Chapter 1. Introduction

1. Anonymity is a key feature of voluntary systems of corporeal donation. The normative practice of not telling the recipient about the donor or the donor about the recipient is a means of avoiding indebtedness (Fox and Swazey 1992: 37).

2. The family replacement system is not unique to India. Part of the blood supply in the United States was until recently reliant on this mode of collection; the same system currently prevails in Sri Lanka (Simpson 2004: 850) and in many other countries. Most medical opinion is now strongly opposed both to paid and to replacement donation. Paying donors is said to provide an incentive to conceal disqualifying factors such as HIV/AIDS (Brooks 2004: 282). Replacement donation is said to pressurize patients’ relatives unduly, pushing many to seek so-called professional donors to donate in their stead, and threatening those who cannot arrange for this kind of donation with denial of life-saving treatment.

3. The National Guidebook on Blood Donor Motivation (2003), published by the government, estimates India’s blood need as 8 million units per annum. The constant stream of new, blood-requiring treatment techniques causes this figure to increase year by year. The total annual collection figure, says the Guidebook, is 4 million units, with roughly 2 million of these being voluntary donations and 2 million replacement (ibid.: 203). The gap between demand and supply is extremely serious and results in many preventable deaths; however, these are not as many as the figures may suggest—there are several established alternatives to transfusion, and doctors are reported to overprescribe blood (Bray and Prabhakar 2002: 477).

4. Founder of Jainism. See Laidlaw (1995) for an account of annual celebrations of his birth. See Glossary for basic background on all these groups.

5. I define “utility” provisionally here in a classical sense as the state of being productive, conservative, useful, or beneficial. “Social utility” refers to that which is socially useful; “medical utility”—a term I employ throughout the book—comes under this definition. These are only provisional definitions—this is extremely contested analytical terrain which I explore in depth in chapter 3. The Sanskrit term for “useful” is upyogi; more colloquially, the word fayademand is often used.

6. See, for example, Ohnuki-Tierney (1994) and Lock (2003). Simpson (2004: 841) too has noted that utility is often framed in opposition to “intrinsic value” in such studies. I term “corporeal donation” all willed transfers of bodily substance for medical or research purposes, including blood, cadavers, kidneys, eyes, ova, and many other body-derived substances.
It could be argued that these spiritual orders and movements are not in themselves religions. However, devotional orders in the north Indian sant tradition often see themselves as wholly new religious dispensations (see Babb 1986; Juergensmeyer 1991). In addition, Indianist scholars frequently wrestle with definitions of Hinduism: that is, is it one religion or a conglomeration? (see Gellner 2004). These points I hope lend legitimacy to my use of the term “religions of utility.”

I see this usage of “interoperability” as preferable to the more conventional vocabulary used by anthropologists, that is, “interdependency” or “mutual constitution,” the latter being a term often used to indicate the way in which seemingly separate phenomena can work with or against each other to transform and in a sense create one another. While “interdependency” is less problematic than “mutual constitution” because it offers more precision in conveying a sense of the reciprocal reliance that can develop when one thing (in this case medical blood donation initiatives) connects with or makes contact with another (the activities of devotional orders), what I point to particularly in my use of “interoperability” is the practical nature of the set of interactive operations involved when so-called separate systems may come to interlock and work through each other. This, I emphasize, can involve disjuncture as well as fruitful combination.

The Sant Nirankari Mission is distinct from the Nirankari reform movement founded by Baba Dayal (1783–1855) in order to address creeping “deformities” within Sikhism. The difference is elaborated in chapter 4. The Radhasoami movement, it should be noted, has intermittently collected its devotees’ blood since the 1960s. I am grateful to Chris Crookes for making me aware of this.

Though the words sant and saint are extremely close in meaning, there is apparently no etymological connection between them (Juergensmeyer 1991: 22). Some Nirankari devotees claim the Mission has 20 million adherents, far more than the 4 or 5 million Radhasoami initiates (see Juergensmeyer 1991: 236–238), but the Nirankari figure is unofficial and probably unreliable. The Mission is, however, a very substantial organization, with a presence throughout India and the world, so the lack of scholarly work on it is certainly curious. The Dera Sacha Sauda claims to possess more than 2 million devotees.

Satsang means literally “association of the good.” Sant and bhakti movements are “congregational religion[s]” (Lorenzen 1995: 24).

I am influenced here by Miller’s (1998) determination to avoid the sociological obviations that result from treating the consumer-subjects of late capitalism as simply enacting a script laid down for them.

“Biospiritual” is my term for describing situations in which there is either reliance on spirit to facilitate biological aims(goals) or reliance on biological facts or techniques to facilitate spiritual goals.

Cohen (2004: 166) proposes a set of three connected terms: to be “operable” is to be a “bioavailable” body, extracted from as a kind of countergift to the state. “Supplementable” persons are those able to receive, “from the sovereign state,” parts of others’ bodies.

Other key anthropological works on blood donation include Weston (2001, United States), Cohen (2001, India), Erwin (2006, China), and Dalsgaard (2007, Denmark). I have previously written on memorial blood donation events in India (Copeman
2004), and on temporal and affective aspects of giving blood (Copeman 2005). See also Rabinow (1999, France), Valentine (2005), Healy (2006), and Waldby and Mitchell (2006).

16. I am most grateful to Joseph Alter (personal communication) for the term “mechanical transgression.”

17. *Guanxi* refers to social networks, consisting of identifiable persons, which are created and sustained by the exchange of gifts and favors.

18. In the United States most whole blood donations are nonremunerated, while the donation of specific blood components—a more time-consuming process for donors—is usually paid for (Vicziany 2001: 387; see also Starr 2002 on the American situation). The United Kingdom’s system is wholly nonremunerated. The same is true for Denmark; though see Dalsgaard (2007) on the hidden returns which he sees as greasing the system.

19. Seventeen of these were run by the state or central government, two by NGOs, fifteen were attached to private hospitals, and seven were private “stand-alone.”

