Hematologies
Banerjee, Dwaipayan, Copeman, Jacob

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Banerjee, Dwaipayan and Jacob Copeman.
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Our focus in this chapter is on bodily transactions—particularly of blood—that illuminate gaps between the given and the withheld, gaps that become the basis of political critique. The critiques they stage are of absences and deficits—where blood donated by religious groups indicates a deficit in familial giving, where paper hearts gifted by survivors of the Bhopal gas disaster to the prime minister signal his lack of one, and where portraits of politicians employing the artist’s own blood are gifted in expectation of previously denied political patronage. The gift that is given critiques that which is ungiven: family members unwilling to donate blood for their transfusion-requiring relative, the care not provided by the Indian state for Bhopal survivors, and the denial of patronage by politicians to their constituents. We draw here on the works of John Davis and Alberto Corsín Jiménez on the proportionality of transactions (Davis 1992; Corsín Jiménez 2008, 180–97). As we noted in chapter 1, Corsín Jiménez elaborates upon Davis’s work on partonomies in and out of balance in material exchanges in observing that “the part that we give is an indication of the whole that is not given—that is, what you see (the gift) is what you do not get (the larger social whole). Gift-giving is thus an expression and effect of proportionality” (186). We extend this insight to illustrate how acts of bodily giving over may operate critically by way of partonomic relations between the given and not given, with that which is given underscoring that which is not (the deficits and absences we referred to earlier).

Such scenes of bodily giving over constitute a historically significant genre of political performance in relation to the ebbs and flows of other modes of activist signification. Jonathan Spencer describes an extreme negative valuation of the po-
political in the subcontinent, describing people of diverse backgrounds as at once “appalled and fascinated” by political goings on, frequently commenting on the unsavoriness of politics (“dirty work”) and on the moral failings of particular politicians (Spencer 2007, 22). Jonathan Parry, meanwhile, comments memorably on the moral pollution associated relentlessly and invariably with politics in the region, recounting Banaras funeral priests’ description of the great difficulty in making a politician’s body burn due to “the enormous burden of sin accumulated with his corrupt earnings” (1994, 127). If political sincerity is considered to be in such deficit, strategies such as the political fast have long aimed to redress this arrear. For Mohandas Gandhi, performed as a component of satyagraha (truth force), fasting was the mass political tool par excellence. Whereas if a politician now fasts, so the saying goes, he only does so between breakfast and lunch. If a political fast appears to be of a notable duration, the figure concerned has likely been “stealthily eating all night long” (Ramaswamy 1997, 230). Thus, one mode to evidence political sincerity becomes its own undoing. But if a political fast contains easy avenues for sleight of hand, the visual spectacle of politicians or party activists “bleeding for a cause” seems not to leave room for such speculation: the evidence is before your eyes—the bag is filled. Which is to say that the felicity of the presentation successfully supplements the constative substance of the statement or appeal. Extraction as enunciation could thus appear to move beyond the critique of political signs. Not unlike the promise that once attached to photographs as records of facts “about which there could be no doubt” (Pinney 2011, 54)—“every photograph . . . indisputably a document of an event, an event that could not be denied” (80)—political extractive events appeared to be “seared” with “reality” (Benjamin, cited in Pinney 2011, 86) in a way that the fast could never be. We suggest then that blood donation spectacles act as “rituals of verification.”

It is because the blood extracted on political occasions holds an elusive promise of political transparency that we may term it promissory matter. Yet as we shall show in this chapter, blood—even while performing a ritual of sincerity and verification—exposes itself to accusations of dissembling and deception. When used as a substance of political communication, blood indexes conviction and an interior moral truth. But when used for the same effect by politicians perceived as corrupt, it drains the communicative medium of its material intimacy with sincerity. Further, in our discussion of explicitly activist actions, we track how the promise of truth and interiority in blood goes hand in hand with its ability to index violence. Specifically, in our discussion of activism in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster, we show how blood comes to materialize the violence of the long unfolding event, at the same time as it evidences the political transparency of its consequent activist mobilization. And in our related discussion of activism around menstrual politics, we show how blood becomes a matter...
of celebration that verifies a feminist politics, at the same time as it stands in as an index of sexual violence. Through this chapter then, we trace this central tension in blood as political media: at the same time as the substance promises a performance of a sincere moral interiority, it simultaneously holds the potential to reveal the corruption and duplicity of political enunciations. And at the same time as it verifies the truth and transparency of activist claims, it exposes the violence that produces the need for an activist response.

**Philanthropy**

On 21 November 2004, at a Sant Nirankari *satsang* (devotional gathering) just off a busy arterial road in West Delhi, a group of young devotees visiting from Chandigarh performed a sketch on the theme of blood donation. The sketch dramatized the story of a young boy injured in a traffic accident. The boy’s father declares that he is too busy to donate blood for the transfusion his son needs, but the two Nirankari devotees who brought the boy to hospital volunteer instead:

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

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

**Devotees:** Yes. How do you recognize us?

**Doctor:** These days, Nirankaris are giving a lot of blood. *Later, after his transfusion and he is no longer critically ill, the boy begins to sob.*

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

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

**Boy:** God is great. Now I realize the greatest relation is of humanity, not of blood.
The Sant Nirankari movement forms part of an inclusive reformist tradition that crosses formal “community” boundaries between Hindus and non-Hindus. Along with other likeminded reformist movements, the Sant Nirankaris relate to and draw inspiration from the sant tradition of North India: a loose family of nonsectarian saints, often from lower-caste backgrounds, who criticized elaborate upper-caste rituals and practices of idol worship. However, while rejecting idolatry in favor of a formless god (nirkar), Nirankari devotees coalesce around living gurus (satgurus) and attend his discourses in communal gatherings (satsang). And while gurus say that to donate blood is to participate in the service of humanity, devotees view it as much as a service or sacrifice to the guru (guru-seva), to his this-worldly glory, and for which, in turn, they will receive the guru’s blessings and gyan (knowledge). Blood donation as a philanthropic practice thus appears here at the conjunction of abstract altruism and concrete practices of self-interest.

