Veins of Devotion

Jacob Copeman

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Modern Hinduism, it has been argued, is a fractured world consisting of “a curious medley of ancient monuments and half-formed new structures” (Madan 1987: 15). This chapter explores in detail the nature of this medley, arguing that one set of highly significant, and yet markedly undertheorized, “half-formed new structures” are those existing rituals, occasions, and in particular giving mechanisms, that have been or are in the process of being “made social”—that is, rechanneled or redeployed “intelligently” (Roberts 2006: 88) and reflectively according to a teleology of social production. Conventional modes of giving—money to temples, food to the dead, the staging of feasts, and so on—come to be viewed as wasteful and asocial in the light of the emergent imperative to give that which will be useful (upyogi) for an “in-need” society (samaj).

Though I describe this imperative as emergent, the obligation to give to what counts as “society,” rather than, say, to temples, has been recorded for pre-Independence India by Haynes (1987) and Watt (2005). This chapter seeks to show that calls for “useful” giving, such as those documented by these two historians, have reached a new pitch and level of diffusion in contemporary India. My concern is to document the pivotal role of blood donation in this larger social trend, and to provide conceptual tools in order to be able to apprehend more precisely the forms and religious implications of these changes. My term “in need” draws on Corsín Jiménez’s (2007) depiction of allocational models of utility and well-being in which society is “in place”—drawn into models and schema—by virtue of invocations of a “utility” that stands for it. Similarly, an “in-need” society is drawn into place in rituals and giving mechanisms through conscious provision for it.1

In a recent essay on how invocations of “society” in the United Kingdom can throw a cloak of virtue or respectability over a host of disparate causes or projects, Strathern asks: “What will count as ‘society?’” In stating that society is
that for which entities bracketed off from it (such as science) need to show they do "useful things" (2005a: 476), Strathern provides an answer that is pertinent to my discussion. Deaths, marriages, anniversaries, birthdays, even suicides—as I show below—may be spoken of and understood by donors and event-organizers as opportunities for providing society with "useful things." Such occasions usually involve different sorts of offerings, for example, money to the bride the night before her wedding. Giving blood instead of, or as well as, this money would be (and is, as I demonstrate below) a principal way of bringing in utility and therefore society—"society" having being bracketed off from religious, economic, and family life largely as a result of the widespread acceptance among modernizing Hindu activists of European cultural assumptions about the "bifurcation of the social realm" (Sen 2003: 16). This bifurcation has given rise to a situation in which society is summoned in diverse contexts as an entity to which useful things should be contributed. Enactments of "utility" thus ensure the presence of "in-need" society. Though the Hindu reformist milieu has always been internally differentiated and characterized by competing aims and methods, the shared imperative to make society present in all occasions, ritual or otherwise, is one of the important filaments that crosscuts and unites the many movements and associations that form it.

Of course, blood is not the only useful thing that can be given to society: pledging bodies for dissection and organs for transplantation, or giving wheelchairs to hospitals, where previously a religious organization might have offered a feast for its followers, or gifts might have been given by mourners to Brahmans in order to transfer to them the pollution produced by a death, would also count as instances of "making social." It is in the arena of blood donation, however, that one finds some of the most vivid and arresting examples of this rechanneling of existing giving dynamics.

The emerging giving structures documented here are related to and yet distinct from existing scholarly characterizations. Those structures reported in the most important anthropological writings on gifts in India (principally Laidlaw 1995, 2000; Parry 1986, 1994; Raheja 1988) are by no means mere "ancient monuments," but in certain, mainly public, settings there is mounting evidence that they are in the process of critical thought and reformulation, in part through active initiatives involving groups and individuals who profess reformist spiritual and social aims. As shorthand, I refer to the forms of gift explored by the abovementioned anthropologists—all of whom have produced ethnographies of the gift from within comparatively traditional settings—and the important differences between these forms notwithstanding, as "classical dan." I present evidence of the infusion into classical dan categories of what I call "virtuous utility," with modernizing adherents of medical or social utility seeking to convert what they view as nonproductive or wasteful dan into productive dan—that is, gifts that are useful for society.
Utility

Utility, says MacIntyre (1981: 62), is a “pseudo-concept available for a variety of ideological uses”—it is nothing more, he says, than a “conceptual fiction.” Utility is undoubtedly a problematic concept and requires clarification. It is principally understood, both inside and outside anthropology, according to the quantitative delineations of classical economists, for whom, says Bataille, utility is on the one hand “limited to acquisition (in practice, to production) and to the conservation of goods; on the other, it is limited to reproduction and to the conservation of human life.” This implies that all social activity, “in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (Bataille 1985: 116, 117). For Mauss, utilitarianism was equally reductionist—synonymous with “the brutish pursuit of individual ends”—and he famously proposed “the gift” as an alternative. Reciprocal gifts, in contrast to “icy, utilitarian calculation,” would institute and sustain enduring social relations (1990: 98). The important differentiation here is that for Mauss gifts did indeed have utility in establishing relations and social solidarity but were not utilitarian. Gifts for Mauss were useful in a sense that classical utility could not recognize. Parry (1986) has demonstrated the limited applicability of Mauss’s The Gift to Indian categories of dan. Spirit (sin, impurity, inauspiciousness, and so on) is indeed present in Indian gifts, argues Parry, but paradoxically in light of the prevailing interpretations of Mauss’s essay, the norm of reciprocity is denied (Parry 1986: 463).

Processes of “making social” in which gifts of blood, eyes, or bodies are made unilaterally by donors thus do not represent the progressive ebbing away and replacement of Maussian reciprocal gifts—Indian dan was not reciprocal in the first place. Instead, this chapter provides examples of the “exaptation” of the gift, exaptation being the “process of co-opting one structure to do a different job from that for which it was originally adapted” (Ingold 1997: 119). Exaptation, here, neither departs from nor moves toward a version of Maussian utility—rather, the exaptation of the gift is in the direction of production and conservation, and hence of classical utility. Importantly, however, exaptation is mostly enacted only in a partial manner (that is, the structure’s ability to serve its original purpose is largely maintained, even reinforced, as the structure is adapted to serve another purpose). The partial nature of this exaptation is significant because the reform of giving practices is characterized both by conceptual retentions and by departures that consolidate those retentions through being dependent on them. Reformed gifts, or gifts “made social,” tend not to efface existing giving structures, but rather to enroll and become parasitical upon them. The “parasiting” of one calculative agency by another, says Callon (1998: 45–46), involves the imposition of the interloper agency’s calculative rules and the consequent forcing of the “host agency to engage in its own calculation.”
the cases documented in this chapter, existing giving structures become the host agencies for the particular calculations of medical or social utility.

According to Bataille’s portrayal of utility as a creed that recognizes social validity only in actions reducible to production and conservation, adherents of utility would view actions of “disutility” as wasteful and in need of reform. This of course recalls Weber’s claims about the rationalizing effects of industrial modernity, and related transformations in giving activities from “wasteful” to “useful,” or efforts in the direction thereof, have been studied ethnographically in several contexts. Yang, for instance, who also draws on Bataille, notes that the burning of money at funerals and other displays of “ritual excess” in Wenzhou, southeast China, are viewed by Chinese Communist reformers as wasteful and stupid. The irony here is that such “illegitimate” and extravagant consumption of wealth can only take place because the region is so prosperous and thus fully cognizant of the economic rationality it so strikingly suspends on these occasions. Thus, Yang concludes, “the opposition between ritual and religion, on the one hand, and economic development, on the other, does not hold in rural Wenzhou” (Yang 2000: 479–480).

Whereas Yang documents attempts by the Chinese state and its officials to prohibit excessive expenditure, Haynes considers attempts made by the British authorities in nineteenth-century Surat to reform comparable varieties of expenditure in a “socially productive” direction: officials urged the city’s wealthy elite to adopt an attitude of philanthropy, “hoping to divert some of the money spent on religious festivals, offerings to deities, and marriage ceremonies into channels they regarded as more ‘productive.’” Colonial officials argued, “Far better it is to lay out your riches on such lasting objects [as school buildings and suchlike] than to waste them on fireworks, in music and other extravagances.” It was by no means only colonial officials, however, who exhorted the Indian elites to reform their giving practices. The Gandhian National Education Society in particular portrayed itself as a “sacred focus for charitable donations, one that was more deserving than Vaishnavite or Jain festivals and temples” (Haynes 1987: 350, 356).