20. The transmutation of “altruism” into hefty profits for recipient institutions is a feature of numerous corporeal economies. Hayden (2007: 730) has noted how “altruistically” given tissue, blood, or gene samples in the United States and Europe can cause disquiet among ethicists, for “such gifts may well enable quite a lot of profit for those on the receiving end of such transactions.” Or as Waldby and Mitchell (2006: 24) put it, the norm of altruism in corporeal giving “has simply rendered the body an open source of free biological material for commercial use.” Familiar with the charge against them, blood banks, both government and commercial, protest that the fee they demand of recipients is merely a “processing charge” which barely covers the costs of testing, storing, and matching donated blood. Such protests usually fall on deaf ears, especially when the blood bank in question is a commercial one.

21. Doctors tend to be Anglophone, middle- and upper-middle-class, and “clean caste” Hindus. However, Muslim, Christian, and Dalit doctors are by no means unheard of. The social background of donor recruiters overlaps with that of doctors, though is somewhat more diverse. Many blood banks cannot afford to employ recruiters. The two blood banks with which I was most closely associated in Delhi do, however, employ them. Though both are female, I do not think that this represents a wider linkage between women and recruitment activity. The social profile of the many doctors with whom I interacted largely matches that described by Madan (1980) in his earlier study of Delhi medics, despite the intervening years. In his survey of doctors and medical academics at New Delhi’s prestigious All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the location of two of the blood banks with which I had contact, Madan found that nearly all the doctors had had “elite” school and college educations (1980: 61) and that 87 percent were Hindus, the rest being Christians and Sikhs. Eighty-six percent of his respondents were “clean” caste (ibid., 50–51). Madan encountered no Muslim medics, though the Muslim community constitutes nearly 11 percent of the population of India. Similarly, during the fifteen months of fieldwork on which this study is based, I met only two Muslim doctors, at government hospitals in Mumbai and Kolkata, respectively. Madan (ibid.) claims that this absence is related to Muslims’ “lower general educational levels and socioeconomic conditions.”

22. Doctors report that Muslims are extremely reluctant to donate blood. As a religious minority, the low donation figures reported in surveys (e.g., Ray, Singh, and
Banerjee 2005) partly reflect the lower proportion of Muslims in the population at large. There is, however, some substance to doctors’ reports. Camps are staged at Delhi’s Muslim Jama Milia University, but other than that, I heard of very little Muslim involvement in blood donation. There is, I suggest, a fine line between stereotypes of the reluctant Muslim and the reality. One doctor told me of the tactics he employs in order to persuade Muslim relatives of the patients admitted to his hospital to provide replacement donations: “I tell them quietly that Muslims are very bad people. He’ll say ‘No.’ I say, ‘I tell you, they’re bad—they don’t donate blood.’ He’ll say, ‘No, they’ll do it. I’ll show you.’ So, out of vengeance they’ll donate. It’s the only way.” Though I collected much data on this thorny issue, the devotional focus of this study does not permit a full consideration here of the relation between Islam and blood donation.

23. This is a controversial practice because it appears to reintroduce “payment” as a feature of a supposedly nonremunerated system. I do not have space to fully consider these debates in this study, but provide a brief discussion in chapter 7.

24. A similar situation pertained in the days following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States. The Congress staged a blood donation event at which senators and representatives gave blood. Each of them was presented with a videotape depicting their blood donations for showing to their constituents (Starr 2002). See chapter 5 on the documentation of mass camps, and Copeman (2004: 140–141).


26. Although this is indicative of the educated class’s disparagement of ignorant or poor people’s “superstition,” it is in fact a very general fear—I quickly discovered that even many blood bank staff are frightened of blood donation. Arnold (1993) records the acute anxieties harbored by many nineteenth-century Indians about the extractive aspects of Western medicine as practiced by their colonial masters.


28. Message from Chief Medical Officer of Lok Nayak Hospital, souvenir publication, Jai Hind (NGO), 2003; http://www.bloodbanksdelhi.com/content/FAQ.htm.


31. Dosa is “force in the body or mind responsible for illness; also trouble” (Langford 2002: 274). The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1976) defines an “armamentarium” as the resources available to someone engaged in a task, or a set of medical equipment or drugs.

32. Red cells live for 120 days. Dr. Debasish Gupta of the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) informed me that “In your circulation you have plenty of red cells, millions and millions. Of these cells, some are one day old, some are 10 days old, some are 20 days old, some are 110 days old, some may be 119 days old. So when you are donating blood you are donating a mixture of differently aged red cells.”

33. See Reddy (2007: 434–435) on invocations of dan among Indians in Houston who were asked to donate tissue samples for genetic research purposes.
34. This is because of the medical policy axiom that offering donors incentives increases the likelihood that they will conceal risk factors that, if revealed, would disqualify them from donating.

35. Although replacement donations given by relatives are rarely actually transfused into their sick family members, such donations are nevertheless in essence given “for” them in order to facilitate their treatment.

36. This move outward from the family finds a parallel in the business world. Harriss (2003) has recently demonstrated that Indian family businesses are seeking to widen their “circles of trust” in order to adjust to economic change.

37. Ramanujan (1989: 57) points to the way in which the English language has acquired markedly Sanskritic characteristics in its Indian usage.


39. See Dominique Lapierre’s famous Kolkata-based epic, The City of Joy (1999), for a semi-fictional account of the desperation and squalor that characterizes the life of a “professional” blood donor.

40. During an interview with the director of a government blood bank, I witnessed exactly this. A BJP member of the Delhi Legislative Assembly (MLA) telephoned my interviewee to request the release of blood, without replacement or cost, to an acquaintance in his constituency. The director complied, reasoning to me that the BJP, after all, organizes blood donation camps from time to time.

41. Newspapers regularly report on Delhites’ purported indifference to one another. One article, consisting of snapshot interviews with Delhites bemoaning their city, was memorably headlined: “Capital Shame: Filth, Boorish Behaviour” (Times of India, 12 December 2003). When changes are carried out on the world that make it conform better to particular descriptions of it, a “principle of convergence” is enacted, according to Bowker and Star (1999).