Nirankari Colony, northwest Delhi, 24 April 2004—it is Human Unity Day (Manav Ekta Divas), a pivotal date in the Nirankari devotional calendar that commemorates the assassination of former guru Baba Gurbachan Singh on the same date in 1980. The former leader’s sacrifice is annually remembered through the staging of large-scale gatherings at which devotees are strongly encouraged to donate their blood. Many thousands of devotees give blood on this day in Nirankari Colony, where the guru will address gathered devotees, but also at scores of satsang bhavans around the world. The Nirankaris thus stage a positively revalued reenactment of the trauma of losing their former guru, converting his martyrdom from an experience of victimhood into one of self-initiated ennobling virtue. In doing this, they attribute to the successor guru an exhortatory aphorism about the transformation of violent bloodshed into spiritually meaningful donation: “Blood should flow into veins (nari), not drains (nali).” An announcement over the public address system declares, “When a brother, a sister, or a son in a family is in need of blood, everyone says take as much money as you want, but we cannot give [our own] blood. The relatives of some Nirankari donors say, ‘Why are you giving blood?,’ but it is great of them to give blood for humanity.”

In both this loudspeaker announcement and the staged drama, Nirankaris imagine the possibility of constituting a social form through the act of giving blood. The relation between this constitution of a wider social form and bodily giving is partonomic: in our opening drama the gift of Nirankari blood gestures to, and is only required because of, a prior gift withheld by the family. The seemingly paradoxical final utterance of the boy only makes sense in the framework of this entanglement of the given and not given; the abstract social form of the anjaan is made sensible through the repersonalized figure of the errant family. “God is great. Now I realize the greatest relation is of humanity, not of blood.”
But, of course, it is a relation of blood, if not a conventional blood relation. After all, this is a drama that seeks to performatively call into being future altruistic donations. The devotee-performers both mourn the passing of “true” blood relations (khun ke rishte) and celebrate the coming of the successor relation: the widened-out tie of humanity (insaniyat ka rishta). The bad family is vividly portrayed: too busy to care and donate for its own. The new abstract relations made possible by blood donation (insaniyat) rest upon a call to the passing of an older, more concrete relation of biological blood (khun ke rishte). If we call attention here to such a form of bodily giving as philanthropy, it is to suggest that the philanthropic imagination of anonymous giving is predicated on its particular repersonalizations. The anjaan, after all, is not the anonymous stranger presumed by modern philanthropy, but rather takes its meaning from the North Indian sant tradition. At the same time, the critique here of the familial order does not lead in a straightforward line to its rejection. In other words, the familial blood-relation (khun ke rishte) does not entirely eclipse the idea of a personal blood-relation but seeks to recuperate it as another kind of blood-relation (insaniyat ka rishta). The blood-gift critiques here by way of its partonomic form: the given indicates its entanglement with the not-given; the gift presupposes that it was previously withheld. Philanthropic critique—as we shall continue to argue in this chapter—is thus a partonomic relation between the concrete practice of giving and a prior failure of giving that threatens the constitution of a social whole.

The relation between the reform of blood donation and the social reformist agenda of the Sant Nirankari tradition here finds echoes in other alliances, or relations of reform, underpinned by practices of substance-exchange in contemporary India. Lawrence Cohen tracks precisely such a reformation of the body politic in postindependence cinema (2001). In his analysis of two films—Sujata and Amar Akbar Anthony—Cohen tracks at least two moments of a “nationalist recoding” of blood. In the dénouement of both films, an upper-caste mother figure lies in expectancy of a blood transfusion in a hospital bed. Until this point, the narrative burden of both films has been to relate how “traditional” forms of relation—caste and religion—lead to her malaise. Finally, in both films, the upper-caste mother figure is rescued by the donation of blood from the lower-caste daughter-in-law, on the one hand, and sons raised Muslim and Christian, on the other. In this postindependence imagination of India’s political future, blood donation thus operates to dissolve the boundaries of caste and religion. Such an imagination is suffused with the Nehruvian imaginary of the times, where cinema played a pedagogic function to urge audiences to renounce dividing, subnational ties. In such cinematic gestures, the weakened and reconstituted mother figure often served as a powerful cipher for the nation and the future nation-making project at hand (Ramaswamy 2009).
But why do sanguinary politics serve as the privileged conduit for nationalist imaginations in India? Why is blood so particularly potent in conveying the weakening and strengthening of familial or national solidarity? As we discussed in chapter 1, McKim Marriott posited a “dividual,” monistic (nondualist) nature of personhood in the region whereby people were understood as capable of both giving out and absorbing coded material substances—that is, substances imbued with personal character traits or particular moral qualities (Marriott 1976). In explicit contrast to Schneider’s description of kinship practices in the United States, South Asianist ethnosociologists drew upon Marriott to distinguish “western” personhood from what they took to be a quite distinctive South Asian variety. For instance, it is well known that in many Hindu villages throughout India, caste boundaries continue to be maintained in part through restrictions on who eats and drinks with whom (Lambert 2000, 73–89). Scholars such as Inden and Nicholas declared code and substance to be inseparable in Bengali culture—for example, adoption, a “social” or “fictive” form of kinship, may take place only within and not between castes—and Marriott himself took to underscoring this inseparability through use of the term “substance-code” (Inden and Nicholas 2005). Brilliant as Marriott’s Samkhya- and Ayurveda-inspired modeling of the implicit categories structuring South Asian life is, the sources drawn on can appear arbitrary and the categories and correspondences set in stone, while the possibility that South Asians might treat these reflexively and even dynamically deploy them in inventive ways seems entirely discounted.

In our description of practices of bodily giving over, we focus precisely on reflexive and inventive deployments that contravene the norms and correspondences modeled by Marriott. The licit and illicit flows of bodily substances that we describe carry the danger of contagious social contact—often contravening class and caste norms. For example, what we see in the case of Nirankari devotees’ pedagogic performances is how a key category within Marriott’s schema (substance-code) may persist precisely by way of an intervention that highlights a failure in the norm. The problem the performances address is that of the perceived disjuncture between substance and code—that is, between blood and its constitution of North Indian family relations. The performance of reform described above operationalizes an expansively redefined code—from the fallen modern Indian family (L. Cohen 1998)—to a widely conceived humanity, achievable through a more generalized diffusion of substance via voluntary blood donation. Similarly, in its official literature, the Sant Nirankari order is explicitly critical of the decoupling of duty and care (the order of law/code) from ties of blood (the order of nature/substance). It proposes a successor relation-form achievable through blood donation, with devotees’ donated blood coded with knowledge, spirit, and intentions, enabling devotees “to establish blood relationship with other human beings” (Sant
And as we have seen, these will be “relations of humanity,” a term that suggests a divorce between substance and code— with relational coding (duty, care) no longer dependent on substance (the blood tie)— but which, in fact, remain based upon substance (the blood tie). Thus, the reformation of the body politic through blood rests firmly upon an imagined form that already entangles substance and code.

