land (*bhumidana*) donated by kings, usually to Brahmins (Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*)—though Bhave was original in making it an index of Gandhian socialism, with those in need rather than Brahmins becoming the recipients of his reformed mode of land gift. Bhave subsequently enlarged (and radicalized) the category of *bhoo-dan* to *gram-dan* (village gift), whereby ‘all land would be legally owned by the village as a whole, but parcelled out for the use of individual families according to need’. Bhave did not stop there. The concept of *block-dan* soon joined those of *bhoo-dan* and *gram-dan*, and was closely followed by other concentrically expanding *dan* concepts such as *district-dan* and even *state-dan*. ‘Vinoba’s fertile imagination widened the concept of “daan” . . . and created other forms of it. These included Shramdan (gift of labour), Sampattidan (gift of money, income or wealth), Buddhidan (dedication of one’s mental abilities to the realization of Sarvodaya ideals) and Jeevandan (dedication of one’s life to the cause)’. D. Jeevan Kumar, ‘Gandhian Struggles for Land Rights,’ in Mimmy Jain (ed.), *Human Rights Education for Beginners* (Delhi: National Human Rights Commission, 2005), pp. 134–136. Some of Bhave’s innovations resembled classical *dan* forms—*buddhi-dan*, for instance, recalled *gyan-dan* and *vidya-dan* (gifts of knowledge or learning)—while others were altogether novel.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Adrian C. Mayer, ‘Public Service and Individual Merit in a Town of Central India’, in Adrian C. Mayer (ed.), *Culture and Morality: Essays in Honour of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 165.

¹²⁰ <http://sawaal.ibibo.com/puja-and-rituals/what-good-donation-407210.html>.

¹²¹ This is because some of these items are literally transferred along with *kanya-dan* to the bride’s new family, but also because the *kanya-dan* is itself constituted by all the *dan* the bride has received from her parents (food, knowledge, money, and so on) and,

rakt-dan is subsumed by *kanya-dan*, *rakt-dan* has itself been theorized according to a similar template of containment: for instance, it has been described as a new mode of *anna-dan* (gift of food), and in publicity materials it is frequently extolled as *jivan-dan* (gift of life).¹²² It has even been construed as a gift of knowledge (*vidya-* or *gyan-dan*).¹²³ This demonstrates how forms of *dan* may be assimilated to other forms of *dan*, whilst also providing an indication of how particular modes of *dan* attain value (i.e. through containing other *dan*).

One possible reason why *rakt-dan* is subsumed by *kanya-dan* in the above post resides in a conception of their both being gifts of flesh and blood. In answer to the question: ‘Why is kanyadaan considered to be the most auspicious thing?’, a respondent states: ‘It is most auspicious because you are giving away your own flesh and blood for creation of a new family, a new bloodline’. The implication here is that influence and generative potential may be further means by which forms of *dan* can receive a high valuation. Akin to the foregoing response, another post declares of *kanya-dan*: ‘It is auspicious because you are enabling a family to procreate and thereby establish a lineage’. *Rakt-dan* is portrayed by both blood donors and donor recruiters as similarly generative: in saving people who have yet to procreate, it facilitates procreation and the generation of lives that would otherwise have been foreclosed. The solicitation slogan ‘A part (*ansh*) of your blood can save somebody’s generation/family line (*vansh*)’ explicitly emphasizes the familial reproductive power of donated blood.¹²⁴ The high valuation of *kanya-dan* for a similar reason perhaps indicates a key motive for the frequent portrayal by donors and doctors of *rakt-dan* as a means of saving family relationships and the generative potential of recipients, and why it, like *kanya-dan* on <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com>, is so frequently declared a *maha-dan* (great donation).¹²⁵

in a pre-emptive sense, because she will later become productive in providing these forms of *dan* to her new family and offspring.