Chapter 2. Generative Generosity

1. Platelets are disk-like structures that are the foundation of clots (Starr 1998: 211). Plasma is the colorless coagulable part of blood in which the fat globules float (OED)—usually frozen after extraction and centrifuge, it becomes known as Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP). Red cells contain hemoglobin that helps carry oxygen from the lungs to other parts of the body. Red cells also collect carbon dioxide waste, moving it to the lungs for expulsion (Ray 2003).

2. Interview with Dr. N. K. Bhatia, director of Rotary Blood Bank, Delhi, 2004. In my experience, government blood banks are less likely to possess the technology than private or NGO blood banks, though the biggest government hospitals in Delhi do practice separation techniques.

3. Compare to Scheper-Hughes’s (1996) article “Theft of Life,” in which theft of life derives not from irrational prescription but from illicit extraction.

4. This is important for the same reason that dividing blood is important—the single unit transfusion, like the “whole” unit, is a figure of censure, an “irrational” waste of precious substance. For if one can give a unit of blood with no resulting physical
harm, say modernizing doctors, then what possible benefit could occur from transfusion of the same quantity?

5. In anthropological writings on Hinduism’s apparatuses of return, blessings (ashirvad), merit (punya), and fruits (phal) are related but differentiated concepts—all are “benefits” that can be secured by donation (dan ka labh). Punya is merit that results from ethically good actions. For the donors I had dealings with, blood donation, roughly speaking, may result in both punya and blessings, with the benefits of blessings likely to bear fruit in this life rather than the next. The blessings that donors can expect to receive from transfusion recipients are continually stressed by blood bank donor recruiters—“Give blood, get blessings,” as one Indian Red Cross slogan puts it. Blessings may predominate, but punya also—which is likely to come not from recipients but from a higher authority or impersonal spiritual mechanism—is a feature of poetry of solicitation and also of donors’ own expectations. One recruitment poster, for instance, declares, Rakt-dan punya ka kaam (Blood donation is the work of a good deed). In my experience, phal (fruits) can stand for both punya (merit) and ashirvad (blessings). The point I wish to emphasize is that, though different words, and formally different concepts, ashirvad, phal, and punya often appeared to me during fieldwork mixed together and difficult to distinguish. For example, a devotee of the Dera Sacha Sauda (see chapter 5), who when I met him had recently narrowly survived a car crash, told me on one occasion that he had been saved through the punya of his guru and manav seva (service of the guru and humanity), and on another that it was simply the guru’s blessings (ashirvad) that had saved him.

6. The Indian Web site http://www.bloodsavers.com emphasizes the ease with which donors can save not only one but several lives: “Saving the world isn’t easy. Saving a life is. Donating one pint of blood can save up to three lives. Maybe even someone you know.”

7. “Such volunteers are also eligible for the benefit of ten (10) Grace Marks Under Section 0.229-A of the University Act. Preference is given in Public Service Commission to a candidate who is holding such certificate for two years of service in NSS and for attending the Y.F.S.D (i.e., Youth for Sustainable Development) camp. The motto of NSS is “Not Me, But You.” It stands for the following two ideals, “(i) to forget and surrender the self and (ii) to render selfless service to the entire nation” (http://www.karmayog.com/ngos/nss.htm).

8. I am grateful to Amrit Srinivasan for drawing my attention to these differentials. Social service schemes are featured at all levels of the Indian education system. See Reddy (2007: 437) on the obligation to perform Socially Useful Productive Work (SUPW) at school. See also chapter 5 on protests staged by trainee medics against a new requirement that they spend a year conducting social service in rural areas. On the National Service Scheme (NSS), see http://yas.nic.in/yasroot/schemes/nss.htm.

9. The phrase is Zaloom’s (2003: 263); she uses it to refer to factors influencing decision making among Chicago finance traders.

10. Lohri, celebrated annually on the 13 or 14 of January, is the Punjabi version of the famous Makar Sankranti and Pongal festivals of northern and southern India, respectively.

11. This all recalls Ramanujan’s argument (1989), discussed in chapter 1, that India is a predominantly “context-sensitive” society. See Heim (2004: 117, 126) on the foregrounding of time, place, and calculability in regard to the giving of dan in the Dharmashastras.
Chapter 3. The Reform of the Gift

1. Corsín Jiménez (2007) has documented the way in which “utility” has acted as a proxy for “society” in Western economic theory since the beginning of the twentieth century.

2. “In everyday life, ideology is at work, especially in the apparently innocent reference to pure utility” (Žižek 1999: 90).

3. Though, as Parry (1986: 463) makes clear, dan is far from being the only kind of gift in India. Many gifts, not governed by the laws of danadharma, are indeed reciprocally structured (ibid.: 460). In such cases, says Parry, there is little evidence of the transfer of spirit. Chapter 4 considers this matter in some detail.

4. Mayer (1981) too has described socially active asceticism as eschewing the conventional association between ascetic practices and merit making. I take issue with this view below.

5. Analyses of classical dan have emphasized the importance of the worthiness of recipients. The “worthy vessel” (recipient) is extremely reluctant to accept the gift (Parry 1986: 460). Laidlaw (2000) analyses supatra-dan—a gift to a worthy recipient—from lay to renouncer Jains. Worthiness remains an element of the reformed gift, but the recipient is worthy not by virtue of status but by virtue of need.

6. I mean that they are epiphenomenal from the point of view of the actor pursuing his self-interest (“Private Vice”).

7. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a “sage-polemicist” (S. Bayly 1999: 150) and giant figure in twentieth-century Hinduism, taught that “one should see “man as god,” and that “true worship consist[s] in work for social ends” (Hansen 1999: 70).


10. Ibid. See Vidal (2000) on the ambiguous role of intermediaries in other Indian contexts.

11. Rupana Times, 11 October 2004. Patri ceremonies are held for the passing of the deceased male’s turban to the new head of the family, ideally the deceased’s eldest son.