In the Nirankari narrative, the contemporary family first divorces code from substance when relatives refuse to donate blood for one another (in replacement). It then rejoins substance and code in a perversely restricted manner when non-Nirankaris enjoin their Nirankari family members not to give blood “for humanity,” suggesting that Nirankaris’ care for unknown others would detract from their ability to care for their known dependents due to a damaging depletion of blood. The devotees reverse the archetypal demands of blood donation in the region—demands are not made on devotees for their blood; neither do they demand to receive it. Instead, they demand to give it. This, then, is a reflectively situated alignment of substance-code. Perceiving their contemporary detachment, the Nirankari response is to seek to restore their symbiosis via blood donation as a mechanism of promise and critique. The image is of donated Nirankari blood circulating outward, mixing with many other bloods to both restore and reformulate (for the scale is entirely different) the unity of substance-code—Marriott redux.

Performing Sincerity

While the scale of the nationalist imaginary is grander, the tension between the corrupt and the restorative functions of blood is equally at play in the political rallies that we first introduced in chapter 1. If the Nirankaris stake a future utopic humanity on the corruption of the contemporary family, political blood-donation rallies too are rife with the ambivalent entanglement of utopic futures and a dystopic present.

Political blood camp rallies, such as those conducted by the Congress and Samajwadi parties, suggest a reversal of the flow of forcible extraction that we described in the previous chapter, with vampirelike politicians (colonial and post-colonial) sucking the blood of the janata (people). If the janata’s blood/money is usually figured as flowing to the political class, part of what such rallies seek to communicate is a reversal of the flow. That is, the political class offers its own replenishing substance to the janata. The rise of the sanguinary political rally in the era of economic liberalization may thus be understood as far from coincidental. Critics responded to the Hindu far-right political party Shiv Sena’s massive blood donation camp on Maharashtra Day in 2010 by stating that rather than
taking people’s blood, it should be providing them with water. As Nikhil Anand demonstrates, claims on matter form a vital part of Mumbai’s city life, as its political ebbs and flows constitute a form of “hydraulic citizenship” that tie together material and semiotic urban infrastructures (Anand 2017). The blood donated at such rallies seemed to substitute for those substances of the civic and of development—water, electricity—that people really need. Rather than provide services, the political class instead provides blood via unpersuasive postures of commitment. A substance that had promised to demarcate a communicative sphere beyond symbolism, blood is relegated squarely back into the domain of the purely symbolic: political blood donation appears as a nostalgic attempt to reanimate the template of the “maa-baap” paternalistic-yet-benevolent state (Gould 2011, 182) in an era in which utilities are increasingly privatized. If marginalized groups in Mumbai exert pressure upon the civic state to provide water flows, the state in this instance responded with its own hydraulic imaginary—both desperate and strikingly out of place. The party’s supremo (pramukh) Bal Thackeray responded to hydraulic citizenship claims by stating, “Blood donation is the real social work,” while at the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) “the leader of the house, Sunil Prabhu from the Shiv Sena, suggested that his party should get a pat on their back from the BMC for a successful blood-donation drive.”6 Indicative of its public-spiritedness and ethos of seva, the blood drive is the sovereign gift of the party. But a Congress corporator responded, “Sena ko Mumbai aur Mumbaikaron ka khoon chusne ki Aadat hai. Toh isme nayi baat kya hai?” (“Sena is known for sucking the blood of the common Mumbaikar. There’s nothing new or praiseworthy about this?”). We are back, then, with the more familiar practice and metaphor of illicit extraction. The accusation is that the party sucks the blood of city dwellers, which it then passes off as a gift from itself; the donated blood is framed as a gift to the very janata, or Mumbaikar, it is extracted from. But that was not all. Another Congress corporator “alleged that the blood donation drive was conducted by luring union workers in the Shiv Sena with the promise of a permanent job.”7 Whether or not there is weight to the accusation, it contains more than a faint echo of the forcible deals of Emergency-era India, in which the granting or regularization of plots of land might be dependent on undergoing sterilization (Tarlo 2003). The very means by which the party seeks to show it does constructive seva—providing for, not extracting from, the people—is reduced back down to the level of (literal) khoon choosna (sucking blood). In such scenes of fake and extractive giving, the partonomic logic of bodily philanthropy becomes dangerously transparent. The gift presented as a remedy is reframed itself as poisonous due to its prior illicit extraction. In the political camp, it is no longer easy to distinguish between the remedy and the poison, or the gift that is given from that which is extracted, or the reformist part from the suspended whole.
This prompts further reflections on witnessed bleeding. In 2002 a controversy arose when Hindi film icon Amitabh Bachchan inaugurated a series of blood donation camps for the Uttar Pradesh–based political outfit the Samajwadi Party (SP). They were staged during a state assembly election campaign, a time when the election commission’s model code comes into force, which is meant to prohibit “vote buying” by candidates eager to hand out “electoral freebies” (frequently saris, cooking vessels, alcohol, and cash). The SP’s rival, the Congress Party, lodged a complaint with the commission, alleging that “Mr. Bachchan and the SP leaders were using the blood donation camps to gain political mileage. . . . These camps are being synchronized with the election campaign and they amount to an offer of allurement to the voters.” The complaint was that blood donation was being deployed to legitimate otherwise forbidden political bribes. One implication was that since the event was associated with the SP, the blood collected might be viewed as a “gift” to the public from whom it seeks votes. More significant, however, is how the “token of regard,” which by law is quite acceptable for blood camp organizers to offer to blood donors on completion of their donations, can be used to set up an exchange that otherwise would be obstructed. At a time when gifts to voters are explicitly forbidden, and this indeed being the only time that political functionaries would want to make them, the exchange is performed obliquely in the guise of another exchange (which legitimately inheres within the setup of blood camps). That is, taking the donor-voter’s blood allows the party in turn to offer back what they would not be allowed to give (e.g., saris, cooking vessels) if there wasn’t a blood donation event acting as an “exchange cover,” whilst at the same time also making visible an electorally useful association between the party and social service.

The intimacy between blood donation and corruption reappears in the following news story, which made headlines in December 2013:

Plumbing new depths of sycophancy, dozens of Mahila (women) Congress activists happily posed for photographs claiming that they had donated blood to mark the birthday of party president Sonia Gandhi, at Gandhi Bhavan in Hyderabad on Monday. The problem, however, was that very few of them—three by our count—had actually donated blood. The rest merrily posed for pictures on the stretcher. State Mahila Congress president Akula Lalitha said that 15 activists had donated blood. She said it was common for publicity hounds to pose for pictures with fake claims. Doctors from Red Cross Society, Barkatpura, who collected the blood, said that they had faced such situations many a times.

