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Ungiven: Philanthropy as critique *

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Abstract

Drawing on field research principally from contexts of medical blood donation in North India, this article describes how gifts that are given often critique—by obviation—those that remain ungiven: the care not provided by the Indian state for Bhopal survivors, the family members unwilling to donate blood for their transfusion-requiring relative, and so on. In this way, giving can come to look like a form of criticism. The critiques that acts of giving stage are of absences and deficits: we present cases where large paper hearts donated by survivors of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster to the prime minister of India signal his lack of one, where donated human blood critiques others' unwillingness to do so, where acts of blood donation critique and protest communal violence, and where similar acts of giving over simultaneously highlight a deficit in familial affects and an attempt to resuscitate damaged relational forms. We thus illustrate how critique can operate philanthropically by way of partonomic relations between the given and not-given.

* Although we (Dwaipayan and Jacob) carried out our respective stretches of fieldwork in North India independently, in order to avoid unnecessary distraction, we do not differentiate between ourselves when presenting ethnography in this article. Jacob's main stretch of fieldwork on blood donation took place in Delhi and elsewhere in North India from 2003 to 2005, but has continued intermittently since that time. Dwai's fieldwork presented in this article was conducted in 2009, and continued discontinuously until 2011. We would like to thank Sandra Bärnreuther; Aya Ikegame; Arkotong Longkumer; Carlo Caduff; the Dartmouth College South Asia collective; audiences in Tokyo, Copenhagen, Durham, London, and Minneapolis; the special issue editors; and the *MAS* reviewers and editors for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of the article. All websites were last accessed in February 2017. The authors contributed equally to the article.

Introduction

This article unfolds through presentation of a number of scenes of critique that find their logic in—and are both structured by and communicate by way of—acts of bodily giving over.¹ The distinctiveness of these scenes lies in their dramatization of what we call *activism as philanthropy*. Giving over, in the scenes we describe, is the condition of possibility of criticism. The given-over illuminates gaps between the given and the withheld—gaps that become the basis of critical social commentary. Crucially, the materials given over are, or make reference to, human biological substances. Our focus here, then, is on philanthropic modes of bodily giving over as scenes of critique. Some modes of what in the present day is glossed as philanthropy, in responding to situations of human suffering, implicitly criticize the conditions that give rise to the suffering it attends to.² In the scenes we describe, such critique is explicit—the giving-over of biological materials is simultaneously and indissociably philanthropic *and* critical.

Let us clarify our terms and aims. Activism and critique are intimates. The former presupposes the latter's arguments, though the reverse is not true—one may remain an armchair critic. This article thus forms a contribution to an emergent body of scholarship focusing on practices of critique. In his important work on the topic,³ Boland does not explicitly mention activism, but we suggest that such an anthropology might need to expand its parameters to take account of activism as critique operationalized. Indeed, this article is concerned with scenes of critique in the activist mode.

Boland links our current order of the questioning of everything to enlightenment thought. Though Boland is aware that there have existed multifarious critical milieus throughout history, his core argument pivots on what he calls the constitutive role of critique in the production of modernity. The point is largely persuasive. Indeed,

¹ L. Cohen, 'Given over to demand: excorporation as commitment', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2013, pp. 318–32.

² Certainly, this point does not apply to all 'philanthropic' acts. For example, the feeding of the poor in temples in India or the giving of alms does not necessarily wage a critique of suffering, but instead may take suffering as a condition of the world, and an opportunity for the exercise of *dharma*. Here, suffering is naturalized, not critiqued. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for insisting we make this clearer.

³ T. Boland, 'Towards an anthropology of critique: the modern experience of liminality and crisis', *Anthropological Theory*,

Foucault's seminal reading of Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' marks practices of critique and self-examination as a critical feature of the Enlightenment tradition.⁴ Yet, as Partha Chatterjee describes in his reflections on Kant and Foucault's essays, in this mode of Enlightenment, scholars' self-understanding was viewed from its inception with scepticism in colonies such as India. Rather, the close complicity of modernity with colonial power made its chimerical ambitions of universality and self-examination all too apparent.⁵ Yet, any scholar of bhakti devotion, and in particular the sant movement, in the subcontinent will be aware that practices of social critique emerged not only as sceptical colonial negotiations with the Enlightenment. Rather, contemporary and historical projects of critique have tangled colonial and indigenous roots: a complex interweave of Enlightenment thinking and historically dynamic Indic traditions. Our first case study is drawn from a guru-led movement in the sant tradition called the Sant Nirankaris. Typical of much sant poetry is its strongly non-Brahmanical tone. Ravi Das, for example, criticized Brahmins for their proud and hypocritical love of empty ritual.⁶ Many sants were themselves from low-status and generally lower-caste backgrounds, and taught that all human births are rare and valuable—not only those of Brahmins.⁷ This kind of social critique persists in present-day sant movements, which uniformly criticize elaborate ritual, idol worship, and virtuoso displays of asceticism.⁸ What we draw attention to in this article is the way in which bodily philanthropy—specifically, 'voluntary' blood donation—is instrumentalized as the means of such criticism.

In the scenes of critique we explore, the biological materials given over are actual blood and metaphorical hearts. The critiques they stage are of absences and deficits: we present cases where large paper hearts donated by survivors of the 1984 Bhopal Gas Disaster to the prime minister signal his lack of one, where donated human

⁴ M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', trans. C. Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow (ed.), Penguin, London, 1991, pp. 32–50.

⁵ P. Chatterjee, *Our Modernity (No. 1)*, Sepsis, Rotterdam, 1997, p. 14.

⁶ J. Schaller, 'Sanskritization, caste uplift, and social dissidence in the Sant Ravidas Panth', in *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, D. N. Lorenzen (ed.), State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995, pp. 106–07.

⁷ D. N. Lorenzen, 'Introduction: the historical vicissitudes of Bhakti religion', in Lorenzen, *Bhakti Religion in North India*, pp. 18, 24.

⁸ J. Copeman, *Veins of Devotion: Blood Donation and Religious Experience in North India*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2009, pp. 4-7.

blood critiques others' unwillingness to do so, where acts of blood donation critique and protest communal violence, and where similar acts of giving over simultaneously highlight a deficit in familial affects and resuscitate damaged relational forms. The gift that is given critiques that which is ungiven: the care not provided by the Indian state for Bhopal survivors, the family members unwilling to donate blood for their transfusion-requiring relative, and so on. It is for this reason that we suggest the term 'partonomic philanthropy'. What the term signals is the way in which critique operates by obviation in many of the philanthropic modes we call attention to in this article. We draw here on the works of Davis and Corsín Jiménez on the proportionality of transactions.⁹ Partonomies are hierarchies of part-whole relationships. Though closely associated with computer science and linguistics, their role in the representation of knowledge should make them intrinsically interesting for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in reference to questions concerning the distribution of resources. Elaborating upon Davis's work on partonomies in and out of balance in material exchanges, Corsín Jiménez observes that 'The part that we give is an indication of the whole that is not given—what you see (the gift) is what you do not get (the larger social whole). Gift-giving is thus an expression and effect of proportionality'.¹⁰ We extend this insight in order to illustrate how critique can operate philanthropically, by way of partonomic relations between the given and not-given, with that which is given underscoring that which is not (the deficits and absences we referred to above). It is partonomy, then, that makes philanthropy critical.