12. Taze, 13 October 2004. The term gaddinashin generally refers to the occupier of the usually hereditary seat of custodianship of a Muslim shrine. The designation, however, is also used in Sikhism, in this case in reference to a nonhereditary guru.
13. The gift of a cow to a Brahmin and pind-dan (balls of grains or rice offered to the dead) are not the same thing, though both may be performed in mortuary ceremonies (see Parry 1994: xxiv, 173). It is possible that their conflation here may be an error on the part of my informant.

14. The rasam pagri events at which blood was donated, Dr. Banerwal told me, were conducted mainly by Jats—commonly “non-servile cultivating people” (S. Bayly 1999: 37).

15. Pind-dan, as described by Parry (1994: 191), consists of balls of rice or grains given by mourners to mediating Brahmins in order to make merit for the deceased and mitigate their sufferings. I referred above to Sacha Sauda devotees’ depictions of pind-dan as an offering of exemplary wastefulness. Banerwal’s mentioning of the peace of the departed, when juxtaposed with Parry’s exposition of pind-dan, suggests that blood donation may have been given as, or in place of, pind-dan as its nonwasteful substitutive ennoblement.

16. I heard several other accounts, however, of marriages extended-to-utility. I was told, for instance, that at his son’s marriage, a Delhi Rotarian demanded monetary donations to Delhi’s Rotary blood bank instead of gifts to the couple. In Calcutta I met Swarup Das, a volunteer in the AVBD, whose wedding had been preceded by a blood donation ceremony. Being a regular donor, he had postponed the event to a date on which he would be able to donate. He and his wife have additionally organized donation camps on each of their wedding anniversaries (and they named their son Sonitasroti, which in Bengali means “flow of blood”). Cohen too (1999: 161) heard of a Delhi couple “who insisted all their wedding guests sign up to donate something [i.e., parts of their body].” Watt (2005: 81) notes that in the early years of the twentieth century there was a spate of weddings in which invitees were encouraged to make monetary donations to nationalist educational initiatives instead of to the couple. Marriages have for several hundred years been a key target of Indian social reformist activity. These examples attest to the Indian marriage’s continuing status as critical reformist target, now for the inculcation of virtuous utility.

17. Times of India, 12 February 2002; Times of India, 7 February 2002.


19. A renowned yoga instructor, he has gained national prominence over the past ten years with broadcasts watched by over a million viewers throughout India on the private Aastha TV channel. He also presides over huge “yoga camps” staged in Indian cities, attended by up to 75,000 students.

20. The pranayama breathing techniques taught by Swami Ramdev are advertised as benefiting the practitioner’s “heart, lungs, brains, depression, migraine, paralysis, neural system, obesity, constipation, gastric, cholesterol, allergic problems, asthma, snoring, concentration, and even cancer and AIDS,” to name but a few conditions (http://research.iiit.ac.in/~smr/knowyoga/tiki-index.php?page=pranayama).

21. On donation as self-purifying, see chapter 1. This is a further example of the metamorphosis of blood donation into bloodletting.


25. The first part of this sentence paraphrases Laidlaw (2005).

26. “In Bangalore and Delhi I was told stories of a kind of donation madness: a man desperate to give away any organ he could; a couple who insisted all their wedding guests sign up to donate something” (Cohen 1999: 161).


29. “The Delhi Police organized a blood donation camp to commemorate the courage of the five police personnel who were killed while preventing heavily armed Pakistani militants from entering the Parliament House complex on December 13 last year” (Hindustan Times, 14 December 2003).


31. Commenting on letters written by French soldiers to their loved ones during the First World War which envisage their bloodshed as a kind of gift to the nation, Koenigsberg (2004) writes that such images evoke “a blood transfusion where the life-sustaining substance of an individual body passes into the collective body, functioning to keep it alive.” See chapters 4 and 6 for more on convertibility between blood sacrifice and blood donation.

32. See Copeman (2006) for a fuller account of the samiti’s activities. Myths surrounding Dadhichi are analyzed by Babb (2004). See also Heim (2004: 138) on bloody gifts of the body (deh-dan) as discussed in Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts, and Reddy (2007) on Indians in Houston looking to mythical examples of bodily gift-giving as templates of a kind for their own giving of blood for genetic research.

33. Simpson has documented a comparable move in Sri Lanka by medical authorities to install the Buddha, as he appeared in a previous birth, as an eye donor, and thus to mobilize Buddhists in the region to act as their master had done. As Simpson (2004: 840) comments, “stepping into a biogenetic future rich in technological possibility also involves an engagement with the past.”


Chapter 4. Devotion and Donation

1. On the sant tradition and bhakti movements in north India, see Lele (1981), Schomer and McLeod (1987), and Lorenzen (1995). Though the Sant Nirankaris are briefly mentioned in Madan (1997) and McKean (1996), there are no substantial existing scholarly treatments of the movement.

2. This is sold cheaply in Nirankari Colony in Delhi, the location of the Mission’s headquarters. Originally in Hindi, much of it has been translated into English, and it is on these translations that I draw.

3. Dr. Bharat Singh, director of the Delhi State Blood Transfusion Council, informed me that roughly 350,000 units of blood are collected in the capital each year. Eighty percent of this is replacement donation, 20 percent voluntary. Therefore approximately 70,000 voluntary donations are collected. The Mission claims to collect 20,000 units of blood annually, which therefore represents 28.6 percent of the 70,000 voluntary donations overall.
4. At donation camps, as in blood banks, medical professionals perform a series of tests on devotees’ hemoglobin, weight, blood pressure, and so on in order to ascertain prospective donors’ eligibility to donate. As Brooks (2004: 282) notes, “While the donor offers the gift of blood, the blood service is the arbiter of its suitability.”

5. Devotees use the language of bhakti devotion for key elements of donation practice—notably the employment of the term prashad for postdonation snacks, this being the term for the sweets, flowers, and other sanctified “levings” imparted to devotees in token of the God’s or guru’s divine favor in a wide range of Indian religious contexts (see Fuller 1992: 85).