As we noted earlier, party-organized blood donation camps are liable to be canceled if a leader is unable to attend, and if the leader does attend, they
often break up immediately upon the leader’s departure. The above example is of the same genus as such (abortive) camps, but its cynicism was more glaringly ripe for media exposé. The \textit{actually} posed blood donation camp seemed to underscore its logical extension—the posed nature of the rest of the sanguinary politics. What was in any case a thoroughly gestural politics, here we finally locate its “purest” fake form. We quote now a selection of the reader comments below the main text of the online version of the article:

by Indian\_anna on Tue, 2013-12-10 12:52
we should thank them for not giving the genuine blood, as we do not need a corrupt blood from these liars . . .

by nsrivastava2 on Wed, 2013-12-11 09:24
You are so true. Those 3 who donated shall take back their’s.

by a k shetty on Tue, 2013-12-10 16:12
these ladies are behind all these scam . . .

by TS on Tue, 2013-12-10 16:38
What else can you expect from them when they are working under the leadership of “Amma” Fake people. . . . Shame on you all . . .

by WP on Tue, 2013-12-10 17:52
Seriously? Blood donation is one of the easiest things you can do to help a fellow human being. It hurts as much as a mosquito bite, does not leave scars and best of all, you can start your normal work right after you donate. If these ladies feel the need to fake even that, I am at a loss for words.

by Shah minhaj on Wed, 2013-12-11 19:35
. . . its funny and shameful how desperate they are to get in the picture!!

by BG on Wed, 2013-12-11 22:17
These might be the same people who say “we need a change” without any contribution . . .
Nauseating. Shame on the part of Congress. When will people reject out right this kind of shameless politicians. What gives them confidence that people can be fooled and cheated by enacting such cheap drama. These hypocrites suck your blood out.

With that fake smile and intention they look like “those types” waiting in the bed, pathetic!! I hope no one would need to receive their blood, it is all dirty with politics.10

Clearly, different axes were being ground in the forum. The avatar names of the commentators themselves provide interest: “SoniaGoBackToItaly” is suggestive of the Hindu right’s interest in the story, from which it unsurprisingly sought to draw political capital. Likewise, “a k shetty” employs the language of the scam. This and the headline itself (“Fake blood donation shames Congress in Andhra Pradesh”) draws this event into the sort of national conversation that issues of fakery and duplication (L. Cohen 2012; 2017) enjoy in the country. These are conversations that take in, among other things, fake gurus, fake milk products, and most notoriously “fake encounters,” which refers to the staging of extrajudicial executions in Kashmir and elsewhere as if they had been enacted in combat situations. If those army and police personnel who enact fake encounters are said to do so in order to gain professional advancement (“to collect bounties and add stars to their epaulets” [Duschinski 2010, 124]), a similar logic inhabits the staged blood donation camp through which party workers seek advancement in the party.

Visible here is a kind of degenerative symmetry: in chapter 1 we noted that on Sonia Gandhi’s birthday in 2003, Youth Congress activists organized blood donation events at which they signed anticorruption pledges. In that instance, the enactment of blood donation helped register a message of committed anticorruption. However, the same leader’s birthday ten years later generated comments declaring that the “corrupt blood of these liars” must remain uncollected: “I hope no one would need to receive their blood, it is all dirty with politics.” “Those 3 who donated shall take back their’s [sic].” Their body parts, dirtied by their bad characters, must not be allowed to circulate and infect others. Corruption means that politicians’ bodies don’t burn in Banaras (Parry 1994); it also means that their blood must not be transfused into the body politic. We noted above the currency of the phrase that politicians suck blood (khuun choosna), an image featured in cartoons in which corruption is figured as transfusion into the politicians’ body. Here the commentator VKV.Ravichandran reiterates the sentiment in English
(“These hypocrites suck your blood out”) as a means of explaining: Well of course their blood donation was fake—political parties only take people’s blood.

Finally, WP asks why the activists were in any case reluctant given that “blood donation is one of the easiest things you can do to help a fellow human being.” And here we can gain a sense of why the sanguinary politics, despite the public circulation of such discreditable stories, retains at least some vigor: verifiable extractions enact political commitment and truth because of one’s own reluctance to do likewise. If the Congress members had donated, it would have been a sacrifice, a “giving over” (Cohen 2013) to the leader and to the janata. As it happens, their alarm at the prospect of donation overcame their willingness to enact it, and the media was willing and able to register this. What we mean to say here is that the scandal was to do with the extraction not happening, not with the “truth” of it if it had. To assert that the sanguinary politics has been recast wholesale as a dissembling political form would be going too far; its continued enactment in a large variety of mass political settings suggests it continues to possess some degree of communicative efficacy. Consider, for instance, the case of the high-profile Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Superstitious Practices (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti, or MANS), which campaigns across the state to expose the spuriousness of what it sees as irrational and dangerous religious practices that exploit the credulous and vulnerable. The major aim of the organization is to pass legislation in the state parliament that will make illegal precisely these forms of religious practice. In 2005, MANS succeeded in persuading the Maharashtra State Legislature to approve the “Eradication of Black Magic and Evil Aghori Practices Bill.” However, due to a concerted and sometimes violent campaign on the part of right-wing Hindu organizations who claim that the bill was specifically targeted at Hindu forms of religious worship, which it would effectively criminalize, the bill has not yet—to MANS’s dismay—been signed into law.

MANS sought an appointment with the chief minister to press its case. Finally, it resorted to a letter-writing campaign using activists’ own blood. The movement’s then-leader, Narendra Dabholkar, recalled to us a particular campaign:

We decided to write letters to the chief minister [CM], [Congress leader] Sonia Gandhi, and [local “big man” politician and then-central government minister] Sharad Pawar with our own blood, from MANS workers. We took out just 3 ml of blood from the vein in a special syringe—enough for three to four sentences only. Then, using small brushes, we wrote letters to the CM. More than a thousand letters were sent to the CM. Nobody objected or ridiculed the idea, but everyone was now sure of the integrity of the organization, so ultimately the result was that the CM was compelled to discuss with us.
This is to say that, finally, MANS had found the right elicitory form and obtained the appointment. To cite one report, “Dr. Dabholkar informed that about 300 such letters would be written to the Government, where the ‘number’ is not an issue but the issue is about the ‘pain.’” Physical self-subjection thus also formed a component of the correct manifestation. However, number and endurance were insufficient in themselves. Rather, it seemed that activists’ use of their own blood was critical for demonstrating an “integrity”—a “congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 1971, 2) made tangible and discernible via externalization of moral interiors (“actual feeling”) as bloody text (“avowal”) that “compelled” the chief minister to pay attention. MANS had finally located the correct performative supplement to the constative. In what follows, we take a closer ethnographic look at another such “successful” performative linkage of moral interiority with blood. In doing this, we trace how certain actors are able to continually deploy blood as a material ritual of verification, despite the accusations of dissembling that have come to be leveled against its deployment by politicians perceived as corrupt.