¹²² For Vinoba Bhave, *jivan-dan* meant something quite different—dedication of one’s life to a cause (Kumar, ‘Gandhian Struggles for Land Rights’, p. 136). The common exhortatory blood donation slogan ‘*Rakt-dan, jivan-dan*’ (‘Blood Donation, Life Donation’), on the other hand, encourages prospective donors to give a portion of their *biological* life rather than a life-time commitment. Perhaps this shift in meaning partakes of the wider change in emphasis, identified by Rabinow and others, from the way life is actually lived (*bios*) to ‘bare’ or biological life (*zoe*): ‘Life today is more *zoe* than *bios*’ says Rabinow. Paul Rabinow, ‘French Enlightenment: Truth and Life’, *Economy and Society* (1998), 27, 2–3, p. 200.

¹²³ See Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*, pp. 97–99.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹²⁵ In its classical style *maha-dan* was a kingly gift, a mode of statecraft suggesting the ‘idealised moral order of the little kingdom, which constitutes an exemplary

In a final example, a Hindu leader locates a different *dan* (*vidya-dan*) as pre-eminent among *dan*, but judges it pre-eminent for similar reasons that *kanya-* and *rakt-dan* have been judged the finest: because the effects it produces are ongoing. In a speech given at the Institute for Management Development, Mysore, in 2005, Dr D. Veerandra Heggade, Chairman of the Lord Manjunatha temple in Dharmasthala, Karnataka, stated:

In Dharmasthala, I have been given vision by my forefathers that my responsibility goes beyond the Kshetra Administration and the offerings to temples have to be channelled into Annadan [gifts of food], Vidyadan, Oushadadan [gifts of medicine], Abhayadan [gifts of non-fear] and Nyayadan [gifts of justice]. I consider out of all these *dans* Vidyadan is one of the strong pillars of Sri Kshetra Dharmasthala. As told by the great Chanakya [revered statesman and administrator; third century BC], Vidyadan is the only wealth that cannot be destroyed. On the other hand it has great potential for exponential benefits by all those who get educated and spread their knowledge and wisdom.¹²⁶

So online questions and answers about *kanya-dan* on the sawaal website provide two main pointers for helping to understand how forms of *dan* may be relatively valued in the present. These are that *dan* which are judged to contain or encompass other forms of *dan* are prestigious, and connected to this, *dan* judged to effect ongoing influence, reproductive or otherwise, are highly valued. The example of *kanya-dan* also usefully demonstrates that gifts of flesh and blood are hardly novel and do not exist as isolates—there exist important precedents and templates for this kind of giving. As was stated above, forms of ‘bio’-*dan* have accumulated rapidly in recent years. This, of course, reflects the dramatic increase in forms of donatable corporeal material now utilizable by biomedicine: in addition to *rakt-dan*, there exist *netr-dan* (eye donation), *ang-dan* (organ donation), *deh-dan* (body donation), *bhrun-dan* (embryo donation), and other categories.

centre through display, redistribution, and command’. Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 107. At an event staged before Delhi schoolchildren in order to encourage them to donate their blood when they come of age I witnessed a blood bank doctor enumerate different classifications of *dan*: ‘There are various types of *dan*: spiritual, secular, saving life, giving food and the donation of blood’. The accompanying slide read: ‘*Rakt-dan*: Words fall short’, and the slide that followed displayed the slogans: ‘*Rakt-dan, maha-dan*’, ‘It feels like heaven’ and ‘Share a gift of love’. The gift of blood was depicted as a euphoric gift, saturated with feeling—an ineffable and great *dan*.

¹²⁶ http://www.sdmimd.net/chairman_speech.html. For further discussion of *vidya-dan* see Carey Anthony Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of Service, Association, and Citizenship* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

While these new variants attest to the extensibility of *dan*, existing precedents for these sorts of gift in theory and in practice suggest that, in addition to defining a 'new' terrain of *dan*, they reconnect with or revivify foundational corporeal features of *dan* that might have been downplayed (or at least metaphorized) in more recent times. *Deh-dan*, which in its present-day usage refers to post-mortem gifts of the body for extraction of organs and/or dissection by trainee medics, is a particularly elaborated category of giving in literature such as the Dharmashastras.¹²⁷ There are, in addition, literal offerings of body parts, as in the cases of Karna in the *Mahabharata*,¹²⁸ the sage Dadhichi¹²⁹ and the king Jagdev Singh Panwar, who gave 'even his own head in *dan*',¹³⁰ and there are metaphorical gifts of the body, where in complex ceremonies the ritual patron divests himself of his impure self through the giving of 'gifts (*daksina*) which represent parts of the body'.¹³¹