6. Devotees I met claimed a following of 20 million, but I emphasize that this is an unofficial figure.

7. These exchanges took place in the context of extreme tensions surrounding the growing Sikh separatist militancy of the late 1970s and 1980s. See Grewal (1990: chapter 10) for an account of this period.

8. I am making an ethnographic rather than a political point here. I am not seeking to debunk or challenge the necessity of these medical tests.

9. An example of the specifically guru-centered orientation of devotees’ seva was provided at a Nirankari donation camp I attended in Haryana. One bhajan (devotional song) sung by women donors as they were bled referred to their souls’ marriage to their guru, and asked him for strength so that they would be able to endure giving this gift to him. Another bhajan, sung by the same women, went: “Great father, great soul, every bit (kan-kan) of us belongs to you; please accept our offering (dan).”

10. The Nath Sampradaya is a master-disciple initiatory tradition, made up of different guru lineages, and largely associated with Shaivism. See White (1996) for further details of the Nath tradition.

11. The guru makes a similar claim about devotees’ purity of intention, declaring that “while the world has the tendency to forget what it receives, the saints [devotees] forget what they give” (http://www.nirankari.com/archive/reports/2003_04_20_bdcamp.htm).

12. See Juergensmeyer (1991: 142) on Radhasoami devotees needing to be restrained from giving too large a proportion of their salaries to their guru. See also chapter 5, which documents attempts by Dera Sacha Sauda devotees to give more than one unit of blood at a time.

13. Vessey’s (2002) observation that “The body does not always collaborate with our plans” finds strong support in these stories of disqualification.

14. The Association of Voluntary Blood Donors stages a Parliament of Motivators conference, the title of which consciously recalls Vivekananda’s address to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893), in Kolkata every five years in order to share best practices in donor recruitment techniques.

15. Osella and Osella (1996: 41) similarly draw attention to a strong correlation between physical and moral states in Kerala.

16. Warrier (2003a: 277) records Mata Amritanandamayi’s comparable aim “to alleviate suffering and infuse love into the modern world.”

Sermons delivered by Jain renouncers are considered *gyan-dan* (gifts of knowledge) (Laidlaw 1995: 297), while gifts of learning are known more commonly as *vidya-dan* (Watt 2005: 71). Devotees' understanding that their *gyan* (knowledge) is reified in their donated blood resonates with the Jain case, even if the context of transmission differs. See also Copeman (2006) on cadaver donation as gifts of learning to trainee doctors.

As Sharma (1987: 276) has noted, the transfer between persons of karma “violates the doctrine to the extent that one is supposed to be the legatee of one’s own deeds and not of others.”

Though this devotee explicitly attributes “corporeal capture” to the satguru’s strategizing, I heard no official endorsements of these views.

As these examples indicate, devotees’ descriptions of the effects of their gifts on recipients are frequently rendered in a cellular or genetic idiom: Nirankari blood donations work upon recipients’ nerves, genes, and cells; the spirit of the gift is expounded through a lay scientific dialect of biospiritual capture and loving control.

See also Arnold (1993: 143) on concerns among nineteenth-century Indians that colonial vaccination projects were an instrument to force their conversion to Christianity.

Parry (1999: 137–138) and S. Bayly (1999: 314) also note that caste boundaries can be maintained through restrictions in flows of substance.


Though see Gregory’s (forthcoming) essay “The Auspicious Gift in Middle India.”

This citation is drawn from a posting by Laurie Maund made on 11 November 2005 to an e-group called “SEA-AIDS,” hosted by http://www.healthdev.org/eforums. Its title is “Living Blood Bank: How Thai Buddhist Monks Are Helping Their Communities Prevent HIV.” Laurie Maund works on the project she describes.

Chapter 5. Blood Donation in the Zone of Religious Spectacles


2. There is a large discrepancy between the number of donors attracted to the events and the number of units actually collected. Many devotees, subsequent to their registration, are found to be ineligible for medical reasons. See chapter 4 on the high prevalence of medical disqualification among the devotees of guru-led movements.

3. See Glossary for background on the Limbdi Ajramar Jain community and on the other organizations listed in this section.


6. *Times of India*, 7 October 2004. See chapter 1 on the gender ratio of voluntary blood donors. Roughly 200 units were donated at the Lord Ayyappa camp, more than a third of which were provided by women. This is a higher than usual proportion, but is hardly unique. Migrants from Kerala, a state in which women are commonly regarded to share a more equal status with men than elsewhere in India, the camp organizers hoped to highlight the “enlightened” nature of persons hailing from there.

I return in chapter 7 to the Puttarparthi blood bank. Though there is an epidemic of claims, many are clearly for categories of record that do not exist (e.g., the Ayyappa
and Sathya Sai Baba claims). I know of at least three further attempts made by Indian organizations to break the record for most units of blood collected in a single day: a Gujarat cultural group tried and failed to achieve the record in 2002 (http://www.ahmedabad.com/news/2k2/oct/21largecrowd.htm); the Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society claimed to have broken the record in 2003, though there is no record of this (http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_413841.html?menu=); and a Surat blood donation society collected 8,008 donations in 1999, intriguingly from only 8,000 donors (http://www.prideofindia.net).

7. The present study, along with Mines’s (1994) and others’, seriously calls into question Michael’s (2004: 7) recent claim that the Hindu “identificatory habitus” is marked by an absence of competition and recognition of individual achievement.


9. Ibid.

10. See also Godelier (1999: 77), who notes that the Kwakiutl word p’asa means “to give but to flatten at the same time, by crushing the name of a rival, of the receiver.”

11. Such statements recall Gandhi’s (1949: 385) complaint about the Indian “popular attitude” of “partiality for exciting work, dislike for quiet constructive effort.”

12. He is also called Hazoor Maharaj Ji in the movement’s literature, and Pita Ji (father) by his devotees.

13. Cf. Laidlaw (1995: 245) on the Jain idol as an “assemblage of excellences, in which abstract ideas are given bodily form.”