**Persuasive Portraiture**

Shihan Hussaini of Chennai, Tamil Nadu state, is a karate and archery teacher, but he also runs a fine arts academy offering instruction in sculpture, dance, and painting. We waited for him in his office, which displayed swords, guns, arrows, daggers, and a huge Buddha head. Through a window we watched an attendant arrange fifty-seven paintings of the former chief minister (state-level head of government) of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha—all painted using the artist’s blood. There were mirrors on each wall, which multiplied the bloody images (figures 5 and 6).

Why did he engage in such an exercise? The reason, he explains, was simple: he needed land for a karate school. For this he required an appointment with the chief minister.

After I had 101 cars run over my hand [Hussaini is known for such spectacular feats] I did a portrait of Jayalalitha. Had I just done a painting and no blood, it would have achieved nothing. She brought me to her residence and promised me 1 million dollars... She asked why did I do it. I said I knocked on your door several times, but there was no reply. I had to run trucks over my hand and paint your portrait in my blood! [However,] once [the promise] was announced, some bureaucrats changed the decision and the land was taken [from me]. The next year she turned fifty-seven, so I did fifty-seven portraits. But she was
FIGURE 5. Hussaini’s paintings. (Photo by the authors.)

FIGURE 6. Portraits of Jayalalitha in blood. (Photo by the authors.)
subjected to sixty [legal] cases, so couldn’t give me the land. When she comes back I will influence her to get the land. This is to influence decision-making.

Hussaini is explicit concerning his theory of art:

Blood art is a tool of propaganda, communication, and influencing decision-making. . . . I go and ask for a favor, and I give them a painting in my blood. I have influenced several people with my own blood portraits of them. For me, it is not aesthetic—it is to influence thought, decision-making, people, an entire idea to be implanted in people.

In other words, this is interventionist art, created in order to compel particular outcomes. Hussaini’s portraits thus attempt, with some success, to compel or oblige via aspects of their form. First, there is the sheer number of them:

Jayalalitha was fifty-seven years old, so I did fifty-seven blood portraits. . . . I’m adding them up every year. My very first portrait was for land, and I got it, but subsequently I had an exhibition in 2001 and the Karunanidhi [Jayalalitha’s successor and fierce rival] government was so offended by the blood painting they raided my place and took this painting. . . . I said, you take—I will make fifty-seven more. Till now I have never got it back. The original one is lost forever. So in defiance of this daylight robbery by the state machinery, I did fifty-seven more paintings [in blood of Jayalalitha]. . . . With an election coming, [Karunanidhi] thought it was only for propaganda. The paintings were taken. I fasted [to protest]. I was forced [to stop] by friends because the police were arranging and putting false [legal] cases on me. My riposte was to do fifty-seven more paintings of Jayalalitha and another every year on February 24—Jayalalitha’s birthday.

With one portrait for every year of the chief minister’s life, an acutely personal formula is set up between quantities of lifetime and offering. Its enumerative form seems to help make the gift compelling (in the sense of the adjective but also the verb—force or oblige). Yet each image forms only a small part of a larger concern, for another is added every year. There is, in this sense, only one (ongoing) collective portrait. But enumerative form is also a site of vulnerability for Hussaini. The critical mass of “sixty legal cases” against Jayalalitha meant that she couldn’t make good her promise to him, while the very need to create more portraits was a result of their initial theft by Jayalalitha’s political opponents, an action seeming to demonstrate the superior efficacy of his competitors over his own artistic efforts at political influence. It is not surprising that media reportage found
in Hussaini’s literally bloody art an excess that reconfirmed the perversity of Tamil Nadu’s modes of political expression. For instance, the paintings were bracketed by both the BBC and local newspapers with a case from 2003 in which a man from Vellore was reported to have cut off his tongue as a birthday offering to the chief minister.\textsuperscript{12} Initiating a user-led discussion with the title “Why Do Tamils Burn Themselves?,” an Indian news website has enlisted Hussaini’s paintings as further compelling evidence of Tamil Nadu’s status as politically pathological.\textsuperscript{13} It is worth pointing out that it was also in Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu) that Lawrence Cohen conducted an interview with a female slum dweller who, already having sold one kidney to settle a debt, invoked Jayalalitha’s predecessor as leader of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam Party, the former chief minister M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), and his need for a kidney transplant, in making the following startling admission: “He was dying, and received one from his niece; they did the operation in America. At that time, I did not know about kidneys. If I had, I would have given him both of mine” (1999). Elsewhere Lawrence Cohen (2004, 167) has analyzed such ideational-corporeal political relations in terms of a citizen’s operative form, where one’s body is always potentially a countergift to the state, “in some cases as a sacrifice resurrecting a failing or absent sovereign.” Hussaini’s portraits point toward the variety of media employed in enacting such a corporeal exchange relationship.