Is it helpful to think with the concept of philanthropy here? The donation of paper hearts to the prime minister is of course pseudo-philanthropic. Yet it remains an offering in response to human suffering that is all the more effective for the atypicality of the donor-recipient subject positions it comprises (those who require care offering their metaphorical hearts for transplantation to he who is the figurehead of the state that should provide it). What of blood donation? The current situation responds to a government

⁹J. Davis, *Exchange*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992; A. Corsín Jiménez, 'Well-being in anthropological balance: remarks on proportionality as political imagination', in *Culture and Well-Being: Anthropological Approaches to Freedom and Political Ethics*, A. Corsín Jiménez (ed.), Pluto, London, 2008, pp. 180–97.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 186.

move to outmode forms of blood donation such as 'professional' (paid) donation and replacement donation where relatives of recipients are asked to replace (in advance) the blood they require. These modes, at least officially, have been superseded by anonymous voluntary blood donation—a practice more in accordance with global health standards. We have previously written about how the renewed emphasis by the state and the medical establishment on anonymous voluntary blood donation allows a convergence between it and Indic *dana* categories of gift exchange—a convergence that lends force and meaning to the practice.¹¹ But equally the shift to voluntary blood donation is a shift towards modern philanthropic norms—the gift of blood is now (in theory) voluntarily given and has a moral basis. The present promotion of anonymous voluntary blood donation thus connects it to the kind of giving that is widely favoured in a host of other contexts both within and beyond India in which philanthropic action is considered to be both modern and moral only when directed untraceably to anyone in need. This kind of philanthropy promotes 'idealized solidarity reigning in abstract humankind' and fosters bonds between 'abstract subjects'.¹² We will see, however, that, just as Oxfam and other international aid organizations personalize their exhortatory posters with pictures of needy-looking children, voluntary blood donation in Indian settings undergoes particular processes of repersonalization, even as efforts are redoubled to foster depersonalized voluntary donation.

In this reformed mode, one no longer knows but may imagine one's recipients. This widening aligns blood donation with the idea of service and sacrifice to broader imagined communities—the nation, the abstract entity of 'society' and of a 'family' larger than immediate kin. We show how the bodily philanthropy of reformed blood donation is made congruent with a number of different social reformist agendas, including but not limited to those of the Sant Nirankaris. We

also show how a variant of these reformist alliances is found within overt political domains, with political party activists and other dubious characters seeking access to the ethical surpluses generated by voluntary blood donation, thereby deforming the aura and status of practices hitherto ethically charged with diverse reformist powers. Indeed, we show how, both conceptually and in practice, philanthropic

¹¹ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*; D. Banerjee, 'No biosociality in India', *BioSocieties*, vol. 6, 2011, pp. 488-92.

¹² M. Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 5.

self-interest and altruism do not disentangle easily. Rather we describe the tense play between altruism and self-interest as a productive dialectic, as 'philanthropic' transactions of blood in North India produce tense visions of both the possibilities as well as the limits of the fraught present and promissory futures. As anthropologists know well, practices of gifting are hardly ever innocent. In the gesture of forming and reforming human communities, gifts reveal the vulnerability of social forms, and stake the possibility of their deformation. This article, then, explores the tension between form and deformation immanent to practices of blood donation in North India. The fragility of the form of blood donation lends itself to its own unravelling and critique in the practices of those that find themselves sacrificed at the altar of such a future. As blood circulates in the social body in North India, we suggest, it acts both as remedy and as poison; practices of blood donation hope to perform reformations of a national imaginary while, in the same gesture, counter-practices seeped in irony reveal the sanguine fragility of sanguinary visions.

Saintly transactions

At a Sant Nirankari *satsang* (devotional gathering) just off a busy arterial road in West Delhi, a group of young devotees visiting from Chandigarh perform a sketch on the theme of blood donation.¹³ The sketch dramatizes the story of a young boy injured in a traffic accident. The boy's father declares that he is too busy to donate blood for the transfusion his son needs, but the two Nirankari devotees who brought the boy to hospital volunteer instead:

Devotees: We are willing. Take our blood. We are human beings. We are not related through blood, we don't even know him. But we have with him a relation of humanity.

Doctor: That is strange. You are helping and his relatives are not. These days blood relations don't help, blood relations are finishing. You have come here and you are not his blood relations. A stranger is trying to help. Are you Nirankaris?

¹³ 21 November 2004.

Doctor: These days, Nirankaris are giving a lot of blood.

Later, after his transfusion and he is no longer critically ill, the boy begins to sob.

Boy: I'm crying because the persons related to me by blood didn't help me, but you strangers (*anjaan*) on the road who are not related to me by blood, you helped me. You gave blood. In my hour of sorrow all my relatives turned away. I will never forget your kindness.

Devotees: Do not be obliged. It is our guru's orders to help human beings with blood. He says humanity is the greatest relation. We have not done anything great; we have only done our duty. Perhaps God wanted to teach you a lesson: only humanity is the real relation. Now take rest.

Boy: God is great. Now I realise the greatest relation is of humanity, not of blood.

The Sant Nirankari movement forms part of an inclusive reformist tradition that crosses formal Hindu-non-Hindu 'community' boundaries. As we noted above, along with other likeminded reformist movements, the Sant Nirankaris are connected with and draw inspiration from the *sant* tradition of North India: a

loose family of non-sectarian saints, often from lower-caste backgrounds who criticized elaborate upper-caste rituals and practices of idol worship. However, while rejecting idolatry in favour of a formless god (*nirankar*), Nirankari devotees coalesce around living *gurus* (*satgurus*) and attend his discourses in communal gatherings (*satsang*). And while gurus say that to donate blood is to participate in the service of humanity, devotees view it as much as a service or sacrifice to the guru (*guru-seva*), for the purpose of his this-worldly glory, and for which, in turn, they will receive the guru's blessings and *gyan* (knowledge).¹⁴ Blood donation as a philanthropic practice thus appears here at the conjunction of abstract altruism and concrete practices of self-interest.