The mythic sage, Dadhichi, has in particular been mobilized as a template for nurturing campaigns to promote blood and body donation.¹³² Said to have sacrificed his bones, made strong through his extraordinary penances, for the fashioning of a weapon to defeat the demon king, Vritrasur, Dadhichi is conceptualized by proponents of *deh-dan* as the original body donor. The Delhi-based organization the Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti has been particularly innovative in its utilization of the Dadhichi myth. Declaring that body donors are renouncers of their bodies, the samiti gives prospective donors saffron robes to wear at will-signing ceremonies reminiscent of the ritual taking of vows of *sannyas* undertaken by initiates. The samiti's use of prestigious tropes of renunciation is an important means of attempting to overcome the reluctance of many prospective donors to forego cremation rites. The fact that this act of renunciation is simultaneously a *dan* apparently aids the process. This is because *dan*—as an unreciprocated gift—is 'officially' a surrogate for both sacrifice

¹²⁷ Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia*, p. 138.

¹²⁸ See Reddy, 'Good Gifts for the Common Good'.

¹²⁹ See Jacob Copeman, 'Cadaver Donation as Ascetic Practice in India', *Social Analysis* (2006), 50, 1, 103–126; Lawrence Babb, *Alchemies of Violence: Myths of Identity and the Life of Trade in Western India* (Delhi: Sage, 2004).

¹³⁰ Raheja, 'Centrality, Mutuality and Hierarchy', p. 97.

¹³¹ J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 27. See also Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 75 on *tula-dan*.

¹³² Copeman, 'Cadaver Donation as Ascetic Practice'; Reddy, 'Good Gifts for the Common Good'.

and asceticism in the Age of Kali.¹³³ The unreciprocated giving of corporeal substance therefore *already implies* the asceticism that the samiti seeks to capitalize on in order to assuage the misgivings people have about foregoing rites of cremation.

The purpose of this example is to introduce the critical point that theories of *dan* lay great emphasis on the substitutive function of the gift, that, in the words of Heesterman, ‘the men of our era are no longer deemed strong enough to cope with the heady excitement and terror of sacrifice. In the *dvapara* era, sacrifice was the foremost meritorious work, but in our age it has been replaced by the gift’.¹³⁴ What the Dadhichi example demonstrates, however, is that present-day corporeal variants of *dan*, which are frequently conceptualized along sacrificial lines, *reactivate* the substituted elements. If *dan* substitutes for animal or even human sacrifice, then the sacrificial nature of biomedical modes of *dan* re-connects *dan* with precisely that for which it is substituting. I have documented elsewhere the various ways in which givers of *rakt-dan* translate blood donation into ascetic practice.¹³⁵ Attempts to donate blood despite being physically unfit to do so, or to give twice at one donation event, or three times on consecutive days—all these suggest a conception of blood donation as an austerity. What is significant here is that it is by way of such translations that *dan* reclaims the asceticism that it is meant to imitate.

A further example is the Tirupati Temple, dedicated to the deity Lord Venkateswara, located in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The temple is thought to be richer than the Vatican and records greater annual numbers of pilgrims. At the foot of the hill leading to the temple are lines of accredited barbers for the tonsuring (shaving heads) of pilgrims (*kalyana katta*). Tonsuring possesses a rich and varied symbolism in the subcontinent. Jain renunciators pluck each other’s hair—a painful practice indicating renunciation of bodily adornment and sexuality; the close family relations of both newborns and the deceased are tonsured in order to rid themselves of birth and

¹³³ Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 190.

¹³⁴ Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, p. 86.