We use “enact” advisedly. Hussaini enacted his devotion in compelling fashion. He attained an audience with the chief minister—no small feat. He provided media-friendly quotes: “‘There were times when I passed out [when having blood drawn]. But I persisted.’ Mr Hussaini says that he worships the Chief Minister as ‘Ma Shakti,’ or the goddess of power. . . . ‘It shows my admiration for Ms Jayalalitha, who is a woman of great courage.’” Moreover, the BBC article on Hussaini treats his portraits as a quintessential example of the way in which in South India, “the dividing line between politics and cinema is blurred [with] fans often going to extreme lengths to display their affection.” Yet in conversation with us, Hussaini was explicit about the performative nature of his “fandom”: “The reports were wrong. I am not a fan! [i.e., he did it not out of devotion but because he wanted land]. All poets play praise for rulers. Unless you eulogize and iconize your kings and CMs, you’re not going to get your commission. I did not draw her portrait because I am a fan—but because it is a tool.” While such a utilitarian analysis surely accounts for the ends the artist sought to accomplish, it hardly does justice to the means. The material presence of the artist in Hussaini’s portraits was necessary for achieving something very particular: a relation to the subject of representation in the “space” of—which is to say enframed within—the portrait. In a consideration of John Berger’s (2007) writings on drawing, Michael Taussig (2009) highlights the intimacy between drawer and thing drawn: “Each
confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become. . . . A drawing is an autobiographical record of one’s discovery of an event, seen, remembered, or imagined” (Berger, cited in Taussig 2009, 269). In drawing, one gets close to an object. The drawing forms an intimate material relation. In the case of Hussaini’s portraits, the act of representation no doubt brings the artist closer to the represented in the manner suggested by Berger. But there is an intensification of the relation achieved by way of the artist’s indexical physical presence within the portrait—substance delineating subject. The aniconic element—the sanguinary medium as literal index of the artist—is present as substantive delineation of the icon it comprises, the relation both formed and displayed in the space of the portrait itself. The image objectifies a relation and is that relation; as Marilyn Strathern puts it, one can “not only perceive relations between things but also perceive things as relations” (2005, 63). This relation—made and displayed in the image itself—is integral to its ability to affectively persuade. Hussaini ultimately might not have obtained the land he sought, but the mere granting of an audience with the chief minister attests to the success of what might be called the propaganda of the image. As Michael Carrithers points out, direct access to Indian political leaders—ordinarily extremely difficult to secure—may be “vital for life chances, in politics, in business, or in education” (2010, 255). The fusing of subject and object in the medium of the portrait forces a relation upon the anticipated viewing subject/recipient. Hussaini’s portraits compel not by invoking the wider relationships out of which the presenter/giver is made up, but by materializing (and inflicting) a relationship between the corporeal self and the recipient onto the recipient. A priori encoding of the form of the relation in the image was thus, in Hussaini’s own words, a tool. Strathern, too, explicitly defines the relation as the anthropologist’s tool, for anthropologists “use relations to explore relations” (2005, 7). Specifically, anthropologists “operate two kinds of relations at the same time” (2005, 7)—the conceptual and the interpersonal. The relational portrait, toollike, caused an invisible (conceptual) relation between ruler and unknown subject to become a visible (interpersonal) relation between ruler and known subject—the portrait a kind of relational intervention.

We have stated that the portraits objectify a relation; let us now consider more carefully the properties of the “blood tie” created in the images. First of all, Hussaini’s portraits form a part not only of the wider sanguinary politics but also of a tradition of political praise offering in South India that is characterized by relations of “hierarchical intimacy” (Bate 2002). Preminda Jacob describes the particularly intimate association of visual culture and political power in Tamil Nadu, pointing out, for instance, that all five politicians that have headed the state’s gov-
ernment since 1967 have been products of the film industry (Jacob 2009). Poems
and images printed in local newspapers by local political functionaries or low-
level community leaders in honor of these film-stars-turned-political-leaders (in
particular, Jayalalitha) “aestheticize power as an intimate being, such as a family
deity or mother, who will grant us the benefits of her presence and respond to
our appeals” (Bate 2002, 309). Locating its roots in the medieval bhakti tradition
of devotional love, Bate describes how images of Jayalalitha are framed in ways
that underscore her royal-and-divine identity. Yet such “hierarchical distancing”
of the leader is fused with tropes of intimacy: Bate offers the example of a central
print of Jayalalitha surrounded by sixty smaller images of exactly the same im-
age, with their warm gazes seemingly directed downward toward the advertiser
himself—the head of the Tamil Nadu Sales Board—whose image is located at the
bottom right of the advertisement (318). If, once again, quantity is a key quality
of an image that is both many and one at the same time, in tying the advertiser’s
name to that of great political leaders, what such images and their attendant po-
etry achieve is, of course, a relation. In other words, these “portraits” are not
simply of the leader; neither are they simply self-portraits. They are portraits of
the advertiser in relation to the political leader that also create this relation.
Hussaini’s portraits, indeed, partake of this genre—the relation both made and
made visible in the space of the portrait. But the use of blood heightens the inti-
macy of the relation discussed by Bate. The portraits adhere to—but critically exceed—the regional convention of political praise offering. This brings us back
to Berger’s account of drawing. As was noted earlier, the material qualities of Hus-
saini’s portraits embody an intensification or literalization of the process de-
scribed by Berger: Hussaini “adds substance” to the already intimate process of
physical portrayal. Indeed, Hussaini repeatedly emphasized to us the provenance
of his artistic material in the heart: “This is an amazing and personal medium;
when you draw people it is said it should come from your heart, and this literally
comes from the heart.” He has faced criticism from several quarters; in particu-
lar, for “wasting” a medically valuable substance and for proliferating new icons—
not an uncontroversial practice for a Muslim who claims direct descent from the
Prophet Muhammad: “People have said it’s sacrilegious. But I say it is the most
special substance because it comes literally from the heart.” And again: “They say
that you can see the artist in the art, and when I do my art it is literally true.” That
the substance of his paintings derives from his heart is a key aspect of his self-
presentation in media interviews as much as in interviews with us, and the con-
nection, far from being only his own, is a recurrent motif of the Indian sanguin-
ary politics. For instance, the attention paid by the public to the provenance of
artistic material in the heart was a notable feature of its response to the exhibition
of freedom fighter portraits in blood that we described in chapter 2. To paraphrase
Hussaini, then, what we witness in his blood portraits is substance literally from the heart commingled with—and intimately delineating—the features of its subject. Of course, even works considered by critics to dismantle long-standing aesthetic conventions are assessed according to an authenticity criterion—they must be “from the heart.” For Richard Handler, “modern art is required, not to please, as in earlier aesthetic theories, but to provide its audience with examples of authenticity” (1986, 4)—hence recent controversies concerning Damien Hirst’s spot paintings, famously made by a team of assistants. Defending himself against accusations that he was making millions of pounds from artworks he had little to do with, he is reported to have stated, “Assistants make my spot paintings but my heart is in them all.”