Nirankari Colony, north-west Delhi, 24 April 2004—it is Human Unity Day (*Manav Ekta Divas*), a pivotal date in the Nirankari devotional calendar that commemorates the assassination of former

¹⁴ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*. *Guru-seva*, in almost all *bhakti* traditions, is ideally performed without self-interest, either for the devotee or for the guru. Officially, this is also the case for the Sant Nirankaris. In practice, however, devotees were explicit and unabashed in speaking to us about the blessings and other spiritual fruits that their devotional blood-giving would result in.

guru Baba Gurbachan Singh on the same date in 1980.¹⁵ The former leader's sacrifice is annually remembered through the staging of large-scale gatherings at which devotees are strongly encouraged to donate their blood. Many thousands of devotees give blood on this day—in Nirankari Colony, where the guru will address gathered devotees, but also at scores of *satsang bhavans* around the world. The Nirankaris thus stage a positively re-valued re-enactment of the trauma of losing their former guru, converting his martyrdom from an experience of victimhood into one of self-initiated ennobling virtue. In doing this, they attribute to the successor guru an exhortatory aphorism about the transformation of violent bloodshed into spiritually meaningful donation: 'Blood should flow into veins (*nari*), not drains (*nali*).' An announcement over the public address system declares:

When a brother, a sister or a son in a family is in need of blood, everyone says take as much money as you want, but we cannot give [our own] blood. The relatives of some Nirankari donors say, 'Why are you giving blood?' but it is great of them to give blood for humanity.

In both this loudspeaker announcement and the staged drama with which we began this section, Nirankaris imagine the possibility of constituting a social form through the act of giving blood. Crucially, this relation between the act of bodily giving and the act of constituting a wider social form is *partonomic*: in our opening drama, the gift of Nirankari blood gestures to, and is only required because of, a prior gift withheld by the family. The seemingly paradoxical final utterance of the boy only makes sense in the framework of this entanglement of the given and not-given, the abstract social form of the *anjaaan* made sensible through the re-personalized figure of the errant family. ‘God is great. Now I realise the greatest relation is of humanity, not of blood.’ But, of course, it *is* a relation of blood, if not a conventional blood relation. After all, this is a drama that seeks to performatively call into being future altruistic donations. The devotee performers both mourn the passing of ‘true’ blood relations (*khun ke rishte*) and celebrate the coming of the successor relation: the widened-out tie of humanity (*insaniyat ka rishta*). The bad family is vividly portrayed: too busy to care and donate for its own. The new abstract relations made possible by blood donation (*insaniyat*) rest upon a call to the passing of an older, more concrete relation of

¹⁵ On the background to this violence, see *ibid.*, Chapter 4.

biological blood (*khun ke rishte*). If we call attention here to such a form of bodily giving as philanthropy, it is to suggest that the philanthropic imagination of anonymous giving is predicated on its particular re-personalizations. The *anjaaan* after all is not the anonymous stranger presumed by modern philanthropy, but rather draws its allegiance to the North Indian *sant* tradition. At the same time, the critique here of the familial order does not lead in a straightforward line to its rejection. In other words, the familial blood relation (*khun ke rishte*) does not entirely eclipse the idea of a personal blood relation, but seeks to recuperate it as another kind of blood relation (*insaniyat ka rishta*). If blood-giving here is philanthropy as critique, then it is so partonomically: the given indicates its entanglement with the not-given, the gift presupposes that it was previously withheld. Philanthropic critique—as we shall continue to argue in what follows—is

thus a partonomic relation between the concrete practice of giving and a prior failure of giving that threatens the constitution of a social whole.

The relation between the reform of blood donation and the social reformist agenda of the Sant Nirankari tradition here finds echoes in other alliances, or relations of reform, underpinned by practices of substance exchange in contemporary India. Anthropologist Lawrence Cohen tracks precisely such a reformation of the body politic in post-independence cinema.¹⁶ In his analysis of two films—*Sujata* and *Amar Akbar Anthony*—Cohen tracks at least two moments of a ‘nationalist recoding’ of blood. In the dénouement of both films, an upper-caste mother figure lies in expectancy of a blood transfusion in a hospital bed. Up until this point, the narrative burden of both films has been to relate how ‘traditional’ forms of relation—caste and religion—lead to her malaise. Finally, in both films, the upper-caste mother figure is rescued by the donation of blood from the lower-caste daughter-in-law on the one hand and sons raised Muslim and Christian on the other. In this post-independence imagination of India’s political future, blood donation thus operates to dissolve the boundaries of caste and religion. Such an imagination is suffused with the Nehruvian spirit of the times, where cinema played a pedagogic function to urge audiences to renounce dividing, subnational ties. In such cinematic gestures, the weakened and reconstituted mother figure often served

¹⁶L. Cohen, ‘The other kidney: biopolitics beyond recognition’, *Body & Society*, vol. 7, no. 2-3, 2001, pp. 9-29.

as a powerful cipher for the nation and the future nation-making project at hand.¹⁷

But why do sanguinary politics so often serve as the conduit for nationalist imaginations in India? As is well known, Marriott posited a ‘dividual’, monistic (non-dualist) nature of personhood in the region—whereby people are capable of both giving out and absorbing coded material substances (i.e. substances imbued with personal character traits or particular moral qualities)—that results in a general emphasis on restricting certain modes of contagious social contact.¹⁸ For

instance, it is well known that, in many Hindu villages throughout India, caste boundaries continue to be maintained in part through restrictions on who eats and drinks with whom.¹⁹ But a confusing definitional tangle has bedevilled use of the term ‘substance’ in the anthropology of South Asia.²⁰ In Schneider’s study, *American Kinship*, later drawn upon and modified by Marriott and others in the Indian context, American kinship is portrayed as ‘a symbolic system resting on the two contrasting but mutually dependent elements of blood (shared biogenetic substance) and love (a code for conduct both legitimating the creation of blood ties and governing the behaviour of those who are related by blood)’.²¹ Here South Asianist ethnosociologists found a device through which they could distinguish ‘Western’ personhood from what they took to be a quite distinctive South Asian variety. For instance, scholars such as Inden and Nicholas declared code and substance to be inseparable in Bengali culture—for example, adoption, a so-called ‘social’ or ‘fictive’ form of kinship, may

¹⁷ S. Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009.

¹⁸ M. Marriott, ‘Hindu transactions: diversity without dualism’, in *Transactions and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour*, B. Kapferer (ed.), Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, pp. 109–42; M. Marriott, ‘Constructing an Indian ethnosociology’, in *India through Hindu Categories*, M. Marriott (ed.), Sage, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 1–39. See Parry for important comments on Marriott’s conceptualization. J. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994. See J. Copeman, ‘The gift and its forms of life in contemporary India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5, 2011, pp. 1051–94; and again Parry, *Death in Banaras*, on gift-giving as imperilling contact.

¹⁹ H. Lambert, ‘Sentiment and substance in North Indian forms of relatedness’, in *Cultures of Relatedness*, J. Carsten (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 73–89.