Haynes concludes his study of Surat philanthropists’ gift giving with the observation that there occurred a “negotiated accommodation to the value system of the rulers rather than an abandonment of traditional preoccupations” (1987: 353). Secular giving was now pursued in tandem with religious offerings but in different transactions. For the most part, the wealthy elite partitioned its giving into separate spheres, continuing to offer resources to festivals and temples while also making “modern” charitable donations to “society” (for example, to schools and hospitals).

In the cases of “making social” I document below, however, a kind of volitional conjunction or “fusion force” (Kapferer 1997: 261) is developed whereby both secular and religious giving commitments are sustained simultaneously
within the same giving actions. Philanthropic gifts of utility come to be enacted in “sacred” settings for purposes that are as much spiritual as secular. In his study of the renovation of giving practices in colonial India, Watt finds comparable instances in which “new” giving is justified in relation to older charitable concepts. When, for example, in the early years of the twentieth century Brijendra Nath Roy and others sought to raise funds for the founding of Benaras Hindu University, the revered concept of \textit{vidya-dan} (the gift of learning) was mobilized in order “to sanction the transformation of traditional charitable institutions to suit modern educational needs” (Watt 2005: 71). Though Watt is careful to say that “the shift toward social service . . . was inflected by indigenous traditions of giving” (ibid.: 88), the story is still largely one of replacement, hence his chapter title: “From Dana to Associational Philanthropy.” In the face of Western ideological influence, the Indian giving mentality is ultimately revealed by Watt to be “something like a glass, which when it becomes full, begins to shed its old content as the new is poured in” (Macfarlane 1997: 23). In exploring blood donation’s role in making existing giving mechanisms “social,” I aim to show, conversely, that even when groups professing reformist aims actively seek to replace established practices of giving, what actually results are complex accommodations between different aspirations and imperatives.

Watt additionally invokes Parry’s (1986) argument that regions dominated by “world religions” such as Hinduism and Christianity are the most susceptible to conceptions of the free gift for the reason that such religions restrict reciprocity to the realm of salvation and “unseen fruits” in the next life. Watt (2005: 70) adds to this the insight that although in the early twentieth century, “many Indians did indeed hope to acquire \textit{punya} (and thus improve their \textit{karma}) through acts of giving . . . this is precisely what social activists wished to change.” Rewards would henceforth be detached from “spirit,” recompense now coming in the form of this-worldly social improvement. Indeed, Arya Samaj leader Lala Lajpat Rai (1865–1928) thought Hindus’ quest for spiritual reward should be replaced with an emphasis on social service: “The brahmanical emphasis on ‘self-realization’ he condemned as mere selfishness” (Sen 2003: 14).

The mutual exclusiveness of service-oriented giving and spiritual reward may well have been the desired objective of modernizing social movements—their goal a kind of radicalizing of the free gift through which it becomes drained not only of this-worldly but also other-worldly recompense—and both Watt and Lajpat Rai portray acts of social utility as being exterior to spiritually remunerative virtue. In the examples I document below, however, the targeting of practical utility emphatically does not preclude the attainment of spiritual aims; in fact, the fulfillment of practical goals becomes the very condition of their achievement. Simpson’s observation that body commoditization debates are cast largely as a struggle between intrinsic value and utility is certainly germane as regards wider debates on the theme of corporeal donations for medical
purposes (2004: 841). The interesting thing about the contexts that this chapter explores, however, is that utility has been assigned a virtuous or pious aspect and is regarded by many of the donors and medics I met as itself something like an intrinsic value. This is apparent, for instance, in the phrase, often repeated by both doctors and donors, that “Donating blood once is better than giving to a temple a hundred times.”

This leads to a further key aspect of the reformed gift—the question of its recipients. In the examples I explore below, blood donation comes to possess superior virtue compared to temple giving in part because it presupposes a need that cannot be guaranteed in the case of temple priests, who are often viewed with suspicion as grasping intermediaries. The superiority of blood donation also obtains from the fact that it more safely secures the benefits of giving (dan ka labh) to the donor. It can at times seem as though the individual spiritual goals attainable through giving can now only be secured by way of an expansive (or centrifugal) movement that, as it were, makes the gift social. Such a logic appears to invert the idea that “moral obligations to others can be satisfied [best] . . . by first satisfying obligations to the self” (Wolfe 1989: 33). Indeed, the logic of “making social” seems to indicate that only through adding to “in-need” society can self-oriented spiritual aims be satisfied. In the discussion in earlier chapters, blood donation was “made selfish” through recruiters’ emphasis on donation as an act of physical purification and a means of acquiring maximal quantities of merit, whereas in the present discussion it is “made social.” However, these seemingly contrasting approaches are in fact the two sides of the same coin, with both seeking commensuration between apparently incompatible requirements as the means to obtain donations. Mandeville’s celebrated observation in his Fable of the Bees—that Publick Benefit derives from Private Vice—also embodies a commensuration of self-love and the overall welfare of society, where a privileging of the former supposedly has epiphenomenal benefits for the latter. A large measure of self-love’s value was this socially beneficial overflow. This chapter documents the same commensuration but from the opposite angle, where part of the value of the making social of “host agency” ritual and giving forms lies in the way this process better enables the attainment of spiritual merit.

Making Social as Reformist Activity

The “making social” of structures of giving is a process of reform. The word “reform” could be viewed as problematic in that it may imply relative stasis prior to recent moves to update established transfer practices. The term “reform,” however, is appropriate here since it invokes a much-studied, avowedly reformist milieu of social and religious activity from which transformations in giving practices cannot be dissociated. Indeed, the reform of giving is indivisible
from the reform of Indian religion which has also, in many contexts, been made social.

In a comparative study of trends in Vietnamese and Indian religious reform, S. Bayly (2004a: 117) notes that reformist thinkers sought to purify and rationalize religiosity: “The characteristic model for these reformers was and still is a religion of doctrinal coherence whose prevailing mood or disposition was one of reason, sobriety, and selfless service.” This disposition has had an impact not only on giving practices but also on a series of interlocking social phenomena which have all been subject to reformist redefinition: the concepts of seva (selfless service), sannyas (renunciation) and dan have all undergone or are undergoing similar centrifugal movements from being targeted toward specific people’s material or spiritual statuses to mass social uplift and society in general.

To take renunciation: definitions of Indian religiosity as being “the cradle of those religious ethics which have abnegated the world, theoretically, practically, and to the greatest extent” (Weber 1958: 323) rightly remain integral to understandings of Indian renunciation. However, certain innovative forms of asceticism that do not entail withdrawal from society have been receiving increasing scholarly attention (see Copeman 2006; Alter 1992a; Khare 1984; Warrier 2003a). Swami Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, is often credited with initiating a redefinition of asceticism as the truest template for socially oriented seva (Warrier 2003a: 255). Beckerlegge (2003: 59) notes that “Vivekananda’s use of the sannyasin [renouncer] as a deliverer of organised service to humanity has frequently been acknowledged as an astute retention of a powerful Hindu symbol.” In a discussion of the increasing entwinement of asceticism and seva, Mayer (1981: 170) declares that “renunciation of selfishness through social service has taken the place of the traditional form of renunciation as leading to spiritual merit.” Though I do not agree that “spiritual merit” has been expunged from the realm of asceticism, Mayer rightly argues that the “selfless” orientation of the truest seva has become indivisible from contemporary definitions of renunciation. As I illustrate below, the Dera Sacha Sauda devotional movement provides a particularly striking example of the “making social” of renunciation.