¹³⁵ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*. See also Jacob Copeman, ‘Violence, Non-Violence, and Blood Donation in India’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2008), 14, 277–295; ‘“Blood Will Have Blood”: A Study in Indian Political Ritual’, *Social Analysis* (2004), 48, 3, 126–148. For an exploration of ‘ascetic’ blood donation cross-culturally, see Jacob Copeman, ‘Introduction: Blood Donation, Bioeconomy, Culture’, in Jacob Copeman (ed.), *Body & Society: Special Issue on Blood Donation, Bioeconomy, Culture* (2009), 15, 2, pp. 8–12.

death pollution, and when performed at temples the rite has 'votive overtones'.¹³⁶ Interviewees in Delhi gave several reasons for tonsuring at Tirupati, the most commonly expressed being that as pilgrims in god's service, devotees wish to donate parts of their bodies to the deity to show their sincerity towards it. Returnee female pilgrims in Delhi told me that they had their long plaits cut because 'while I am serving god I want to look ordinary'. Others suggested that it is really the whole head that should be offered, but in modern times the head is surrendered only metonymically in the form of the hair offering. One man, a teacher, told me: 'they can't give a finger, so they give their hair as a token of their regard'. This again reflects the idea that giving represents the culmination of a 'developmental sequence', with offerings a surrogate for sacrifice and asceticism in the present degenerate age.¹³⁷

Dr Debasish Gupta, who now works in Delhi for the National Aids Control Organisation (NACO), previously ran the blood bank attached to the temple-affiliated hospital in Tirumala, close to Tirupati. In 1998 he introduced an innovation: 'Hair is a tissue, blood is also a tissue; so we thought, why not lump it together?' An agreement was reached between the hospital and the temple authorities: pilgrims who donated their blood for medical purposes rather than or as well as their hair would be offered special temple privileges. It was reported that,

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) has decided to provide free *darshan* and a *laddu* to blood donors. . . to encourage blood donation. Thousands of pilgrims throng the hill shrine every day for Lord Venkateswara's *darshan*. The TTD feels that if some of the pilgrims donated blood, it could be of great help to the needy.¹³⁸

According to Dr Gupta, the practice continues apace today and has solved the problem of blood bank shortages in the area. The giving of hair continues, of course, but is supplemented and in some cases

¹³⁶ James Laidlaw, 'Embedded Modes of Religiosity in Indic Renouncer Religions', in Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory: Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), pp. 100–101; Lawrence Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 76–77.

¹³⁷ Joseph Alter, 'Self, Sacrificed, Sacrifier: Embodiment in Hathayoga and its Theoretical Entailments' (n.d.); Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 132.

¹³⁸ *Indian Express*, 12 August 1998. *Darshan* is the moment of dramatic spiritual interaction in which the devotee exchanges vision with the deity. *Laddus* are deep fat fried sweets made from a flour-milk mixture, which are offered to the gods and then eaten as *prashad*.

supplanted by gifts of blood. Once again an instance of 'bio'-*dan* is assimilated to sacrificial logics through substitution. Just as some devotees view hair as a substitute for head (or finger), medically useful blood now, in some cases, substitutes for hair.¹³⁹ While the Tirupati case connotes less the reanimation of latent self-sacrifice (an already present feature) than an effort to redesignate or expand the range of permissible sacrificial substances in a manner beneficial to local medical centres, corporeal variants of *dan* do suggest the figurative reactivation of substituted-for traits.¹⁴⁰ 'Bio'-*dan* can, in consequence, appear to collapse into complex simultaneities the developmental sequence whereby *dan* is said to stand in for asceticism which stands in for sacrifice.