²⁰ J. Carsten, *After Kinship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

²¹ D. M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1980 [1968]; C. Hayden, ‘Gender, genetics, and generation: reformulating biology in lesbian kinship’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1995, p. 43.

take place only within and not between castes—and Marriott took to underscoring this inseparability through use of the term ‘substance- code’.²² There is no need to rehearse in detail the many criticisms to which Marriott’s ethnosociological models have been subjected (Moffatt’s²³ is perhaps the most systematic). As brilliant as Marriott’s Samkhyan- and Ayurveda-inspired modelling of the implicit categories structuring South Asian life is, the sources drawn on can appear

arbitrary and the categories and correspondences set in stone—in spite of the language of fluidity and dynamism used to describe them— while the possibility that South Asians might treat these reflexively and even dynamically deploy them in inventive ways seems entirely discounted.²⁴ Critically, what we see in the case of Nirankari devotees’ pedagogic performances is how a key category within Marriott’s schema (substance-code) may persist precisely by way of interventions that recognize its fragility and historical situatedness.

The problem the performances address is that of the perceived disjuncture between substance and code, namely between blood and its constitution of North Indian family relations. The performance of reform described above operationalizes an expansively redefined code—from the fallen modern Indian family²⁵ to a widely conceived humanity, achievable through a more generalized diffusion of substance via voluntary blood donation. Similarly, in its official literature, the Sant Nirankari order is explicitly critical of the decoupling of duty and care (the order of law/code) from ties of blood (the order of nature/substance). It proposes a successor relation- form achievable through blood donation, with devotees’ donated blood coded with knowledge, spirit, and intentions, enabling devotees ‘to establish blood relationship with other human beings’.²⁶ And, as we have seen, these will be ‘relations of humanity’, a term that suggests a divorce between substance and code—with relational coding (duty, care) no longer dependent on substance (the blood tie)—but which

²² R. B. Inden and R. W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1977.

²³ M. Moffatt, ‘Deconstructing McKim Marriott’s ethnosociology: an outcaste’s critique’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1990, pp. 215-36.

²⁴ A. Beteille, ‘The reproduction of inequality: occupation, caste and family’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1991, p. 28.

²⁵ L. Cohen, *No Aging in India: Modernity, Senility and the Family*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.

²⁶ Sant Nirankari Mandal, *Sant Nirankari Mission: An Introduction*, Sant Nirankari Mandal, Delhi, 2003, p. 20.

in fact remain based upon substance (the blood tie). Thus the reformation of the body politic through blood rests firmly upon an imagined form that already entangles substance and code.

Moreover, there is nothing uniquely or essentially ‘Indian’ about the category. For it to be maintained, cultural work will be required— cultural work that harnesses an emergent flow of biological tissues. Staked in such cultural work is also the possibility of immanent critique. As we have seen, the exchange and donation of blood has been an evocative and fluid metaphor for all kinds of nationalist and sub-nationalist projects in India. But in its very fluidity and evocativeness lies the threat of its diversion to other ends. The spectre of pollution is never too far from the imagined purity of sanguinary politics. This returns us to our argument that substance-code distinctions live in their reflexive and dynamic practices within which binary bifurcation of purity and pollution quickly collapses. Thus, in practices of blood donation, as in other transactions of substance-code in South Asia, the philanthropic abstract and the interested concrete never truly disentangle.

Nationalist reformations

The post-independence filmic hope of reconstituting the weakened nation drew upon concrete contemporaneous practices of political mobilization. While Nehru himself was known to donate blood, and central and state government ministers donated blood in front of the media at the time of China’s invasion in 1962,²⁷ when senior blood-bank employees speak about their memories of political involvement in blood donation, Sanjay Gandhi’s name is repeatedly invoked. In recounting Indira Gandhi’s youngest son’s role in campaigns to boost voluntary blood donation, a donor recruitment specialist at Delhi’s Red Cross blood bank (situated across the road from the national parliament) also reveals her intimate knowledge of the blood groups of Indian political leaders:

Sanjay Gandhi started the movement of voluntary donation in politics. He made it his mission. He gave blood himself to start it off. Indira Gandhi was O negative. We took two units of this type every 15 days to [her residence at] Safdarjung Road and exchanged it for the previous units in her fridge (we

²⁷ V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, Vintage, New York, 1964, p. 79.

had a special refrigerator). Rajiv Gandhi was B negative, and when he was PM we had to take the blood to Race Course Road [the location of the prime ministerial residence].

Another blood-bank recruitment specialist recalled to us: ‘Sanjay gave the youth a four-point program: (1) blood donation, (2) tree plantation, (3) dowry abolition, and (4) family planning, and Rajiv also donated blood before he was PM. There is none like [Sanjay Gandhi] now’. In fact, blood donation did not form a part of Sanjay Gandhi’s youth programme. Though at the time of the Emergency²⁸ in 1976, Sanjay Gandhi did indeed put forward a programme of promoting literacy, birth control, planting trees, and abolition of the caste and dowry systems that was sometimes tagged onto Indira Gandhi’s larger 20-point national programme, blood donation was not among these priorities.²⁹ However, even though blood donation was not a part of the official programme, it is significant that it is remembered to have been (and not only by this recruitment specialist) and it was most certainly a key focus of Sanjay Gandhi’s activities at various points in his political career (as one of his ‘pet themes’³⁰). For example, blood donation was particularly prominent during his tenure as leader of the Youth Congress—an organization that was formed in 1952 but ‘which was really activated in 1970 under the leadership of Mr. Sanjay Gandhi who gave it a constructive programme of tree-plantation, slum-clearance, blood-donation, family-planning and literacy’.³¹ It was probably at blood-donation events organized by the Youth Congress that being seen to donate blood became so prized as a means to gain advancement. (The Youth Congress was recently described as a ‘rag-tag bunch of petty wheeler-dealers and politically ambitious wannabes’³²—a label befitting the earlier incarnation, as well, even if in the 1970s it had far more clout.) In so doing, it became a key means for political parties to display their *seva* of a hyper-generalized *janata* (people, public) to the media—a generalization well afforded by anonymous blood donation.

²⁸ Indira Gandhi’s suspension of democracy, 1975–77.

²⁹ E. Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of India’s ‘Emergency’*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003, pp. 27–8; V. Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2007, p. 173.

³⁰ K. Chadha, ‘Sanjay’s men and women’, *Hindustan Times*, 4 January 2011.

³¹ T. Kalathuveetil, *Serving Youth Today in India*, Krstu Jyoti Publications, Bangalore, 1992, p. 245.

³² B. Kang, ‘Toothless tigers’, *India Today*, 7 February 2004.