14. The Dera Sacha Sauda is not unique in pursuing commercial ventures. See Juergensmeyer (1991: 159) on the Radhasoami movement’s “enlightened” industrial undertakings. Parry (1989: 85) has argued that antipathy to money often goes hand in hand with an ideology of autarky, which is exactly the case with the Dera Sacha Sauda.

The provision of this level of care for pilgrims runs counter to most anthropological accounts that emphasize the hardships and austerities of pilgrimage (e.g., Osella and Osella 2003; Daniel 1984). In fact, the Sacha Sauda site recalls McKean’s (1996: 4) depiction of “amusement park–like” ashrams in Rishikesh which she sees as venues for “the production and consumption of fetish-like commodities.”


16. McKean (1996), like the Sacha Sauda guru, excoriates Indian gurus for their exploitation of credulous devotees. However, though the Sirsa guru sets himself up in opposition to these other nefarious masters, he has unfortunately joined them in opprobrium. In a 2003 news article headlined “Godman under a Cloud,” the Sacha Sauda is said to be under police investigation after the murder—reportedly committed by devotees—of a journalist who had published allegations that the guru had sexually exploited several female ascetics (sadhvis) (Frontline, 1 March 2003). A letter, copies of which were sent by one of these sadhvis to the prime minister, union home minister, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Haryana chief minister, alleges that the guru threatened to kill her if she disclosed his activities, and also that he regularly boasts of his political influence in Haryana and Punjab. With headlines like these, and a continuing police investigation into its activities, the Sacha Sauda’s large-scale, highly visible adoption of “virtuous” activities such as blood donation may at least in part be an attempt to create a media presence capable of obscuring or
hiding from view a different set of damaging stories that are threatening to define its public image.

17. Unlike the Nirankari Mission, whose previous three gurus have been installed through descent, Dera Sacha Sauda gurus choose their successors.


19. Since its inception in 1875, the Arya Samaj has been particularly active in pursuing campaigns against idolatry, caste, and popular ritual traditions (Hansen 1999: 71).

20. The assumption is logical but problematic in the Indian context, in which many doctors are said to administer transfusions as a “tonic” rather than on the basis of need. An everyday example of the encoding of utility in gifts occurs when passersby give food instead of money to beggars in order to forestall their spending of the money given to them on drugs or alcohol.

21. Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Aasra, The Truth. DSS Video CD Vol. 1 (Dera Sacha Sauda n.d.c.). Cf. the classic view that “the cow is seen as an embodiment of Laxmi. She is also a maternal figure associated with nourishment and nurture. Eating her flesh is therefore suggestive of matricide” (Babb 2004: 233n).


23. These phrases are contained in a Sathya Sai Baba calendar, given to blood donors at a Delhi camp organized by the Sathya Sai Baba Seva Samiti.

24. Kirti-dan is not a term I heard during fieldwork, but suspicion as regards public giving and earning fame through acts of largesse is extremely widespread. The principles informing kirti-dan were thus very much evident in my primary field sites, if not the formal category itself.


26. See Babb (1986: 176–77) for a discussion of problems arising from application of the “tendentious” Western concept of miracles in non-Western contexts. In India, notes Babb, there is nothing particularly “remarkable in the idea that human beings can cultivate extraordinary powers.” At the same time, “scientific rationalism is very much part of the Indian scene.”

27. Participatory and yet not so in terms of attribution. What devotees see as evidence of the guru’s miraculousness—his wonderful gifts to humanity—are at the same time their gift to him. These “miraculous” constructions and donations were, after all, carried out for free (if one for a moment discounts blessings) by devotees as guru seva, and it is the guru who is credited with the miracles that they perform. Though objectively miracles of participation, such “miracles” are performed multiply but attributed singularly. Partaking of the miracles for which they praise their guru, devotees are awestruck by their own ability to be mobilized. The singular attribution of multiply performed feats is not an exclusively Dera Sacha Sauda phenomenon—it is shared by other guru-led movements in India. As discussed in chapter 3, devotees of the south Indian guru Mata Amritanandamayi give her credit for happenings as mundane as having enough petrol in a car to get home. In addition, writes Warrier (2003a: 256), the Mata’s devotees view the enlargement and spread of the movement she heads as evidence of her miraculous powers, whereas it is in fact “the perseverance of the devotees and disciples themselves that has made this institution building possible in the first place.” Thus, rather like Dera Sacha Sauda devotees, followers of the
Mata are responsible for the “miracles” they attribute to her. Such singular ascription ought to qualify any sense of the democratizing of the miraculous by way of its newly multiple generation. Instead, miracles’ multiple performance is ideologically denied by both the movement’s literature and by devotees themselves. Participation is expected as “spiritual duty,” but what occurs, in fact, is devotees’ simultaneous enrolment and erasure.

28. Juergensmeyer (1991: 82) notes that accounts of miracles performed by Radhasoami masters, such as the multiplying of food, are reminiscent of those attributed to Jesus. When this data is taken together with my own, I think it becomes clear that Jesus has assumed the status of miraculous exemplar for reform-minded Hindus. Furthermore, the example of Christ is often used by these groups in order to demonstrate the importance of living spiritual masters: just as God came to earth in the human form of Christ 2,000 years ago, runs the argument, so he now takes the form of this or that guru.


30. This, of course, contravenes all official guidelines. See chapter 4 on blood donation as an austerity.

31. Although the Nirankari guru does attend the annual Human Unity Day (manav eka divas) camp where he observes his wife donate (the guru himself reportedly can no longer donate due to diabetes), he does not attend the smaller-scale camps staged throughout the summer months.

32. Juergensmeyer sees the importance attached to darshan as a significant driver of the annual eye treatment camps staged by the Radhasoamis. The high value for devotees of experiencing the darshan of their guru means that blindness is looked upon by the movement with particular pity. The blind suffer “an enormous weight of bad karma, and as a result some within Radhasoami have thought it impossible for the blind to achieve a high degree of spiritual achievement” (1995: 81). Juergensmeyer does not say it directly, but the strong implication is that Radhasoami eye operations give not only sight back to the patients but also the opportunity for spiritual advancement.