Seva is a polyvalent term enacted and enunciated as a claim to virtue in a variety of settings: children do the seva of their parents in old age (Cohen 1998; see also Gandhi 1949: 24), devotees do the seva of a particular deity or guru, and politicians are ideally supposed to do the seva of their constituents (Mayer 1981: 158–159). Like philanthropic giving and asceticism, however, seva is increasingly directed toward service of “humanity” (manav seva) or nation rather than merely parents, gurus, or deities. As stated, the historians Haynes (1987) and Watt (2005) have both undertaken interesting and important studies of changing Indian giving dynamics in pre-Independence India. In anthropology,
however, though the reform of asceticism and the correlative redefinition of seva have been touched upon, the reform of the gift has received negligible attention thus far.⁸

**Gurus, Death, and Blood Donation: A Winning Combination**

As was noted in chapter 1, the Dera Sacha Sauda is a devotional order in the sant tradition which undertakes large-scale social welfare projects. I undertook a month’s ethnographic research in one of its ashrams in the city of Sirsa, Haryana state, in 2004. One of the ways in which the movement proclaims its reformist credentials is through its professed disdain for conventional asceticism. The guru’s public declarations are often directed toward the demystification of the figure of the sadhu:

> We met a man who said you will find god in forests. We said, just think! If you find god in forests then all the wild animals living there must have found god way back, but have they?! Somebody said to us, wear clothes of a particular color [i.e., saffron] and you will find god. Think! If you can meet god by changing the color of your clothes then there is nothing to do! Change the color of your clothes; god will come to your home. And when you want to make god leave, just change your dress to different color clothes.⁹

The Dera Sacha Sauda at once retains and reformulates classical concepts of asceticism in housing roughly 350 “sadhus” and 100 “sadhvis” at its Sirsa ashrams. Dedicated to the giving of seva (service) to the guru and to “humanity,” these renouncers claim to work eighteen-hour days tilling the fields, writing and publishing the organization’s newspaper, *Sacha Kahoon*, serving at the Sacha Sauda petrol pump or restaurant, or engaged in other labors. They wear plain, non-saffron clothes, many sadhus donning cockney-style flat caps. There seems very little visually to link them with classical representations and definitions of the sadhu. They have, however, left their families to live in the ashram—an archetypal Indian ascetic requirement—and further, the claim to work eighteen-hour days appears to be a kind of practical analogue of the feats of endurance associated with classical renouncers. Indeed “practical sadhus” would be an appropriate term for these renouncers whose activities correspond to Swami Vivekananda’s call for a “Practical Vedanta,” which “propagates an ethical and social application of the *advaita vedanta*” (Hellman 1996: 241) and which stresses the supremacy of action as worship. One extremely important way in which their behavior diverges from (and implicitly critiques) that of classical renouncers is in their not accepting alms. The guru strongly criticizes the giving of money to temple priests, and his organization professes never to accept donations. In one discourse the guru contrasts useless offerings
of money to God with superior offerings of utility such as medicine and blood for human beings:

Nobody reached God with money. We can give this to you in writing. Yes! Donate, but where it is needed. . . . If somebody is dying from a disease, then it’s your duty to help him. Donate blood and money; bring medicines for him. . . . This body will vanish to soil so donate your eyes for somebody. It is really a great donation and God must bless you for this. So brother! Saints never stop you from donations but they ask you to do so at the right place, for the right person [my emphasis; see above, note 5]. Donate with your own hands. Don’t bring anybody in between. O! You give a donation of money and say it is given to God. Does God sign on that?20

Since Dera Sacha Sauda sadhus and sadhvis were firmly at the fore in donating blood at a donation camp staged by the movement in October 2004, the occasion forcefully demonstrated the interlocking nature of reformist redefinitions of giving and asceticism, for each was manifested simultaneously and interdependently in this singular event.

Articles published in regional newspapers by journalists covering the camp recount the guru’s address at the inauguration in which he reportedly declared that the decision to hold the camp was taken at the pagri ceremony of his father, Sadar Magghar Singh. It was staged in order to “contribute towards the service of mankind rather than having a public feast.”21 In another article on this “great yagna [fire-offering ritual] of blood donation,” the guru is quoted as claiming that manav seva (service of humanity) such as blood donation is “of greater significance than organizing any type of feast.” The reflective replacing of customary feasts and rites with blood donation in “the service of mankind” may be termed “substitutive ennoblement.” Another article puts this clearly: “A rare example was witnessed on the occasion of the homage paying function (shradhdhanjali samaroh) of the father of the present gaddinashin of the Sacha Sauda, Sirsa . . . a massive blood donation camp was organized on the occasion of this homage paying ceremony instead of indulging in the numerous rites and rituals which usually follow the death of elders in order to create a reputation for oneself.”22

In addition to making statements similar to those cited above from the local media, devotees in Sirsa told me explicitly that they thought of themselves as performing rakt-dan in replacement of pind-dan: the giving of food to the deceased. As Banwari Lal, editor of Sacha Kahoon, told me: “Guru Ji said our aim is to serve society (samaj). So [when his father died], instead of pind-dan, which is actually just a waste (bekar) of money, we did rakt-dan, which is a great donation (rakt-dan maha-dan hai). In pind-dan a cow is given to a Brahmin, but this is not useful (uppyogi).”23 My guide in Sirsa, Dr. Soni, also describes the instigating of
blood donation as the substitutive ennoblement of conventional mortuary ceremonies: “Instead of pind-dan and other orthodox customs, Guru Ji did a blood donation camp and gave free houses to the poor and widows. Pind-dan is for the peace of the soul of the departed. But it’s not true! Old people say give pind-dan, give a cow to a Brahmin. But the pandits are rich. If you give money to the rich, how will anybody be benefited?” Part of the virtue of blood donation, according to this view, is that it possesses built-in means testing—a person doesn’t receive a transfusion, Dr. Soni surmises, if they do not need one: the transfusion recipient is needy and therefore worthy.

**Extensions of Death and Marriage**

Soon after my visit to Sirsa I met with the donor recruiter Vinay Shetty in Mumbai. I mentioned to him the extraordinary scale of the Sirsa camps, and he laughed: “Religious leaders and death is a fantastic combination! It really hits you. Indira dies and Rajiv wins the elections. You have a death and everyone is more sympathetic to you. Death, gurus, and blood donation is a winning combination!” He has a point. The first blood donation camps conducted by the Sant Nirankari Mission took place on the death anniversary of its former guru, Gurbachan Singh, who was assassinated in 1980 (see chapter 4); the Dera Sacha Sauda’s first world record–breaking donation camp was conducted on the death anniversary of its preceding guru; the Youth Congress holds camps on the death anniversaries of Indira, Rajiv, and Sanjay Gandhi, respectively.

Deaths and death anniversaries precipitate giving practices that spiritual movements and medical institutions seek to “parasite” in order to reconfigure their calculative goals in accordance with the aims of medical utility. Devotional orders and political parties are not unique in attempting to “make social” events staged in the immediate aftermath of deaths. The Shiv Shakti blood bank, located in Sirsa (but not connected to the Sacha Sauda), takes active steps for the initiation of (reformist) rakt-dan in the “spaces” of classical dan. It uses its literature and expertise to campaign for both eye and blood donation, and its medics regularly travel to Haryana’s more remote rural areas to educate villagers about donation and to encourage the staging of camps. A blood bank director named Dr. Arora whom I met in Sirsa at a blood donation camp conducted at a marriage function (discussed below), recalls holding roughly ten blood collection camps at the uthala and rasam pagri ceremonies of persons who had donated their eyes or bodies on either the fourth or the thirteenth days after a death: “We get a good response—usually 25–30 units. It is an emotion by which they pay tribute to the departed soul (jane wale). It is a prayer to god, an offering to the god that the soul will rest in peace. By doing something good, they want something in return—peace for the departed soul.” Uthala is the “getting up” ceremony when mourners are no longer expected to sit patiently on the
floor; rasam pagri is the passing of the deceased male’s turban to the new head of the family. The blood bank’s founder, Dr. Banerwal, explains: “When people have the funeral gathering, a turban (pagri) is put on the elder son to show he is now responsible for the family, and we have convinced people that after wearing that pagri, the first thing to do is to donate blood. This is the noblest (sub se nek) way to begin your regime.” Banerwal continues: “I went to mourn the death of a friend and I said to his children, if your father can donate his eyes, why can’t you donate blood on rasam pagri? At first they said no but they called me up two or three days later and asked me to address the mourners.” The alliance between reformist Hinduism’s focus on practical action over existing formal procedures and campaigns to solicit blood donation was again clearly present in Banerwal’s appeal to the mourners: “We have come here to pray for the peace of his soul and it doesn’t come through words but through action.”