Well, not literally. In Hussaini’s case, because the medium of the portraits has literally passed through his heart, the sentiments of the works are considered to be more forcefully conveyed and faithful. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the blood medium does not merely connote the sentiment that gave rise to its extraction but that it is, quite literally, that sentiment as unmediated affect. We have discussed elsewhere understandings in South Asia that see the heart as the literal repository of genuine sentiment. From love and pride to shame and fear, feelings “belong to the body and they flow [literally] from the heart” (Krause 1989, 568). The de-metaphorized portrait’s material composition from a substance delivered literally from the heart, and partaking of the sentiment it embodies and produces, lends force to its affective efficacy. Certainly, it was central to the propaganda of the image in Hussaini’s own terms. Such running together of the contiguous and the representational is, of course, not unique to Hussaini in India’s wider sanguinary politics. The example offered earlier of the Bajrang Dal’s collective portrait of the god Ram in activists’ pooled blood suggests a similar underscoring of a demonstrable relation and aesthetics of commitment via the blood medium: a portrait of neither Ram nor the activists but of the activists in relation to Ram—a blood tie made literal.

Portraits of what, then? Strathern’s approach to images is one that pays great attention to the instability of figure and ground (Strathern 1990; Wagner 1986). Hussaini actively builds in, or encodes, a figure-ground reversal; we are directed to concentrate at least as much on the substance of composition as on the “figure.” To employ Kath Weston’s (2013a) formulation, the extracted blood that is used in portraits and petitions is metamaterial because it forces reflection upon the material properties of the artifacts it forms. If in the classic understanding of portraiture “the portrayer makes visible the inner essence of the sitter” (Van Alphen 1997, 241), in Hussaini’s case the portrayer makes his own “inner essence” visible in relation to the portrayed. That the word for heart, dil, is frequently used for “I” in parts of South Asia (Krause 1989, 568) might further support a figure-
ground reversed understanding of Hussaini’s paintings as nonrepresentational self-portraits (forming part of an epidemiology of nonrepresentations, so to speak). There is an echo here, then, of those artworks that contain “a miniature replica of [themselves or their authors], as in Velazquez’s Las Meninas” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013, 8), even if in Hussaini’s case the artist’s appearance in the work makes no reference to the artist’s own likeness. Hussaini’s paintings, indeed, are not self-portraits in any simplistic sense but “self-in-relation-to-another” portraits. The key point here is that the instability of figure and ground is an important facet of Hussaini’s relational industry. The easy switches from figure to ground, and vice versa, remind the viewer of the relation the image comprises—that is, the portraits make evident not only the one who is represented. Matter here is a kind of relational reminder.

Of course, one might object that the toollike nature of the relation does not square with Hussaini’s insistence that the portraits are composed via “the most personal medium” and our own insistence, with reference to Berger and local understandings of the human heart, upon the achievement of relational intimacy. But it is not simply a question of either relation as tool or relation issuing pristinely “from the heart.” The relation works so well as a tool precisely because it elaborates an aesthetics of presentation and commitment and is undergirded by an artistic sensibility fully cognizant and reflexive of the persuasiveness of form. Issuing “from the heart” via “the most personal medium”—this is precisely how the tool works. The portraits—as emotive instantiation of a relation between icon and iconizer—thus possess affective power; the chief minister was emotively compelled to respond. To conclude this section, then, we briefly consider the nature of the image-maker’s sway. Van Alphen explains how the portrait conventionally bestows power on the portrayed: “It is because we see a portrait of somebody that we presume that the portrayed person was important and the portrayed becomes the embodiment of authority. Thus, authority is not so much the object of portrayal, but its effect” (1997, 240). It is possible that Hussaini’s portraits did augment the chief minister’s authority and that her prestigious invitation to the artist and promise of property were merely acts of noblesse oblige. Such a view, however, discounts the capacity of the affective image to influence or compel its viewer to action. Rather than augment her authority, the portraits demonstrate her essential vulnerability when subjected to the relational industry of another. This was not a relation she chose; Hussaini acted according to the principle that “one cannot point to a relation without bringing about its effect” (Strathern 2005, 64). The image was the occasion for a kind of relational binding—a blood tie.

One can thus gain a sense of the continued potency of extracted blood as promissory political matter, despite our prior description of its association with political dissembling in “fake” camps. The extraction of blood as enunciative act
continues to promise to provide material access to the truth of the donor’s moral interiority and convictions. This argument is congruent with Van de Port’s observation about the critical role of the body in seeming to “precede” all argument and therefore in “upgrading the reality caliber of social and cultural classificatory systems” (2011, 86). In the following section, we explore how this logic of the material intensification of moral interiors suffuses the activist work of the survivors of the Bhopal gas disaster.

Activist Faux-Philanthropy

In 1984, a poisonous cloud of methyl isocyanate leaked out of a negligently maintained Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. Over the course of the night the gas cloud quickly engulfed the slum settlements that surrounded the factory, leading to the immediate death of over two thousand people. Since then, more than twenty thousand have succumbed to the slower effects of the poison, and about 100,000 more have been left with varying degrees of disability and impairment. The corporations responsible have continued to evade responsibility for the tragedy; the U.S.-based corporation Dow Chemicals bought Union Carbide in 1999, claiming responsibility over only Carbide's assets and not its liabilities. The site, upon which the survivors have no choice but to continue to live, remains toxic and the groundwater poisoned. The corporations involved have cited “trade secret” clauses in refusing to divulge the results of their investigations into the nature of the toxic gas. Very little of the settlement negotiated between the corporation and the Indian government has trickled down to the survivors. For its part, the Indian government has failed to provide adequate health care to the survivors. The funds reserved for that purpose from the settlement have gone toward creating a hospital from which the survivors are excluded. Further, the government refuses to recognize obvious signs of second-generation effects and has also failed to deliver upon promises of public medical research into the chronic effects of this poisoning (Hanna, Morehouse, and Sarangi 2005).

Faced with these circumstances, the survivors have organized a highly charged and widely networked international “campaign for justice” over the last thirty years. Within the affected slums, they have set up a health clinic that warns against excessive pharmaceutical use and dispenses free multimodal treatment to all those who live in the area. This is consonant with the broader tenor of the activist movement; its ongoing effort has been to link the original disaster of 1984 to the abuses of multinational pharmaceutical companies in the present. The Bhopal activist network is comprised of several subgroups that come under a broader conglomerate organization known as the International Campaign for
Justice in Bhopal (ICJB). The prominent subgroups of the ICJB are Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationary Karmachari Sangh (Bhopal Women’s Gas Victim’s Stationary Labor Organization), Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Purush Sangharsh Morcha (Bhopal Men and Women’s Gas Victim’s Struggle Forum), and the Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA). The BGIA, which takes center stage at moments of heightened activism, is led by charismatic leaders Satinath Sarangi (Sathyu) and Rachna Dhingra; they determine the broader direction as well as the practical daily life of the movement. While the ICJB has conducted protests and actions with remarkable regularity over the last three decades, we focus here on a set of actions that we were able to follow ethnographically in 2008.