33. After the Dera Sacha Sauda gained renown as a result of its record-breaking activities, several entrepreneurial blood banks in Delhi contacted the movement’s local branches and compiled lists of devotees who they could contact when in need of blood.

34. Sometimes a rabbit and sometimes a deer accompany the guru on his public excursions. Several devotees said the movement had rescued them from being slaughtered, and that they accompany the spiritual master as a reminder to devotees about the importance of vegetarianism. See Hibbets (1999) on Indian gifts of protection, which include saving animals from slaughter.


36. Times of India, 21 May 2007. Though in many ways like a strike, a bandh is frequently forcible rather than voluntary. The word itself means “closed.” Responses to the controversy were highly politicized, with the Congress—which has been the beneficiary of Sacha Sauda electoral support—defending the order, and the BJP, which is in an alliance with the Akali Dal, heavily criticizing it.


Chapter 6. Utility Saints and Donor-Soldiers

Wales, colored red, white, and blue, asks people to “do their bit for the nation” (https://secure.blood.co.uk/index.html).

2. Admittedly a very small proportion, but I did meet several Muslim Nirankari devotees and one Christian Sacha Sauda devotee.

3. Bhakti Parav is, as far as I am aware, a specifically Nirankari day of devotion.


5. Vegetarianism is central to most Indians’ ideas about what constitutes nonviolence (see Babb 2004: 21).


9. “Osmotically” is from “osmosis,” “the tendency of the solvent of a less concentrated solution of dissolved molecules to pass through a semi-permeable membrane into a more concentrated solution,” or “diffusion through any membrane or porous barrier, as in dialysis” (*Collins Concise Dictionary of the English Language* [1988]).


12. The phrase “tournaments of blood value” is adapted from Appadurai (1986: 21).

13. During the annual Ganpati festivities, idols of Ganesh—often coated with toxic chemicals—are submerged in rivers and seas. Vermiculture refers to the use of worms as an environmentally friendly method of converting organic waste into valuable organic manure.

14. See also Roscoe (1988), Lindstrom (1984), and Empson (2006) on millenarian and prophetic ideas. Mumbai’s most notable recent catastrophic events have been the large-scale sectarian violence of 1992, followed by a series of simultaneous bomb blasts, said to have been instigated by the Mumbai underworld, also in 1992; the serious flooding of 2005; and the bomb blasts on the Mumbai Suburban Railway in July 2006.

15. See Starr (2002) and Waldby and Mitchell (2006: Introduction) on the acute symbolism that surrounded acts of blood donation in the days following 11 September. The Indian government is reported to have offered to send blood for the victims, “even though its supplies are neither adequate nor safe” (Starr 2002).


17. Founded by prophetic visionary Dada Lekhraj in the 1930s, the Brahma Kumaris (Daughters of Brahma) prepare themselves for a period of calamities and a subsequent heavenly world in which there will be perfect gender equality. Particularly active in urban north India, the movement claims in excess of 100,000 devotees and
has internationalized rapidly with branches in Britain, Australia, and the United States. Its headquarters lie at Mt. Abu, Rajasthan. See Babb (1986: chapters 4–6).

18. Devotees claim a following of 100,000. The Trust has branches throughout Maharashtra but has yet to become a pan-Indian phenomenon.

19. Many seemed not to be aware of the perishability of blood: refrigerated red cells expire after thirty days, platelets after six days. Only frozen plasma lasts indefinitely.

20. “Theology of ultimacy” is after Barkun’s (1998: 459) definition of millennialized politics, where politics has “cease[d] to be an instrument for the incremental adjustment of conflicting interests, [becoming] instead a ‘politics of ultimacy’ where ultimate issues are at stake in a once-and-for-all confrontation.”

21. Ingold (2006: 15) gives the example of the movement of the sun through rather than across the sky.

22. A yagna is a popular fire offering ritual. Maha-yagna means “great offering.”

Chapter 7. The Nehruvian Gift

1. Recent essays by Peabody (2001) and Guha (2003) have been more nuanced in their approach to the question of enumeration, presenting evidence of both precolonial modes of community enumeration and of the active role played by communities themselves in formulating self-descriptions. The present argument, I hope, complements those of Peabody and Guha in demonstrating that analysis of the telling aspects of enumerative processes in the subcontinent is by no means exhausted by those studies that, as Guha (2003: 162) puts it, focus upon “the warm, fuzzy continuum of premodern collective life [being] suddenly and arbitrarily cut up by colonial modernity.”

2. The Times (London), 13 July 2006.


4. A central figure in the history of blood donation and transfusion, Karl Landsteiner discovered blood groups in 1900, thereby increasing the safety of transfusion and enabling it to become a major component of modern medical treatment.


6. Though I contrast the Nehruvian and Hindutva variants of national integration, Benei (2006) argues that Nehru’s conceptualization of the nation was unwittingly “Hindu.” While Benei may be correct that the two variants represent the different extremes of a continuum, I maintain that there remain important qualitative differences between them.

7. See Brass (1990: chapters 5–7) and Husain (1996) on political moves to foster “national integration” in post-Independence India.

8. The irony here is the pivotal role Indira Gandhi played in undoing the efforts of her father in promoting national integration. In the years preceding the so-called Emergency of 1975–1977, the Congress’s populist goals “had come to be expressed in terms which covertly signaled the importance of jati and varna classifications to anyone who could be thought of as wronged or deprived” (S. Bayly 1999: 285; see Khilnani 1997: chapter 1). This led to sometimes violent competition between different caste groups in order to secure the state windfalls promised by Indira Gandhi.

10. Ibid.


12. The phrase “unity in diversity” (anekta me ekta), “one of the most oft-repeated state-sponsored slogans” (Kapila 2008: 120), is often uttered in the same breath as “national integration.” The notion of political composition I take from Mosse (2004: 647), who, drawing on Latour (2000), notes that “actors in development are constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of composition.”