In the “active” focus of rakt-dan lies its reformist superiority. In his address to mourners, Banerwal succeeded in making social the occasion of rasam pagri by stressing the virtues of utility. The soul of the departed person, he asserted, would find peace through offering the productive dan of rakt-dan, the strong suggestion being that this soul’s “peace” is most safely secured through the giving of a dan made social.

Miyazaki has recently written of extensions in gift-giving practices in reference to Fiji. He describes different “terrains” of extension (Miyazaki 2005: 279) which may be glossed here as “indigenous” and “analytical”: indigenous Fijian gift-giving appeared, in one historical moment—though in fact ultimately failed—to provide a template for future relations between native Fijians and the state; indigenous gift-giving appeared to possess “extensible potential.” Another terrain of extension is that of anthropological analysis: through extending the insights gained through his analysis of gift giving in numerous contexts, Mauss (1990), as discussed above, formulated a diagnostic tool for certain problems characteristic of Western society. Following from this, it is evident that Banerwal, in “parasiting” existing giving practices in order to collect blood from mourners, rendered rasam pagri “extensible-to-utility.”

Raheja (1988: 148–156) provides a detailed description of the funerary gifts given on the deaths of male householders in Pahansu village, Uttar Pradesh. She explains that on the day of death, four balls of dough are placed in the corners of the stretcher carrying the deceased. They are later removed to a space outside the boundary of the village in order that the body’s inauspiciousness (nasubh) be removed from the vicinity of mourners. On the third day, milk, honey, and flour are offered to the wandering ghosts (prets) of the locality. More offerings of yoghurt and sugar are made in the house to the deceased’s pret to sever connections with it and to transfer its inauspiciousness. On the thirteenth day, offerings are now given to human recipients. By this time the pret has become an ancestral deity and is no longer a potentially malevolent force. Thirteen
measures of certain types of uncooked foods (*karva cun*) are transferred from the wife-giving side of the deceased’s family to the wife-taking affines who then symbolically offer them to the deceased before finally they are (reluctantly) accepted by the family Brahman. In Pahansu, the thirteenth day is also the day on which the pagri is tied onto the eldest son of the deceased man. His mother’s brother gives him money and the turban. The mother’s brother later places “the cloth of widowhood” onto the head of his sister, which she must wear for several months in order that its inauspiciousness remain contained in her person. The cloth is finally disposed of in the Yamuna River or given to a sweeper at Haridwar. A final prestation on the thirteenth day is called “the coins of the hand washing” and involves women mourners washing their hands and offering coins into a vessel provided by the barber’s wife. This, again, is done to transfer donors’ inauspiciousness to the recipient (the barber’s wife).

Though I did not witness any mortuary rituals in the villages surrounding Sirsa in Haryana, and though the details provided by the blood bank doctors are far from comprehensive, the information I gathered does suggest that certain of the prestations described by Raheja were indeed conducted at the mortuary ceremonies in which blood was donated. Drs. Arora and Banerwal specifically mentioned gifts made to the *pret* (ghost of the deceased) and to a Brahmin. Rakt-dan performed in such settings thus appears to represent the reformist “ennoblement” rather than simply a replacement of existing dan transfers. And yet, while much is seemingly retained of the “traditional” mortuary rites, even as a reformist departure is undertaken, the blood bank, with its emphasis on the importance of rakt-dan as a theology of action and a socially conscious method of ensuring the peace of the deceased, is clearly a significant agent of Hindu reform.

Raheja’s description of Pahansu mortuary gifts additionally raises the issue of inauspicious or impure transfer. In reference to the mortuary rituals under consideration, the matter of impure transfer cannot be authoritatively resolved given the paucity of data, but there are clues. Säävälä (2000: 314) has recently argued—though in a different context—that the removal of inauspiciousness by one party need not necessitate its transfer to another. Similarly in Pahansu, the four balls of dough, placed in fields surrounding the village, simply propel the dead body’s inauspiciousness outside the bounds of the village. The accounts provided by Dr. Arora and Dr. Banerwal appear to suggest that, in certain Haryana villages, rakt-dan may also remove inauspiciousness or sin. It would be going too far, however, to suggest that these qualities become located within delineable others. Rather than being propelled toward transfusion recipients, it may be the case that inauspiciousness is instead minimally impelled away from the vicinity of mourners, just as the balls of dough in Pahansu remove without necessarily transferring inauspiciousness.

A further purpose of rakt-dan in this setting, according to Banerwal, is its symbolic role in the immediate institution by the successor pagri recipient of a
“noble regime”—a further indicator of the propensity of reform-minded Hindus to see utility as a virtue. Finally, to the extent that rakt-dan is aimed at the pret (for its peace or its sustenance, see Parry 1994: 196), the mutating form of the deceased assumes a role similar to that of the Nirankari guru as an agent of multiple refraction. Chapter 4 details how Nirankari devotees’ blood donations are given both to the guru and through the guru to “humanity.” Similarly, securing the peace and sustenance of the pret may be the principal aim of the mourners, but, as in the Nirankari example, the recipient turns facilitator, converting a centripetal aim (securing the soul’s peace) into centrifugal (socialized) effects. Exaptation—the coopting of existing giving structures to effect new outcomes—thus signals not the prior gift’s effacement but the newly formed gift’s duality: rakt-dan, as a mortuary gift extended-to-utility, comes to serve several different purposes at once.

I provide examples elsewhere (Copeman forthcoming) of execution and euthanasia as actions extensible-to-utility. I also heard of a case in Delhi where a student killed himself because he failed his exams, having left a suicide note expressing the wish to have his eyes donated for medical use. I came across numerous further instances of Delhi blood donor recruiters seeking to exploit the “extensible potential” of death-related giving procedures. A medical student at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) exhorted an audience of schoolchildren to “choose one important day of your life like your birthday (janam din) or shraddh,” when rites for the dead are performed, on which to give blood. “Give blood on shraddh in memory of your dead elders (bhuzurg). Choose the day of shraddh, the day to honor and respect your elders, so that from their souls (atma) will come blessings (ashirvad) for you.” Once again, it appears that the impulse to “make social” through “useful” giving to many as opposed to “useless” giving to specific dead elders becomes the condition for the fulfillment of the self-oriented component of offerings (here, the wish to attain blessings).

A notable feature of the blood donation-mortuary rituals I heard about in Haryana is that they were conducted by mourners partly in tribute to the deceased’s donation of his or her eyes. This phenomenon of donations being made in tribute to donations made by others was also a feature of a marriage ceremony I attended in Sirsa in which the well-educated couple’s friends and family were encouraged to give blood. The bride’s brother had died a year before of muscular dystrophy. Before dying, according to his cousin Sandeep, he had said: “Please donate my eyes and they will go on seeing after my death.” Thus, said Sandeep, “Social service is in the family’s blood right now.” I describe such modes of dying elsewhere (Copeman forthcoming)—in which dying persons pledge parts of their bodies—as “consecrations” of misfortune indicative of an emerging Indian aesthetics of dying that foregrounds utility, this being consistent with what has been described as the widespread Hindu ideal of playing an active part in one’s own death (Madan 1987: 11).
Inspired by her brother’s example, the bride Yukti’s blood donation initiative was endorsed by her parents, who stated on the wedding invitations: “Blood donation is a great donation (rak-dan, maha-dan). Please take part enthusiastically (barhcharh kar). This only (yihi) will be the true blessing (sacha ashirvad) for the kanya [daughter/virgin].” There is the suggestion, once again, that “true blessings” accrue only from offerings of virtuous utility. The occasion was ladies sangit (ladies’ music), a function that precedes the wedding proper, in this instance involving the bride’s female relatives performing a broad range of songs on stage, from classical bhajans (devotional songs) to contemporary Bollywood hits. In the adjoining room of the dharmashala (pilgrim lodge) at which the event was held, beds were laid out for blood donation, and it was indeed a remarkable sight to witness the guests and family members donating in their finery. This donation of blood was performed explicitly in place of the small offerings of money which I was told would usually be given to the bride on ladies sangit. I gained the impression, however, that gifts were to be given to the couple as usual at the wedding proper. Blood donation in this marriage context was thus part substitutive ennoblement of a prior gift-form, and part ennobling addition. It was the innovative Shiv Shakti blood bank, described earlier, which bled invitees, and the blood bank’s founder, Dr. Banerwal, who declared on stage, microphone in hand: “People give gifts and blessings to the bride in marriage, and sometimes it reaches a million rupees. But what people are giving today is the gift of life (jivan-dan) which is priceless (anmol).”