A little higher up the political food chain, organizing (as well as donating at) such events became a means of getting noticed and is still marked in bold letters upon political CVs. Sanjay Gandhi's association with blood donation was such that Rajiv Gandhi himself is reported to have donated blood at a meeting held in memory of his younger brother.³³ It is also worth noting that Sanjay Gandhi's systematic promotion of blood (and eye) donation among Youth Congress workers was done at a time when he was promising to 'donate new energetic blood [to] old senile Congress'³⁴—that is, to produce a new generation of leaders, for 'in any revolution, reconstruction or rejuvenation, cultural, social or political, young blood of the nation plays a major and decisive role'.³⁵ Part of his constructive programme for invigorating the Congress, there is a sense in which his camps also sought to transfuse the nation with youthfulness, the literal and symbolic exchanging their properties. Unlike the 'forcible deal'³⁶ of Emergency-era mass sterilizations, there was no suggestion here of forced blood donations (though we refer below to accusations of forced political blood donations in a later period). Yet, Youth Congress blood donations certainly formed part of the mood music of the Emergency, and have ever since formed a template for mass political communication: internally in respect of the observing leader and externally in respect of the observing *janata*.

As we noted earlier, in post-independence India, the two most common forms of blood donation have been paid and replacement—where family members donate to replace the blood withdrawn from the blood bank to treat their ailing relative. In 1998, India's Supreme Court banned paid donation for safety reasons.³⁷ With paid blood donation now illegal and a government order seeking the phased abandonment of replacement donation, the country's blood banks actively seek out new constituencies of 'voluntary' blood donor.

³³ A. Siddiqui, *Son of India*, published privately, New Delhi, 1982, p. 271.

³⁴ J. Singh, *Sanjay Gandhi and Awakening of Youth Power*, Pankaj Publications, Hyderabad, 1977, p. x.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁶ Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories*.

³⁷ Given that most paid donors were/are of low-caste status, the possibility that the

ban on selling blood was informed by caste prejudice has been aired (see, for example, <http://www.ambedkar.org/News/News071202.htm>, [accessed 13 January 2018]—and see poem by Rao discussed below). However, it should also be noted that the move brought India's blood collection policy into line with international health protocols, which assert that safer blood results from non-remunerated donation.

Blood-donation camps are staged at corporate, educational, and religious locations, but also at political rallies. Most blood-bank professionals in Delhi have little positive to say about the latter mode of collaboration. One former blood-bank director we spoke with was repelled enough by the spectacle to want to put an end to such camps:

Political camps are terrible. When I was [employed] at [a Delhi government hospital] I said let's stop going for these (but we can't stop because they're so powerful) because they call everyone and when the VIP comes whether it's Sonia Gandhi or Sanjay Gandhi or whoever, they make such a big noise and the moment he or she goes that's it—they've all gone. We don't need such camps. There's no other motivating factor other than 'I'm trying to please the leader'—I hate all these things. I find them so disgusting. But those are the realities.

Another blood-bank director—a pragmatist prepared to enter the 'dirty' world of politics if it means replenishing his always-fragile stocks—recounted one such political blood-donation camp:

Last year I got a call in the evening. 'There is some political leader who wants a camp to be held'. After great difficulty I reached that place—I met those people—totally, totally disorganised. But they wanted a camp tomorrow. Next day when I reach there with my team, we organise everything, and then a girl is brought who happens to be the daughter of that political leader for whom the blood donation camp is being held, and the political leader is behind bars, and he is fighting an election from jail. Now to give an emotional backup to vote in his favour the daughter is brought and they say we are to weigh the daughter against the blood. It is an election point. Now the daughter is weighing 48 kg. And they asked me to translate it into blood. So I roughly translated that this is the amount of bags, and he said, 'No problem, we'll provide you with more than that'. And believe me, he was the only person who won as the independent candidate. His followers wanted to take advantage and make it an emotional upheaval to draw the sympathy of the voters— wanted to draw advantage out of the situation. The votes were to be cast on that day. It is a *tamasha*, but I just took the blood. Blood is blood.

These two quotations underline that the importance of display at these events is two-fold: the political party makes visible its committed 'service to society', while—as was suggested in the first quotation—the activist may donate in order to be seen

so doing by the leader they wish to impress. Such scenes of *tamasha* (farce/spectacle) reveal fissures in the logic of embodied gifting as partonomic philanthropy.³⁸

³⁸We are again very grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for whom this story of the politician's daughter whose weight becomes the measure of blood donation brings to mind the story of King Shibi, whose kingdom, and then his flesh, and

If the selfless gift of Nirankari blood was meant to reveal the failure of the gift not given by immediate kin, the political camp aims to rejuvenate an ailing political class, as well as to demonstrate a renewed political commitment to a generalized *janata*. Critique is rife within these themes of sanguinary rejuvenation, replenishment, and renewal. Yet, as we have seen, while tending to an abstract ideal of anonymous giving, the Nirankari gift nonetheless drew force from idioms of guru-seva, the medium and metaphor of blood ties, and religious reformist visions. Much in the same way as the Nirankari practice of donation entangles an abstract *manav* with the particular, living *guru*, the political camp entangles an abstract *janata* with particular, political self-interest. Similarly, the figural tie between the Nirankari discipline and *satguru* echoes that between the Congress party activists and leader, as both invoke the idiom of *seva*, albeit to different ends.

then his entire body, become the counterweight to a bird who seeks his protection from a predator. Rather than our (the authors') apparent acceptance of the doctor's description of this event as *tamasha*, might it not—in light of the story of King Shibi—also be read as *yajna* and, in particular, the kind of sacrifice that consecrates a king (or, in this case, a politician)? Though responding to this fascinating observation properly might demand another article, we offer several points: the politician in question is a local 'strong man' leader of a small Muslim party that is moulded in the image of the Shiv Sena. This does not in the least invalidate the points about King Shibi and the *yajna*-like nature of the spectacle (instances that are clearly from the Hindu canon). Indeed, we would agree that the template in which a politician is weighed—usually against cash but here against blood—does take its lead from the ritual consecration of the king and that, from the point of view of those political devotees who participated in the event, it probably did form such a consecration (see Copeman on the conjunction of the king, the politician, and blood donation. J. Copeman, 'Blood will have blood', *Social Analysis*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2004, pp. 126–48). We think, however, that most members of the public would ally with the doctor's point of view of the event as a *tamasha*. The weighing of politicians against money, and more recently blood, is an established component of the political rally. 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>, [originally accessed February 2017, no longer available]). On the other hand, gurus and temple idols may also be weighed in this way. Gujarat blood donor recruiters related to us the practice 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. Finally, see Jonathan Parry on the mode of gift called *tula-dan*, which involves the weighing of the donor against the gift to be given. J. Parry, 'On the moral perils of exchange', in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, J. Parry and M. Bloch (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 64–93.