However, the instrumental basis of the Tirupati example also serves as a reminder that in many cases such integrative depictions of *dan* are hardly 'organically' driven. Rather, they are formulated in specific biomedical contexts of procurement that are usually characterized by scarcity and where an accent on sacrifice can be a technique of solicitation. For the case of embryo donation (*bhrun-dan*), potential donors are explicitly enjoined to sacrifice their 'spare' embryos.¹⁴¹ The rhetoric of self-sacrifice is utilized partly in order to elide the sense that such embryos are in fact *killed*. As one of Bharadwaj's Delhi informants declared:

if you can save someone using my body it is very good, it is not killing! Indian culture says if my body can benefit you I can sacrifice my body. If we save someone through the sacrifice of *bhrun-dan*, then it is good and imbued with a lot of religious merit.¹⁴²

Sacrifice, in Bharadwaj's apt phrasing, is used to encode embryos with a 'moral provenance'.¹⁴³ Institutional-bureaucratic invocations of sacrificial motifs as a means of promoting medical *dan* variants, such as embryo or blood donation, are equivalent to the processes of operationalization as discussed above; they are self-serving and

¹³⁹ Famously, the tonsuring rite is a massive source of revenue for the temple authority which exports much of the hair it receives for the making of wigs.

¹⁴⁰ I borrow 'figurative reactivation' from Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgement* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 65.

¹⁴¹ Aditya Bharadwaj, 'Assisted Life: The Neoliberal Moral Economy of Embryonic Stem Cells in India', in Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli and Marcia C. Inhorn (eds), *Assisting Reproduction, Testing Genes: Global Encounters with New Biotechnologies* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

expedient. But it is because *dan already suggests* the motif that its invocation can be effective. Indeed there is no guarantee that such an intemperate motif will remain confined to its instrumental representation.

In developing his work on organ transfers in India, Cohen has highlighted, with characteristic brilliance, the several ways in which such transfers intertwine with sacrificial registers.¹⁴⁴ Cohen dwells in particular on prevalent public representations of the selling, or 'sacrifice', of kidneys by family members anxious to raise dowry funds: the gift of an organ (*ang-dan*) to facilitate the gift of a daughter (*kanya-dan*) (or the traffic in women, as Cohen puts it).¹⁴⁵ A scene from the Hindi film *Saaheb* (1985) is described. Saaheb has sold a kidney in order to finance his sister's wedding. 'The film cuts from wedding to operation and back again, repeatedly linking the sacrificial oblations of the marriage ceremony making husband and wife into a new body with the transfusion of Saaheb's anaesthetised body'.¹⁴⁶ Elsewhere I have provided examples of comparisons between transfusion and *yagna* (fire offering rituals). As one doctor told me: 'In a *yagna*, you pour ghee, you pour *ahutis* [oblations of incense and foodstuffs], and it burns up. So similarly in this *maha-yagna* of blood donation, every drop of blood given by the donor has the highest value of life and starts rejuvenating the dying patient'.¹⁴⁷ Such analogies between ghee dripping into fire and blood dripping into body vividly emphasize the intimacy between gift and sacrifice in the field of corporeal giving. In contexts of Hindu ritual, as noted by van der Veer, fire sacrifice and gift-giving are equal insofar as the Brahmin-as-receiver-of-gifts is considered to be one of Brahma's mouths, the other being Agni (the sacrificial fire). Further, Agni is present in Brahmins as the digestive fire through which they 'process' the gifts they receive.¹⁴⁸ If it is in the domain of Brahmin-directed gifts that sacrifice has retained more than a latent presence, proliferating variants of 'bio'-*dan* similarly thrust sacrifice back to the centre of the gift's signification.

¹⁴⁴ Lawrence Cohen, 'The Other Kidney: Biopolitics Beyond Recognition', *Body and Society* (2001), 7, 9–29; 'Operability: Surgery at the Margin of the State', in Veena Das and Deborah Poole, (eds), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁵ Cohen, 'The Other Kidney'.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁷ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*, pp. 58, 148.

¹⁴⁸ Peter van der Veer, 'Concept of the Ideal Brahman', p. 72.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to document and interpret some of the many life-forms of *dan* in contemporary India. It has attempted to be both summative in reflecting on the recent extremely productive literature on *dan* and programmatic in identifying emergent themes and instances of *dan* that require more detailed analysis at present and in the future. Though preliminary exegesis has been offered of the modes of *dan* discussed, definitiveness has not been the aim. The paper is thus not a final statement but a call to focus attention on new terrains of *dan* and the continuing vitality of this distinctive set of exchange categories.