The reflective nature of this “parasiting” of marriage offerings should be emphasized—the bride and her family were well aware of the novelty of the event, inviting journalists and television crews to cover the “first ever blood donation marriage.” This appears consonant with Cohn’s (1987: 229) argument about cultural objectification, whereby 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.” Once culture has been turned into a conscious object, states Cohn (ibid.: 250), it can be used for “political, cultural and religious battles.” One such battle, perhaps, is the “making social” of existing offerings, with classical giving structures being objectified in order to be subjected to ennobling reform. Having drawn this parallel, however, it should be emphasized that I do not subscribe to Cohn’s claim that all this amounts to “Westernization,” since, as I hope has been made clear, in many cases reformist giving practices are highly dependent upon and actually reinforce the giving structures they “parasite.” What results is not Westernization but complex accommodations between differing imperatives.

**Differing Instances and Intensities**

The set of processes I term “making social,” it should be clear, are taking place on multiple different levels. Moreover, it is by no means only classical dan
offerings that are subject to this dynamic. In February 2004, Delhi University was the venue for the Society for Unexpected Goals and Means (SUGAM) to induct Valentine’s Day into the realm of the reformed gift. The society was formed in north Delhi by a handful of local traders and businesspeople for the express purpose of refurbishing the narrow and exclusive romantic exchanges they hold to be characteristic of Valentine’s Day into expansively reformulated, “inclusive” gifts of love. It capitalizes on the emotional content of valentine gifts, declaring that celebrants must expand and despecify the circle of valentine beneficiaries and thereby discover the “true” meaning of the occasion. Blood donors each received a red rose, provided symbolically by future recipients. A poster adorning the donating area declared: “All humanity, my Valentine. Selfless love—The poor and destitute—The downtrodden—Accident victims—The suffering—The old and infirm—Indian values—Spiritual values—My India, my Valentine. True love, my Valentine. Give blood for Valentine.”

Student donors I spoke with appeared to subscribe to SUGAM’s message. As one male student told me: “Love is for everyone, not just for a girl or boy. It is also for the poor and for my mother. Today I gave for the poor and for my mother. My mother is my valentine.”

SUGAM’s nationalist reformulation of Valentine’s Day invites a contrast with the Shiv Sena’s stance on this “Western” festival. The Shiv Sena political party was begun as a vehicle to promote the interests of the Marathi-speaking population of Maharashtra, but in the 1980s turned to “rabid Hindu communal rhetoric” (Hansen 1999: 162). The party epitomizes the politics of violence and has engaged in numerous anti-Muslim pogroms. Hansen describes the Sena’s public spectacles of violence as “the very generative and performative core of its being” (2001: 65). The SUGAM donation camp I attended was at one point interrupted by a Shiv Sena demonstration against the festival which passed close by. The Shiv Sena has declared that “Western culture is injected into people’s mindset by these celebrations” and that this represents “cultural corruption of the youth.”

The irony is that the party advocates the organizing of blood donation camps instead of Valentine’s Day celebrations so that youngsters can “express their love for the motherland.” SUGAM’s blood donation camp certainly included the nation as beneficiary, and maybe even encouraged youngsters to “express their love for the motherland,” but not as an alternative to Valentine’s Day. Rather, the narrow anti-valentine nationalism of the Shiv Sena contrasts sharply with the integrative reformism of the NGO for which “utility” reaches out to absorb “alien” practices into the canon of virtue.

The diversity of the levels and locations subjected to processes of “making social” is indeed striking. The phenomenon is evident, for example, in Bollywood films in which, according to Vanita (2002: 155), problematic “love” relationships come to be sanctioned and recognized as virtuous by the romantic protagonists’ families and friends if they can be “demonstrated to be socially
useful and out-reaching rather than inward-turning.” I have been arguing, however, that what is not happening is the unilateral conversion of practices, occasions, or giving structures to a state of virtuous utility. The picture that emerges is more multifaceted. The following example should make this clear. In 2004 the Rotary blood bank conducted a donation camp at a huge congregation of 12,000 people in Delhi who had gathered to learn a form of yoga under the tutelage of Swami Ramdev. Yoga techniques—for Swami Ramdev and his followers at least—are oriented to the physical fitness of the practitioner: Swami Ramdev claims that the breathing exercises he prescribes purify the blood, ward off cancer, and make one live longer. In his pre-camp address in front of Ramdev’s devotees, blood bank director Dr. Bhatia related blood donation to devotees’ concern to improve their physical fitness: “Blood donation is another way to prevent you from falling sick—your whole health will become better.”

I suggested earlier that the two seemingly opposite tendencies in donor solicitation—conceptually rendering blood donation “social” on the one hand and “selfish” on the other—are two sides of the same coin. From one angle, the example of the yoga camp appears to invert the claim that Publick Benefit derives from Private Vice, since a yoga event is “made social” through its integration of an archetypal practice of virtuous utility. As a self-oriented practice, yoga, like a Bollywood love relationship, comes to secure its own piety and worthiness through the inclusion of an “in-need” society to which its practitioners contribute. In other words, the starting point of the process of commensuration was apparently Publick Benefit, whereby adding to “society” served to make virtuous a self-oriented activity (Private Vice)—an analogous but inverse commensuration to that proposed by Mandeville. However, in the same instant that the yoga gathering was “made social,” the blood bank director portrayed blood donation as a self-oriented activity in his depiction of it as a method “to prevent you from falling sick.” Each practice took on a quality of the other, donation being “made selfish,” yoga being “made social.” The blood donation yoga camp thus operated simultaneously according to the two “opposite” modes of commensuration, with each of its two main operational aspects functioning in reverse but complementary ways.

Enigmatic Utility

The focus turns now to the ways in which utility may defeat itself when it is executed with hyperbolic intensity, its pursuit somewhat paradoxically producing effects of disutility and waste. With its “practical sadhus” and voluminous medical contributions to an “in-need” society, the Dera Sacha Sauda enacts what in chapter 1 I called a “religion of utility.” Yet doctors who seek to foster the “doctrinal” variety of regular, consistent, and moderate blood donation activity view the movement as being hopelessly compromised by disutility and destruction,
since the quantities it collects far exceed immediate requirements, thus leading to expiry and waste.

In Sirsa I visited Dr. Aditya Arora, an eye specialist in a Sacha Sauda–run hospital. Long lines of pilgrims crowded the hospital corridors, their pilgrimage doubling as an opportunity to obtain free treatment. Large television screens relayed the guru’s oration before a gathering of his devotees, which was then being delivered in the nearby ashram. Arora described to me a forthcoming Sacha Sauda “mega eye camp” in which he claimed 1,000 cataract operations would be completed in three days: “This eye camp will also [in addition to the movement’s blood donation feats] be a world record.” Arora was well aware of other doctors’ criticisms of the waste resulting from Sacha Sauda blood donation camps and of the lack of patient/donor care they see as characterizing these contexts of mass treatment and collection: “The way we treat patients may not be approved of in the so-called civilized world, but we have a problem to solve with limited resources. The standards of care at our blood donation camps are on the lower side, but if you look at the functional side, we are treating so many people.”