This distinction between the two practices of *seva*—the reformist and the party-political—is worth highlighting. Blood-bank officials resent overt politicking—blood donation as pristine service, or *seva*, is considered by them to be beyond politics, or to belong to the sublime (that is, not the dirty, competitive, profane)³⁹ dimension of politics. But beggars cannot be choosers. As a Kolkata-based donor recruitment specialist put it:

Actually, we do not consider political donation to be strictly voluntary—there is a political compulsion. They use us [namely the voluntary blood-donation movement] to get votes on the basis of the consciousness *we* created among the public. They utilise this to get votes. ‘Look how much we contributed in giving blood’. They have never done it. Making people conscious was done by us. They are reaping the harvest.

The director of a blood bank run by an internationally known non-governmental organization (NGO) in Chennai recalled to us a Congress-organized camp at the very site, 40 kilometres from the city, at which Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated:

‘This was on May 21st [his death anniversary] and we received 8 donors. 200 people were there for the photos and then they went.’ For this doctor, this was the final straw. He no longer conducts ‘political’ camps. A blood-bank technician at a Delhi government hospital recounted a similar experience:

One camp I attended; most probably it was for Rajiv Gandhi—you will not believe—there was a corridor full of refreshments: all sorts of bananas and apples. There were about 25 beds. The workers were waiting for the VIP, Sonia Gandhi, to enter. Then Sonia came and about 50 people rushed and pushed into the tent, they all occupied one bed each; their leader came. Only then would they let us prick and they took photographs; and the moment she left they gobbled the

refreshments and ran away. I have seen this with my own eyes. So I feel it's nothing to do with doing good deeds on someone's death anniversary. Because when you do something like this you should do it very quietly, not with so many cameras around.

Similarly, we heard a number of complaints from doctors about last-minute cancellations of blood-donation camps scheduled by different parties after it was announced that the party leader was unable to attend.

In the Nirankari narrative, the contemporary family first divorces code from substance when relatives refuse to donate blood for one

³⁹The reference here is to Hansen's schema. T. Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

another (namely in replacement). It then rejoins substance and code in a perversely restricted manner, when non-Nirankaris enjoin their Nirankari family members *not* to give blood 'for humanity', suggesting that Nirankaris' care for unknown others would detract from their ability to care for their known dependents due to a damaging depletion of blood. The devotees reverse the archetypal demands of blood donation in the region—demands are not made on devotees for their blood, neither do they demand to receive it; instead they demand to give it. This, then, is a reflectively situated alignment of substance-code. Perceiving their contemporary detachment, the Nirankari response is to seek to restore their symbiosis via blood donation as a mechanism of promise and political critique. The image is of donated Nirankari blood circulating outwards, mixing with many other bloods in order to both restore and reformulate (for the scale is entirely different) the unity of substance-code—Marriott redux. While the scale of the nationalist imaginary is grander, the tension between the corrupt and the restorative function of blood is equally at play in political rallies. If the Nirankaris stake a future utopic humanity on the corruption of the contemporary family, political blood-donation rallies too are rife with the ambivalent entanglement of utopic futures and a dystopic present.

Consider the refrain '*Neta janata ka khuun chooste hain*'—'Politicians suck the people's blood'. The refrain is familiar, certainly in the north of the country, and it reflects the popular conception of substance flowing in one direction only.

Money and blood are analogues.⁴⁰ If it is people's money that is usually 'sucked', the relation with blood is underscored (and literalized) in news reports of

Congress activists forcibly taking the blood of underage citizens in order to make up the numbers.⁴¹ Money *and* blood are sucked. As metaphor, the dubious association of mining companies and ruling politicians in Goa is figured in terms of a transfusion of cash/blood: an advertisement for a Konkani music theatre CD called *Corruption* depicts a tube leading from a single blood bag (labelled ‘Mining company’s vitamins’) to two state politicians. Similarly, a 2012 political cartoon shows a turbaned politician receiving a transfusion made up of blood from the mangled corpses of ‘taxpayers’.

Political blood camp rallies, such as those conducted by the Congress and Samajwadi parties, suggest a reversal of the flow. If the *janata*’s

⁴⁰ Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*, Chapter 8. ⁴¹ *Times of India*, 9 September 2009.

blood/money is usually figured as flowing to the political class— a political class figured in Banaras Holi cartoons as raping the *janata*⁴²—what such rallies seek to communicate is a reversal of the flow. That is, the political class offers its own replenishing substance (making love, so to speak) to the *janata*. The rise of the sanguinary political rally in the era of economic liberalization might thus be understood as far from coincidental. Critics responded to the Shiv Sena’s massive blood-donation camp on Maharashtra Day in 2010 by stating that, rather than taking people’s blood, it should be providing them with water. The blood donated at such rallies seemed to substitute for those substances of the civic and of development—water, electricity—that people really need. Rather than the provision of services, the political class instead provides blood via unpersuasive postures of commitment. A substance that had promised to demarcate a communicative sphere beyond symbolism, blood is relegated squarely back into the domain of the purely symbolic: political blood donation appears as a desperate, nostalgic attempt to reanimate the template of the ‘maa-baap’ paternalistic- yet-benevolent state⁴³ in an era in which utilities are privatized.

Bal Thackeray responded to the retort that his party should instead concentrate on providing water by stating that ‘Blood donation is the real social work’ while, at

the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC), ‘the leader of the house, Sunil Prabhu from the Shiv Sena, suggested that his party should get a pat on their back from the BMC for a successful blood-donation drive’.⁴⁴ Indicative of its public-spiritedness and ethos of *seva*, the blood drive is the sovereign gift of the party. But a Congress corporator responded: “Sena ko Mumbai aur Mumbaikaron ka khoon chusne ki aadat hai. Toh isme nayi baat kya hai?” (Sena is known for sucking the blood of the common Mumbaikar. There’s nothing new or praiseworthy about this).’ We are back, then, with the more familiar practice and metaphor of illicit extraction. The accusation is that the party sucks the blood of city dwellers, which it then passes off as a gift from itself: *the donated blood is framed as a gift to the veryjanata, or Mumbaikar, it is extracted from*. But that was not all. Another Congress corporator ‘alleged that the blood donation

⁴²L. Cohen, ‘Holi in Banaras and the Mahaland of modernity’, *GLQ*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1995, pp. 399-424.

⁴³W. Gould, *Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 182.

⁴⁴*DNA*, 30 April 2010.

drive was conducted by luring union workers in the Shiv Sena with the promise of a permanent job’.⁴⁵ Whether or not there is weight to the accusation, it contains more than a faint echo of the forcible deals of Emergency-era India, in which the granting or regularization of a plot of land might be dependent on undergoing sterilization.⁴⁶ The very means by which the party seeks to show it does constructive *seva*—providing for, not extracting from, the people—is reduced back down to the level of (literal) *khuun choosna*.