15. The term “holding together” is Hirsch’s (1995), used in relation to ritual among the Fuyuge of the Papuan highlands.

16. I do not have space for a full consideration of the kingly aspects of the Dera Sacha Sauda guruship, though it is a rich and interesting subject. The term “fictive kingship” (after “fictive kinship”) was coined by Juergensmeyer (1991: 166) in reference to the Beas branch of Radhasoami gurus. Beas, the Punjab headquarters of the organization, has the appearance of a “magical kingdom,” or a “spiritual court”; several of the Beas masters have been members of the caste from which Punjab’s princes were drawn; and their honorific title, “Maharaj,” of course, directly equates them with royalty. As mentioned above in chapter 5, the full title of the Sirsa master is Guru Maharaj Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Ji, and the literature generated by the organization refers to his kin as members of the “Holy Royal Family.”


18. World Blood Donor Day was begun in 2004 for the global promotion of voluntary blood donation, and is promoted by the Red Cross and WHO.

19. He is partly correct in that in most Western countries people can indeed receive blood at any government-run hospital capable of providing it and do not have to have given previously in order to receive it without charge.

20. I return below to this doctor’s interesting concept of “practical secularism.”

21. The kumbh mela is a massive Hindu convocation which takes place four times in every twelve years. Rotating between Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik, these are the locations where, in the vedic period, four drops of amrīta (the nectar of immortality) are said to have fallen to the ground during a battle between gods and demons for its possession. Attended by millions, including thousands of sadhus, its centerpiece is a ritual bathing at the banks of the rivers in each location.


23. The Dera Sacha Sauda camps also consist of pilgrim donors. Medical pilgrimages are commonplace in a wide variety of global contexts (e.g., Lourdes); the difference in the case of the Sacha Sauda is that, though pilgrims do often themselves get treated at the Sirsa clinics, they also provide blood for the treatment of others.

25. *Outlook*, 22 October 2001. The reputation of Uttar Pradesh state, along with that of Bihar, is blighted by its poor record on women’s rights, communal tensions, and criminal activity. The leading figure in the association, Shahid Askari, faced initial opposition to his camps, with residents of the city chasing him through the streets, calling him *raktu*—one who draws blood.

26. Though the state has indeed subjected the practices of different religious communities to regulation, it is supposed to do so in a balanced and equal manner (Hansen 1999: 53). Of course, controversial debates surround the question of whether this ideology is adequately put into practice.

27. See Freed and Freed (1998: 250–256) for a colorful description of *raksha bandhan* as celebrated in a north Indian village.

28. Schoolgirls from a central Kolkata Catholic school tied lovely rakhis of fresh flowers onto the wrists of donors. Having engaged in a brotherly act of protection, donors were provided with rakhis by these schoolgirl “sisters.”

29. Hibbets (1999) provides a fascinating account of the Indic gift of protection (*abhayadana*), as elaborated in medieval texts. It may be possible that the protective gift of blood is considered by some donors a variant of abhayadana.

30. The blood bank’s location at a pilgrimage centre creates a parallel with the Dera Sacha Sauda camps, which are also points at which extractable pilgrims converge. The kumbh mela camp provides another example of pilgrims as a medical resource.

31. *Times of India*, 19 October 2000. Bryant (2002: 521–523) has found similar attitudes among Greek Cypriots, some of whom express the view that “Turkish Cypriots are Greeks ‘by blood,’ but that they had converted to Islam in the early years of Ottoman rule. Or as one young professional expressed it to me, ‘Even if my brother goes astray [i.e. becomes a Muslim], he’s still my brother.’ ”


33. While it could be argued that reservations form part of a Nehruvian concern with social justice—and therefore that my distinction between Nehruvian thought and reservations is illegitimate—Nehru himself saw only an extremely limited application for reservation schemes, with caste “slated to wither away through a process of modernization” (Rao 2003). One anti-reservation commentator recently quoted with approval Nehru’s view that “these external props, as I might call them, the reservation of seats, and the rest—may possibly be helpful occasionally, but they produce a false sense of political relation, a false sense of strength, and, ultimately therefore, they are not nearly so important as real educational, cultural and economic advance which gives them inner strength to face any difficulty or opponent” (*Indian Express*, 7 April 2006).

34. Agarwal, khatri, and bania usually denote people of merchant-trader background of middling clean-caste status, often of vaishya varna.

35. As was noted in chapter 1, very many though by no means all doctors are high-caste Hindus. In a seeming irony, some of the doctors who complain of the bania influence in donor solicitation are themselves banias. As Laidlaw (1995: 88) has shown, however, “bania” is often understood as much as an attitude or mentality as a caste into which one may be born. It is therefore not unreasonable or surprising for bania doctors to complain of new “bania”-style modes of recruitment.
36. This is an example of the longstanding Indian tradition of making explicit references
to kali yug as a way of explaining or justifying practices apparently at variance with
standard Hindu ethics or morality.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

1. This situation resembles that reported by Säävälä (2003: 237–238) for Hyderabad.
While most Hyderabad urbanites rhetorically deemphasize the significance of caste,
caste anxieties and distinctions continue to be of vital importance in various overt and
covert ways.


3. Though I readily acknowledge that this “centrifugal” aspect is implicit in some varieties
of Indian asceticism: Laidlaw (2005), for example, notes that austerities undertaken by
Jain renouncers, full of volitional complexity, though not directed toward purposes
outside of the self, can and do have “radiating effects,” possibly removing the sins and
faults of those around them.

4. See Mathur (1991: 66) on karma as a form of “divine accountancy.”

5. “Yoga results in the nonconditioned state of samadhi or of sahaja, in the perfect spont-
aneity of the jivan-mukta, the man ‘liberated in this life.’ From one point of view, we
may say that the jivan-mukta has abolished time and history” (Eliade 1990: 339–340).