The movement’s philosophy of mass treatment is epitomized by Arora’s own frighteningly speedy method of screening pilgrim-patients: “It’s a cost benefit screening analysis—in 45 seconds I do a screening for three eye diseases. It is so we can get rid of them and treat more. Similarly at blood camps there is an emphasis on saving time so there might be a 10–20 ml discrepancy in the amount collected. It hardly matters if a little less is collected.” Therefore, due to the temporal constraints of the camp, blood bank teams may compromise on the inner quantity of individual units, thus producing quicker bleeding times and, consequently, optimization of the overall quantity of units collected. In other words, under-collection on the micro level leads to more abundant macro-level collection. Arora’s argument is consonant with the Dera Sacha Sauda’s philosophy of mass treatment. It would not be overly cynical, however, to suggest that the desire to achieve world records is the primary incentive for under-collection on the level of individual units. The criteria for the Guinness world record is explicit in stating that the record must take place within twelve hours. Even for this religion of utility, utility is ultimately subordinated to the desire for recognition through records—“demonstrable utility” (Ssorin-Chaikov and Sosnina 2004) takes precedence over the actually utilizable.

The hyperbolic intensity of the movement’s mass provisioning exercises—its embracing of utility to the point of its erasure—suggests the culturally productive nature of uselessness for the Dera Sacha Sauda, with wastage and tales of voluminous extraction creating “material reports” of the guru’s extraordinary capacities of mobilization (Ssorin-Chaikov and Sosnina 2004). The under-collection of blood in singular blood bags results from the rush to achieve world records within the stipulated amount of time. With medical utility thus
subjugated to quantity, the organization’s covert ambivalence toward utility becomes clear, its excessive collection appearing, to paraphrase Bhabha (1984), to be both within the rules of utility and against them.

Further examples of an “inappropriately” enthusiastic attitude to utility are to be found in the several cases reported in Indian newspapers in which people have sought euthanasia for the purpose of donating their organs. In one case in 2004, Venkatesh, a twenty-five-year-old hospital patient, was facing imminent death from the degenerative condition known as Duchenne’s disease, a rare form of muscular dystrophy. He had written a note explicitly stating that it was not a “mercy killing” that he sought, but a killing that would enable his organs to be extracted for the benefit of others before the disease wasted them further, making them unusable—what was being proposed was euthanasia for the purposes of postmortem organ donation. Venkatesh’s mother, who fought the legal battle, ultimately unsuccessful, to have euthanasia performed on her son, declared that up to six persons could benefit from her son’s extractable organs. In 2000 it was further reported that two applications were made by retired schoolteachers to the High Court of Kerala seeking euthanasia. Both deployed the possibility of transplantation as aim and justification for the procedure: “69-year-old Mukundan Pillai . . . prayed he was contented and believed his mission in life had been fulfilled. He wanted the Court to issue directions to the State to start ‘Mahaprasthana Kendra’ (Voluntary Death Clinic) so as to facilitate death and donation/transplantation of bodily organs.”

There is a well-established genre of philosophical writing (and some legal and medical writing besides) that explores the implications of the familiar Benthamite utilitarian credo, “the greatest good for the greatest number,” for questions of transplantation (Bailey 1997: 92; Hogan and Lairet 2007: 17; Bergman 2006: 247). In a literalist application, the credo would appear (for the “act utilitarian” at least) to license the killing of a person so that their heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, and other useable tissues could be used to save the lives of several others. Such inquiries are always hypothetical, the cases being presented as thought experiments. But Venkatesh’s case is a literal one. What his case and others demonstrate is that far from being a mere hypothetical abstraction, utility is increasingly aligned with the virtuous in an array of Indian contexts, to the extent that some people clearly seem to wish to die to facilitate it. Venkatesh’s mother’s emphasis on the six possible beneficiaries of her son’s death mirrors the emphasis on quantification in the Benthamite thought experiments; only her emphasis is not in the least hypothetical but strikingly current and actual.

Lock (2002) has provided a comprehensive overview of debates on “brain death” as a modern redefinition of the cessation of life. She treats the concept skeptically as oriented toward the particular demands of rapacious medical establishments all too willing to define bodies as ripe for harvesting. Venkatesh’s situation was rather different and, in terms of Lock’s account, far graver, given
that he was still fully conscious—it was a “heartbeat death” for which his mother was campaigning: “There is no possibility of brain deaths for patients of this type. This wish of my son is due to the fact that infection starts before his death and his organs will not be useful if sepsis starts.” In seeking to make a fatal disease that happened to him into something that he did, Venkatesh’s legal fight in a sense “overtook” the injunctions of medical utility, the state, and its legal system, none of which could keep up with his envisioning of utility’s hyperevolution.

The hyperbolic tenor of some Indians’ commitment to utility may be suggestive of their simultaneous “deification and defilement” (Lal 2002) of its maxims. Cohen (1999: 161) might well view these examples as further evidence of a burgeoning “donation madness.” In the case of the Dera Sacha Sauda, its extravagant events of utility maximization actually reveal the enigmatic nature of the movement’s commitment to utility. Such events show how “demonstrable utility” may be deployed as a kind of virtuous capital in Indian public life—the Dera Sacha Sauda, as it were, performs utility. The cases of Venkatesh and others seeking euthanasia for the donation of their organs do, however, say something significant about the preeminent positioning of utility within an emerging Indian aesthetics of dying. What is clear, I think, is that the intensity of some Indians’ embrace of utility pushes its logic to its limits and therefore enables us to see it afresh, not as the detached concept against which ethics and virtues are inevitably composed and defined, but as itself an instantiation of virtue and intrinsic value and therefore not merely an abstraction divorced from context.

Religions of Utility

One notable way in which utility becomes “virtuous utility,” of course, is through its divinization. Each religious group that collects blood—and there are many—places a different theological emphasis on it. What these “donation theologies” have in common, however, is their valorizing of social utility. Calling these groups “religions of utility” therefore draws attention to this commonality while recognizing that their individual theological emphases are likely to differ.

As the examples above have demonstrated, blood donation is not the only method of “making social.” It is, however, one of the principal means, and its study creates a privileged vantage point from which to observe the wider processes of which it partakes. It is clear, I hope, that blood donation on the one hand, and Hindu projects of reform on the other, are interdependent projects—donor recruiters’ frequent declarations to the effect that giving blood once is better than giving to a temple one hundred times is co-extensive with, and reinforcing of, the reformist message of action as worship. As I show below in chapter 4, a further aspect of the interoperable relationship between these spiritual
movements and projects to foster voluntary blood donation derives from the latter’s anonymity. The anonymity of donation means that donors donate for anyone rather than someone, and it is this practical feature of donation activity that the Sant Nirankari Mission conceptually aligns with its own professed universalism. Perhaps most important of all for these movements, however, is blood donation’s status as an unambiguous practice of social utility. It is thus from the veins of the devotees of avowedly reformist religious movements that an increasingly large proportion of voluntarily donated blood in India originates.

I have noted that blood donation has been instituted in several ritual settings as the substitutive ennoblement of classical dan. In this reformist medical milieu, there is a case for going further and viewing blood banks as the substitutive ennoblement of temples. The blood bank attains the status of a sacred setting through its reputation as a consummate arena of utility. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru famously declared of the new dams under construction in 1950s India that “these days the biggest temple and mosque and gurdwara is the place where man works for the good of mankind” (Kilnani 1997: 61). The frequent assignation I found of temple status to blood banks probably borrows from Nehru’s paradigmatic comments, which are themselves phrased in a richly reformist idiom, suggestive both in terms of economic and religious transition. Calling a dam a temple because a dam “works for the good of mankind” suggests a conception of temples already congruent with Swami Vivekananda and others’ promulgation of action and service as worship. Although Nehru’s comments are often interpreted as emblematic of modern India’s political orthodoxy of secularism and secularization, they may equally be viewed as exemplifying an opposite formulation: modernity’s divinization, with the dam—symbol of social utility—being elevated to the status of a temple rather than the temple being relegated to that of a dam.