In such scenes of fake and extractive giving, the partonomic logic of bodily philanthropy becomes dangerously transparent. The gift presented as a remedy is reframed itself as poisonous due to its prior illicit extraction. In the political camp, it is no longer easy to distinguish between the remedy and the poison, or the gift that is given from that which is extracted, or the reformist part from the suspended whole. In the following section, we explore how this logic of extractive

contamination takes on a material force in the world of the survivor-activists of the Bhopal Gas Disaster of 1984 and returns us to the scene of bodily philanthropy as paratopic critique.

Critique and contamination

In 1984, a poisonous cloud of methyl isocyanate leaked out of a negligently maintained Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Over the course of the night, the gas cloud quickly engulfed the slum settlements that surround the factory, leading to the immediate death of over 2,000. In the last 24 years, more than 20,000 have succumbed to the slower effects of the poison and about 100,000 more have been left with varying degrees of disability and impairment. The corporations responsible have continued to evade responsibility for the tragedy; Dow Chemicals bought over Union Carbide in 1999 claiming responsibility over only Carbide's assets and not its liabilities. The site—upon which the survivors have no choice but to continue to live—remains toxic and the groundwater poisoned. Very little of the compensation promised has trickled down. For its part, the Indian government has failed to provide adequate healthcare to the survivors. It refuses to recognize obvious signs of second-generation effects and

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories*.

has failed also to deliver upon promises of public medical research into the chronic effects of this poisoning.

Faced with these circumstances, over the last 24 years, the survivors have organized a highly charged and widely networked international 'campaign for justice'. Within the affected slums, the survivor-activists have set up a health clinic that warns against psychopharmacology and excessive pharmaceutical use. This is consonant with the broader tenor of the activist movement; its ongoing effort has been to link the original disaster of 1984 to the abuses of multinational pharmaceutical companies in the present. The Bhopal activist network comprises

several sub-groups that come under a broader conglomerate organization—‘The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB)’.

In February 2009, the ICJB gathered together about 50 survivors and activists and set out on foot from Bhopal. The destination in mind was New Delhi, the capital city that lies about 500 miles north. The street in the capital on which they converged (and do so almost every year) lies not far from the administrative centre of Rajpath and India Gate. Called ‘Jantar Mantar’, it is named after a historic eighteenth-century astronomical observatory that it circles. In recent decades, ‘Jantar Mantar’ has been administratively marked, cordoned off, and policed for a very different purpose—designated by the city administration as the space within which groups of civil dissent can make public displays of protest. The Bhopalis are not alone here; they find themselves flanked by a group of Tibetan protesters on one side, mourning and protesting the violence against their kin by the Chinese government. While the Tibetans remain a constant presence, other groups come and go.

During 2009, the ICJB leadership set into motion a series of planned protests. We focus here on two strategic actions led by the second-generation victims of the disaster, children then in their early teens that gather under the sub-organizational umbrella of ‘Children Against Dow-Carbide’. In the first action, Bhopali children reach out to their peers in elite schools in New Delhi. Sarita, Rafat, Yasmin, and Safreen, some of the leaders of the sub-organization, painstakingly detail to them the effects of the gas disaster on their present lives. Questions and conversations follow this presentation, after which both the Bhopali children and the school children from Delhi write letters to the Indian prime minister (the de facto addressee of most Bhopali public interventions). However, while the Delhi children write letters in conventional pencil and ink, Children Against Dow-Carbide use

blood collected from young Bhopali adults at the protest site. It is worth keeping in mind that many of these young adults were babies at the time of the disaster and have grown up with genetic impairment and amidst environmental contamination. With this blood-ink, Sarita, Shweta, Yasmin, and others write a letter to the prime minister asking in the most courteous of tones for a long-denied appointment. In 2009, the text of the letter read as follows:

Dear PM, We are people poisoned by Union Carbide. We have walked more than 800 km just to meet you. For the last 19 days, we have been sitting at Jantar Mantar. Would you please take one hour out of your busy schedule to meet us at Jantar Mantar? That is all I wanted to say. On behalf of the Bhopal victims—Yasmin Khan, on behalf of Bhopal Survivors.

In this strategic action, the violence of the disaster was routed first through the contaminated bodies of those directly affected and then through the pen of 11-year-old Yasmin, who knew its effect since birth. In a public event, it was then inscribed as a public letter addressed to the prime minister. Along with the letter, the medium of the writing (blood) was prominently displayed in medical container vials. The children then carried this letter-in-blood to the residence of the prime minister and had it sent in via emissaries, after much wrangling with security.

The medical instruments in the moment of writing—the syringe, the vial, and so on—point to one possible valence of blood that the activists are well acquainted with—its evidentiary quality. In one context, it plays a part as evidence of contamination and suffering, allowing claims to be made for compensation and future medical care. The medical testing of blood is well known as a standard evidence-gathering trope. Here, this evidence is literalized in an expression through writing. Thus, blood here takes on a valence that rejects the transparency of medical evidence. Instead, a history of violence emerges from the depth of the body, travels through the instrument of the activists, and confers depth to a written message whose material medium deconstructs its sarcastic message. Again, the materiality of blood is at stake—its evidentiary qualities run counter to governmental strategies of testing: that is, the surveys that were carried out in the early years after the disaster that denied second-generation effects. Writing with blood establishes an alternative technique for making suffering visible. Blood begins to write its own history, calling out for acknowledgement that is denied to it by governmental biomedical measures. By performing the disjunction

between medium and message, writing with blood calls to attention the gap between a corporeal history of violence and the naturalization of this violence. The implicit sarcasm in this tone—‘*Would you please take one hour out of your busy schedule*’—takes its force not only from its linguistic structure, but also from

its imbrications with its medium. In other words, in taking recourse to blood to make material their critique of the government, Bhopali activists animate its potential to *both* remedy (a medium for critique) and poison (as a marker of contamination).

Another set of public actions demonstrates this strategy in an analogous way. This set of strategies again involves the activist- children canvassing at city schools for support. After explaining the complexity of the issue and the seriousness of their concerns to fellow teenagers, they ask for volunteers to cut out large paper hearts of various colours. Once several such hearts have been carved out, the children from Delhi reflect on what they have just heard and pen a letter on the cut-out heart to the prime minister. The name of the campaign gives away its affective ploy. The ‘Have a Heart, Prime Minister’ campaign is built on the idea that these carved hearts are donations to the prime minister to be transplanted for his obviously missing organ. If his heart were indeed in its place, it would not allow him to turn a deaf ear to the suffering of the activist-children. The conceit of the campaign is again ironic: it entails medical philanthropy (altruistic organ donation) from Bhopali children who have been deprived promised, free medical treatment. The gift of the heart (again) is indicative of the ‘gift’ not given—that of state assistance and medical care. However, this exceeds the partonomic script of the Sant Nirankari donation. Devoid of sincerity and suffused with irony, the donation of the heart forms a meta-commentary on the indissociability of gifting from extraction, of poison from remedy. It is no accident that the heart is not a replaceable organ; in a biological sense, its ‘donation’ implies death for the donor. In a powerful philanthropic gesture that is both playful and sobering, the poorest and most medically deprived donate a pseudo-organ to the person they see as responsible for their deprivation. The ‘philanthropists’ here are those without the resources to gift in the first place.