It is conceded that the nature of my fieldwork in blood bank contexts has inevitably skewed the proffered examples in the direction of *rakt-dan*. However, this has afforded a privileged perspective on *deh-dan* (gifts of the body) more generally—indisputably a site of some of the most complex and interesting extensions and redefinitions of *dan* categories. Like Hinduism itself, *dan* is many and one at the same time and has been subject to the processes of systematization and instrumentalization without being reducible to or definable in terms of these processes solely.¹⁴⁹ *Rakt-dan* provides a case study of both objectification and elusion of objectification, and this is emblematic of the state of *dan* more generally. This paper has, in particular, noted the paradoxes of *dan* in contemporary Indian public life: the way in which it is characterized by seemingly countervailing trends of stabilization and proliferation, disambiguation and re-ambiguation.

It is not only scholars who debate and reflect on *dan*. The internet has developed into an arena not only for decontextualized *dan* transfers which demonstrate, to paraphrase van der Veer,¹⁵⁰ that *dan* is as little confined to South Asia as South Asians themselves, but also for asking questions and providing answers about an array of different kinds of *dan*. Such questions and answers often demonstrate a level of critical and reflective scrutiny in reference to *dan* that is not always evident elsewhere in the Indian public sphere (or, for that matter, in the ethnographic record). As such, it might be argued that these debates perform not merely an indicative function concerning 'views' about

¹⁴⁹ See David Gellner, 'Hinduism. None, one, or many?', *Social Anthropology* (2004), 12, 3, 367–371.

¹⁵⁰ Peter van der Veer, 'Religion in South Asia,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* (2002), 31, p. 184.

dan; but rather that they intervene in understandings about *dan* and thereby participate in its changing nature. A more unruly *dan* emerges online than is apparent in other spheres of public life. However, sanitized depictions of *dan* as a pristine philanthropic principle are also not hard to find on the internet. There are, of course, profound limitations in access to the internet that must qualify conclusions drawn from online discussion. It also seems likely that websites such as <http://www.sawaal.ibibo.com> might attract enthusiasts of the arcane and esoteric. Nevertheless, the internet forms a rich and ever-growing mine of conflicting, strangely recognizable and yet evolving perspectives on *dan* and as such it requires our attention. I considered concluding this essay with discussion of a recent trawl of websites that turned up references to the offering of *pind-dan* in Gaya for the departed soul of Michael Jackson and to a mock funeral conducted by Hindu fundamentalists in Banaras of the Academy Award jury that honoured Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (2000)—activists reportedly tonsured their heads, set alight an effigy of the jury, and performed *pind-dan* on the ghats. But instead I refer to yet another question and answer website (<http://qna.rediff.com/questions-and-answers>). One 'Liyaquat Pathan' asks: '*sab se bada daan kaunsa hain?*' ('which out of all the *dan* is the greatest?'). The answers, each provided by a different respondent, tell their own story of continuity and change in structures of meaning consequent on colonialism, postcolonial transnationalism and the resultant formation of new publics:

1. KNOWLEDGE *daan*. . . *iss se badda koi daan nahin hei Liyaquat bhai jaan*. [There is no greater gift than the gift of knowledge, Liyaquat dear brother].
2. *rakt daan* (blood donation)—it gives life to someone in need.
3. *kanya-gou*. [Bride-cow].
4. *rakt daan*. . . the blood of donation.
5. *nekiyaan chup kar karni chahiye*. [Good deeds should be kept hidden].
6. *kanyadaan*. [Gift of a bride].
7. *Vidyadaan, Annadaan* [Gift of knowledge, gift of food].
8. Eye Donation. . . Educate people.
9. Good Manner, Love. . . and Happiness.
10. *Kanya dan*. It is equivalent to constructing a temple.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ <http://qna.rediff.com/questions-and-answers/sab-se-bada-daan-kaunsa-hain-6085608/answers>.