The Sirsa-based Shiv Shakti blood bank, introduced above, houses a framed photograph of Nehru himself donating blood in 1942. Four years later, in 1946, Time magazine reported that “Jawaharlal Nehru, 56, drew a rebuke from followers for donating to a blood bank. His health, they protested, is ‘national wealth, which should be preserved.’ He should really ‘abstain from such destructive sacrifices.’” Sacrifice for the nation,” notes Parry (n.d.), “had been a leitmotif of the Independence struggle, the ‘freedom fighters’ offering their lives as bali dan [a term usually used in reference to animal sacrifice] that India might shake off the imperialist yoke.” Songs from this era are often played at blood donation camps in Delhi as rousing calls to donate. Nehru probably felt that he was sacrificing for the nation, but his followers viewed his donation as unpatriotic in their presumption of its harmful effects on his health. Nehru’s donation, they thought—because of his political indispensability—was a sacrifice of rather than for the nation. Such protests against the giving of blood would in the present day be unthinkable, blood donation having become a key mode of articulating
ethical and patriotic citizenship. Nowadays, gurus and politicians vie to organize donation camps, and politicians disclose on their CVs the number of blood camps they have arranged and number of times they have personally donated—all these being attempts to enclose for themselves a share of the available “national capital.” The Association of Voluntary Blood Donors of West Bengal has designed a recruitment poster containing a photograph of Nehru’s grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, donating blood, with the slogan: “A nation is great when its leaders are great.” The Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha) Web site contains “Biographical Sketches” of Indian Members of Parliament. The entry for Dr. Vallabhai Kathiria, BJP MP for Rajkot, lays emphasis on his “medical patriotism”: “as a surgeon, operated over 7500 patients and diagnosed and cured over 1,00,000 patients . . . donated blood 104 times; organized over 500 general diagnostic camps and 350 blood donation camps; imprisoned during Emergency; introduced the mobile hospital concept, especially mobile dispensary service in rural areas . . . instrumental in organizing . . . Blood Donation Camp in which 5174 blood donors donated their blood at a time following the unprecedented earthquake in Gujarat in 2001, undertook untiring work of rescue, relief and rehabilitation of affected people . . . professing faith in ‘Nothing but the hard work succeeds’ and nurturing vision of ‘The glorious, the great and the divine India’ of 21st Century.”

Blood donation has clearly joined having been imprisoned among the litany of nationalist virtues. Nehru, having been both a prisoner and a blood donor, was ahead of his time.

To return to the matter of sacrifice: despite the efforts of recruiters to convince their fellow countrymen that giving blood is not an unhealthy activity, the association with sacrifice persists both in the rousing patriotic songs played at camps, which exhort the public to shed their blood (that is, sacrifice their lives) for the country, and in the minds of the many Indians who hold the view that if they were to give blood they would subsequently require a transfusion. While many recruiters seek to dislodge such conceptions and indeed try to emphasize the health-enhancing properties of donation, others actually use sacrifice as the basis of their appeal to donors, thus contributing to the circulation of inconsistent messages about donation. Additionally, it is possible that the fact that classical dan is “officially” a surrogate for both asceticism and sacrifice in the Age of Kali (Parry 1994: 190), and therefore suggestive of both, underscores the widely made association between blood donation and sacrifice.

Parry (n.d.) has illustrated the remarkable ways in which customary forms of local sacrifice in Chhattisgarh came to overlap in workers’ understandings with Nehruvian “sacrifice for the nation” upon the building of the Bhilai steel plant in 1950s India. Nehruvian sacrifice was “reformist” insofar as it was certainly not traditional blood sacrifices that it advocated. Instead, it referred to the efforts required to secure Independence and then to bring India into the new socialist modernity—going to prison, renouncing one’s property in favor of
the poor or new construction projects, or indeed providing industrial labor for those projects were all modes of nationalist sacrifice. However, the furnaces of the steel plant in Bhilai had to get their power from somewhere, and for many in the outlying areas, it seemed obvious that human sacrifices for the goddess Kali were their vital source of energy. The steel plant, like the dam, was an emblem of a modernist social utility for which sacrifices were necessary.

The blurring of the “two different discourses” of Nehruvian and Kali sacrifice holds a lesson for the present analysis. For reformist activists, blood sacrifice is “a barbarity inconsistent with Hinduism’s central tenet of non-violence” (Fuller 1992: 101). Shedding one’s blood for the nation, on the other hand, is highly approved of. Indian soldiers who died in the 1999 India-Pakistan Kargil conflict are now remembered annually through blood donation camps staged in their honor; the same is true for the policemen who were killed defending the Indian Parliament building (Lok Sabha) when it was attacked by militants in 2002. For donor recruiter Dr. Ajay Bagga from Hoshiarpur, Punjab state, it is “the memory of the bullet-ridden, blood-soaked body of his father [a political leader in the Punjab Pradesh Janata Party, who was assassinated by militants in 1984] which propelled him towards the blood donation movement.” The commemoration of bloodshed for the nation through acts of blood donation shares at least partial structural affinity with the immuring of the bodies of workers who died in the construction of the Bhilai site: these victims, the sacrificial remainder, represent the “regenerative element that is the seed of new life and a guarantee of continuity” (Parry n.d.). In remembering blood sacrifice through blood donation, the formula is spelled out literally—the deaths of the soldiers and policemen are regenerative in precipitating blood donations that will plant “the seed of new life and a guarantee of continuity.” The microevent of a donation camp is both expressive and constitutive of the soldier’s role more generally—his bloodshed ensures the continuity of the nation. Blood donation, in these contexts, embodies the extensibility of blood sacrifice for the nation. Different orders of blood shedding—the soldier’s blood sacrifice and the citizen’s blood donation—are analogically transferable (Gell 1992: 316).

If the two different discourses of sacrifice identified by Parry nevertheless in some ways share common ground (Parry n.d.), it follows that it may be possible for reformist social activists to conceptually revisit certain ancient sages and sacrificial practitioners in order to “reform” them into sacrificial exemplars of the new order of social service—this being in line with established trends in religious and nationalist reform in which “the new is turned into something old” (Singer 1972: 399). A key example of this is found in the work of the Delhi-based Dadhichi Deh Dan Samiti (Dadhichi Body Donation Society) which engages the mythic sage Dadhichi—as described in the Brahma Purana and hymns of the Rig Veda—as a Sanskritic figurehead for the promotion of body donation in order to ensure a supply of cadavers for dissection by medical trainees. Said to have
sacrificed his bones in order that Indra, king of the gods, could use them to slay Vritrasur, the demon king, the samiti declares Dadhichi’s action to have been the originative sacrificial body-gift to society (samaj). His is the prototype it claims to reanimate through facilitating body donation. The samiti thus exploits the extensible potential of sacrifice, enrolling it in order to demonstrate that Hinduism was always a religion of utility.

Shiva, like Dadhichi, is enlisted as an exemplar of sacrifice for society by the Shiv Shakti blood bank, which employs myths and iconography associated with the god in its attempts to solicit donations. The blood bank’s founder, Dr. Banerwal, proselytizes blood donation in visits to Haryana villages in which he tells his audiences: “At the beginning of time, when the ocean was curdled, two substances were produced: poison and amrith—which makes you live forever. Someone had to take the poison and it was Lord Shiva who said: ‘I will take the poison so others can have amrith.’ This philosophy is behind blood donation also—you donate blood so others can live. Shiva worked selflessly for others—and he is the god worshiped the most in India. So with this philosophy, it was easy to approach rural people: if you don’t know how to do worship (puja karna), the best way is to donate blood and the worship is automatically done.” The point about worship is emphasized visually by the huge Shiva painting at the blood bank entrance, and also by the current director Dr. Arora’s own definition of his blood bank as a temple: “It is better to donate blood than to go to the temple and worship god. Rather than rituals in a temple, god will be happy if you donate blood. We treat the blood bank as a temple. We show the same respect to the blood bank to reflect the feeling that blood donation is equal to worship.” Selfless service as worship is a familiar reformist idea and activity. The equation made by Banerwal between drinking poison and giving blood is emblematic of the dilemmas of donor recruitment in India: the “appeal” of sacrifice is seen by some recruiters as key to increasing voluntary donation. However, the view of blood donation as an activity of irreversible depletion (that is, of very real personal sacrifice) also works to hinder an increase in donation activity.