The giving of the gift in this activist mobilization stalled at the heavily guarded gates of the prime minister’s residence, just a few miles from the site of the protest. The survivors could only look on, as an aide would finally take the hearts into the guarded compound and disappear down the long pathway towards the residence bungalow.

Yet, even in this failure, the survivors had successfully dramatized the underlying message of their bodily protest: that there is a pathology even more debilitating than the ones they live with—namely the biomoral pathology of neglect and corruption. While their own lives are a testament to ways in which moral and meaningful lives may be forged in the face of stark impairment, the activists take pride in that this form of life is at least more vital than the disrepair of the body politic—literally congealed in the metaphor of the prime minister’s heart.

Reverse partonomy

We have sought to show how philanthropy may critique not only in the sense of drawing attention to the human suffering it seeks to repair (a kind of critique by default or implication) but more directly as the part given over, which, by virtue of the gap between it and the whole it is extracted from, is able to draw attention to that which is held back. We want to now reverse the equation. It is important to destabilize the model; this also helps us to show its peculiar dynamism. Might the withheld whole also illuminate the conceits of the proffered part? We argue that critique can travel both ways along the partonomy—partonomic philanthropy is a flexible critical form.

We quote from a poem by Varavara Rao,⁴⁷ which was written in response to upper-caste protests against the Indian government’s move to institutionalize affirmative action in higher education and public employment (original in Telugu):

We stand in hospital queues
To sell blood to buy food. Except For the smell of poverty and hunger How can
it acquire
The patriotic flavour
Of your blood donation?

Like the gifts of paper hearts, the words of the poem are laced with irony. Yet here the gift *not* given critiques that which *is*. Blood donation is now an established mode of public protest throughout India,⁴⁸ and

⁴⁷We first came across this poem on the alternative Indian news and commentary website Kafila.org (<https://kafila.online/2009/02/18/castegender-in-a-poem-by-varavara-rao/>, [accessed 13 January 2018]).

⁴⁸Copeman, *Veins of Devotion*; J. Copeman and A. Street, ‘The image after Strathern: art and persuasive relationality in India’s sanguinary politics’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 31, no. 2-3, 2014, pp. 185-220.

some of the most prominent uses of blood donation in order to protest have been as a component of anti-reservation agitations. For instance, in 2007, trainee medics in Bangalore fasted, conducted numerous boycotts, formed a silent human chain, and donated blood in protest against proposals to reserve 27 per cent of places in elite medical institutions for so-called Other Backward Classes.⁴⁹ In a riposte to the special privileges claimed by pro-reservation campaigners, protesters sought to occupy the modernist-integrative high ground in protesting philanthropically (the beneficiaries being pointedly *no one in particular*). For all the poetic licence taken here (as if all low-caste people had to sell their blood to survive), the point is compellingly made that one has to be of a certain socio-economic status to even begin to consider voluntarily shedding one's blood as a means of political expression. The 'We' of the poem—labourers, those of non-elite status who might qualify for reservations—are hardly likely to consider that they possess the surplus blood necessary to shed it in order to form political statements (they are far more likely to consider their bodies to contain a deficit). Thus, that which is *not* given—that which indeed may be sold—dramatically highlights the self-serving underlay of the 'integrative', 'charitable', and 'patriotic' protest blood donation and its class basis. The drama of the mediatized blood gift, suggests Rao, all too easily deflects attention from other ungiven substances of the civic and bare survival: food, water.

We suggest that it is not that the model of partonomic critique is destabilized by the example of Rao's poem, but that it is reversible: the proportional elements of transactions can be pejoratively valued as surfeits and deficits, and become subject to moral judgements; the given and the withheld, so to speak, comment on one another: the given upon the withheld or, indeed, the withheld upon the given.

Conclusion: substance exchange and partonomic philanthropy

What role do substances, and in particular blood, play in broader conversations about philanthropy in South Asia? In focusing on the *how* of activism as much as the *why*, we showed how donated and received bodily substance in different iterations are both reformist and remedial, extractive and poisonous. Disease is indexed by a disjunction

between the substance-code relation, magnified upon the body of the putative Indian family, the divided post-colonial nation, and the corrupt post-liberalization state. Its cure relies on an invocation of malaise, followed by the philanthropic donation that realigns cause, character, and the materiality of the substance at hand. We have called this form of exchange partonomic to characterize how that which is given indicates the whole that is withheld, thereby instantiating a mode of philanthropic critique.

Yet, at every instance, substance exchanges reveal the fragility of such scenes of critique. Thus, Nirankari blood donations seek to recuperate the family to the end of a common future humanity, at the same time as they glorify a this-worldly *satguru*. The blood-camps of political rallies too walk a fine line between sincerity and self-interest, between the camp organizers' desire for a universal philanthropic good and the messy extractive modes of realpolitik. Finally, the blood-writing of Bhopali children makes this relation between instruction and corruption starkly explicit, where activist political conviction depends on irony and where the material index of sincerity bears the historical mark of political corruption and environmental contamination.

Thus, the material giving of blood and the metaphoric donation of organs allow us to point to ambivalence and fragility within philanthropic practices. The gift is both a marker of conviction and the bearer of its own undoing. In other words, partonomic philanthropy carries with it a circular threat; the utopic and the corrupt are joined in a dangerous, substantial proximity. The promise of a future through the gift is fraught with the danger of invoking violent pasts and revealing a divided present. The blood gift particularly points to a breakdown of the substance-code relation, a malaise at once material, biological, and political. But, in the practices of its giving, its pedagogic and reformist aims never escape its messy origins. Our aim here has been to not try and disentangle the philanthropic from self-interest, the abstract idea of a common good from the malaise it seeks to reform, or the reformist substance from the extractive and the contaminated. Rather, we have sought to point to this very dialectic as the productive motor of

philanthropic practices. In the philanthropic oscillations between the abstract and concrete, we see that the gift is never quite given, nor is its promise quite fulfilled. To understand the work of philanthropy then is to understand its conjunctive tense: a fragile state between embodied critique and bodily extraction, and in which the scene of critique is never cleanly detached from the scene of corruption.