As spaces frequently perceived—as Nehru stated of dams—as working “for the good of mankind,” it is perhaps not surprising that blood banks have, for some donors and blood bank personnel, assumed temple status, with blood donation a modernist brand of puja. One Delhi advertisement for blood donation declares, rakt-dan sach puja hai—“blood donation is the true worship”—as opposed, it might be inferred, to the “less true” forms of worship enacted in temples. Several donors I met at camps told me that when something eventuates that they had earlier wished for, they go to a blood bank and donate as a way of giving thanks. Such cases recall the “common practice among Hindus of pledging a part of themselves (usually the hair) to gods in periods of danger and redeeming themselves by offering that part when the danger is gone” (Das
1983: 455), though here is it “useful” blood rather than “useless” hair that is offered. Endless similar examples could be given. I shall restrict myself, however, to a comment made by a student I met at a Delhi University camp: “You are sitting in a temple, you are sitting in a gurdwara, you are sitting in a mosque. But by merely praying there do you think that blood is getting into the dying body of a patient?”

Nehru proclaimed his own substitutive ennoblement of the temple in reference to another project of social utility. The blood bank in some ways is the dam’s successor as exemplary temple of utility, and the frequent attributions of temple status constitute one way in which blood donation is itself manifested as a religion of utility. The reception area of Delhi’s Rotary blood bank houses a visitors’ book containing the following inscription: “This is a place of pilgrimage. Those who give and those who receive, both will participate in a yagna—sacred ritual of life-giving.” As this example illustrates, utility does not disenchant religion but is itself sacralized.

**Conclusion**

A donor recruiter in Delhi recalled to me how recently in her blood bank a lady had had tears streaming down her face as she lay donating. The recruiter’s enquiry as to the cause of the lady’s distress revealed that her son had died exactly one year earlier as a result of a car accident. Three people had given blood to try and save him. She felt a large debt to those people and on the same day, one year later, she was, she said, saving somebody else’s child. This analogical repetition and conversion of wasted into productive blood extraction is a formula that we will encounter again in chapters 4 and 5. Significantly, the lady said that she had decided not to go to the temple with the rest of her family where they were shedding “crocodile tears”—she was actually doing something. In the “active” focus of rakt-dan lies its reformist superiority.

The alliance between reformist Hinduism’s characteristic focus on action over reflection and campaigns to solicit blood donation is clearly present in the following poem. Its author, a technician at a Delhi blood bank, presents us with another forceful indictment of conventional temple gifts as inferior to the active seva of rakt-dan:

If you go to [the sacred rivers] Ganga, Yamuna, on pilgrimage
Which sin (pap) are you able to get rid of?
Having given an offering in temple or mosque,
What happiness and peace are you able to obtain? . . .
To get rid of your sin and to feel remorse for them
I will tell you a method (upaye).
To be able to give true happiness and peacefulness to another person
I suggest to you a method.

Come to this temple (is mandir me a jao).

The strong you will not find, though weak ones you will.

In their prayers they will say this:

If you can give willingly through your heart

We will accept red water (lal nir).

Sin can be removed, the poem suggests, through rakt-dan in the modernist temple of the blood bank. Caution is required here, for the removing of sin does not inevitably entail its transfer to another or its physical expelling; removal here could just as well refer to the “erasure” of sin (pap) through meritorious acts that would restore the rightful karmic balance. Taken together with the earlier data on mortuary rituals in Haryana, however, the poem does appear to give further credence to the argument that even as reflectively productive giving appears to substitute for and ennoble conventional giving processes, features of classical dan reemerge in striking ways. The point is straightforward: social utility as aim and target of reformist giving does not render classical dan evanescent—rather, the category of dan enlarges, coming to serve several different purposes at once.

The conjunctive structure of the gift’s volition, with donors giving to society, to humanity, to the nation, to remove sin or to accumulate blessings—perhaps all at the same time, or perhaps in a divided sense with doctors, for instance, seeing use-value where a donor might see discarded inauspiciousness—is likely to be helpful in persuading people to give blood.

Conjunctive volition arises from the exaptation of existing giving structures—their enlistment as a means of effecting new outcomes—helping avoid ruptures in people’s experiences of giving, allowing habitual aims to be accomplished even as “in-need” society is made present. Like medieval bhakti (devotional) movements that assimilated more than they discarded, thus effectively disarming any radical opposition (see Sen 2003: 18), the conceptual retentions that help structure reformist giving appear to inoculate it against the occurrence of serious misgivings (see also Watt 2005: 71).

The conjunctive volition informing these giving practices differentiates them from most of the examples provided by Haynes in his study of earlier efforts to introduce reform in Surat. There, the Indian elite “did not abandon older forms of gifting such as religious donations. Rather they diversified their charitable patterns, plunging themselves into new philanthropic ventures while continuing to express their devotion to their deities through sizable commitments of capital” (1987: 341). The difference lies in the ability of rakt-dan to mean more than one thing. Diversification is critical here also, but not in the sense of simply adding philanthropic giving to an already existing, mainly religious, charitable repertoire. Rather, in parasitizing the existing repertoire, blood
donation partakes of the procedures it enters into, and thus comes to encompass in itself the striking volitional diversity that Haynes attributes to separate practices.

Though the existence of several aims within singular giving actions may lessen the potential for rupture in people’s giving experiences, and ultimately help to establish blood donation’s wider acceptance, the conjunctive volition informing this emergent dan may in addition lead to some very problematic consequences. I have referred several times to Parry’s study of mortuary gifts to Brahmin priests in Banaras. These are usually of money as a surrogate for a cow or a bed, and may transmit and thus remove donors’ sins (1994: 123–132). The recipient pandas are thereby rendered “cess-pits,” many living in “a perpetual state of moral crisis” (ibid.: 123). As I noted above, there is limited but nonetheless suggestive evidence that in certain circumstances the expelling of sin, as identified within forms of classical dan, surfaces in certain contexts 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 nonmaterial 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” (ibid.: 129). If 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” (ibid.: 136), and understandably so. The personnel involved in collecting, treating, and testing donated blood, together with transfusion recipients, however, 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 personnel 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 dars (service volunteers) precisely in order for them to remove their sins (pap). 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 Sardar Ji (Sikh 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 day and barred from making further donations (though this is no guarantee that he did not subsequently attempt to donate his blood elsewhere). As in the Haryana-based mortuary rituals already discussed, there is the strong suggestion here that he was attempting to give three gifts of medically utilizable blood as a means of removing the inauspiciousness afflicting his family (cf. Raheja 1988: 154). These examples show that the retention of an attribute associated with classical dan within a giving mode extended from it can have potentially lethal consequences for recipients, a relationship explored further in the next chapter.

The conceptual and practical interdependence between voluntary blood donation and religions of utility that I identified in this chapter, though significant, should not deflect attention from the fact of the multiple and diverse extensions and parasitings that are under way that are not directly related to religion. Some of these evince a “hyperbolic utility,” some are more restrained and austere: Venkatesh’s desire to die a premature death in order to maximize his body’s postmortem usefulness is an example of the former tendency. Similarly, the Dera Sacha Sauda demonstrates that it is possible to pursue both a maximizing ethos premised around utility and an excess ethos that destroys utility. But SUGAM’s expansive redefinition of Valentine’s Day demonstrates that it is by no means only the giving structures associated with classical dan that are being parasited. Virtuous utility has found many “host agencies.”

The following two chapters deepen my exploration of the relationship between voluntary blood donation and “religions of utility” through a focus on two north Indian devotional orders in the sant tradition: the Sant Nirankari Mission and the Dera Sacha Sauda.