In February that year, the ICJB gathered about fifty survivors and activists and set out on foot from Bhopal. The destination was New Delhi, the capital city, which lies about five hundred miles north. The street in the capital on which they converged (and do so almost every year) lies not far from the administrative center of Rajpath and India Gate. Called Jantar Mantar, it is named after a historic eighteenth-century astronomical observatory that it circles. In recent decades, Jantar Mantar has been administratively marked, cordoned off, and policed for a very different purpose; it has been designated by the city administration as the space within which groups of civil dissenters can make public displays of protest. The Bhopalis were not alone there; among many other organizations, they were flanked by a group of Tibetan protesters on one side, trade union organizers on the other, and a group of disgruntled civil servants farther down the road. We focus here on two strategic actions led by the second-generation victims of the disaster, children in their early teens that organize under the suborganizational umbrella of Children Against Dow-Carbide (CADC). The broader activist collective formed CADC earlier that year, well aware of the persuasive moral figuration of the child activist. Further, the institutionalization of the group was also motivated by the Indian government’s ongoing refusal to recognize second-generational effects, thereby delegitimizing an entire constituency of survivors. In later years, CADC would go on to the United Kingdom and the United States, talking at events and canvassing congressional representatives, urging them to put pressure on Dow Chemical. In the first action of their Delhi campaign, CADC reached out to their peers in elite schools in New Delhi. Sareeta, Rafat, Yasmin, and Safreen, some of the leaders of the suborganization, painstakingly detailed the effects of the disaster to their Delhi peers. Questions and conversations followed their presentation, after which both the Bhopali children and the schoolchildren from Delhi wrote letters to the Indian prime minister (the de facto addressee of most Bhopali public interventions). However, while the Delhi children wrote letters in conventional pencil and ink, CADC used blood collected from young Bhopali
adults at the protest site. The moment of the taking of blood was dramatized by
the young adults by red headbands, photographed and captioned later with ag-
gressive messages such as “Look into our eyes, Prime Minister.” With this blood-
ink, Sareeta and other children from CADC wrote a letter to the prime minister
asking in the most courteous of tones for a long-denied appointment. The text
of the letter read as follows: “Dear PM, We are people poisoned by Union Car-
bide. We have walked more than 800 km just to meet you. For the last 19 days,
we have been sitting at Jantar Mantar. Would you please take one hour out of
your busy schedule to meet us at Jantar Mantar? That is all I wanted to say. On
behalf of the Bhopal victims—Yasmin Khan, on behalf of Bhopal Survivors.” In
this strategic action, the violence of the disaster was routed first through the con-
taminated bodies of those directly affected and then through the pen of eleven-
year-old Yasmin, who knew its effect since birth. In a public event, it was then
inscribed as a public letter addressed to the prime minister. Along with the let-
ter, the medium of the writing (blood) was prominently displayed in medical
container vials. The children then carried this letter-in-blood to the residence of
the prime minister and had it sent in via emissaries, after much wrangling with
security.

The medical instruments in the moment of writing—the syringe, the vial, and
so on—point to one valence of blood that the activists are well acquainted with:
its evidentiary quality. In addition to serving as a ritual of verification in political
theater, the medical testing of blood is well known as a standard evidence-gathering
trope, as it plays a part as evidence of contamination and suffering, allowing for
claims to be made for compensation and future medical care. Here, this evidence
was imaginatively redeployed as a medium of expression, rather than as an ob-
ject for scientific examination. Thus deployed, blood-as-writing rejected the sup-
posed transparency of medical evidence; instead, writing with blood established
an alternative technique for making suffering visible. Crucial to this alternative
technique was the sarcastic content of the address: “Would you please take out
one hour from your busy schedule?” Roland Barthes has suggested that a funda-
mental condition of modernity is that sarcasm became a possible condition of
truth (1972). In other words, Barthes describes sarcasm as a critical deconstruc-
tive tool from within language that denaturalizes how languages often naturalize
dominant ideologies. Resonantly, Yasmin’s sarcastic utterance served as a mode
of critique: as a linguistic technique, it revealed the absurdity of the polite address
from her to the prime minister. In the face of the history of neglect that various
prime ministers have practiced toward the children of Bhopal, sarcasm in the let-
ter pointed to a failed possibility of an ideal relationship between the writer and
the addressee.
By itself, this might be a commonplace observation. What makes this striking, however, is that the letter takes its force not only from the sarcasm inherent in the linguistic address (in the disjunction between apparent content and intent) but also from the disjunction between the apparent politeness of the message and the violent materiality of its writing: blood. To underscore the particular stakes of using blood for communicating political content, we find it crucial to further unpack this disjunction between message and medium. The Bhopali deployment of blood as material and medium is a distant cry from the substance’s association with Nehruvian nationalist integration, as described by Lawrence Cohen in the context of early postcolonial India (2001). With the Bhopal disaster, and the subsequent collusion between the Indian government and multinational corporations to evade responsibility, the integrative imagination of blood gives way to one that is suffused with violence. The closest and most immediate referents for this new sanguinary imagination is the blood spilled on the night of the disaster and the subsequent blood that indexes ongoing contamination in the bodies of the Bhopal survivors. The fiery red bands that the activists wore while donating their blood for this campaign evidence an anger at odds with the polite address of the letter. Thus, while writing with blood here attempted a mode of biosocial relationality between the poor and their government, the mode in which this was attempted was not through the invocation of an inherent biological commonality but rather through calling attention to the violence of contamination and the insistent possibility of death.16 In other words, in taking recourse to blood, Bhopali activists animated its potential to both remedy (asking for political representation) and critique (describing the prior failure of political representation). If the government had pushed the poor into zones of “thanatopolitical” neglect, writing-through-blood sought to counter such a practice of invisibility by intensifying the substances of the body, demonstrating an activist biomoral interiority, and revealing a history of violent deficits in the proper functioning of the body politic. The gift of Bhopali blood exemplified the potential and power of the partonomic gift in its most pointed form—where the gift given not only highlights that which is not given but also demonstrates the vast biomoral chasm between the part and the whole.

CADC’s strategy of a critical bodily giving over was exemplified again in a following activist action—the “Have a Heart” campaign (figure 7). This action once more involved the activist-children canvassing at city schools for support. After explaining the complexity of the issue and the seriousness of their concerns to fellow teenagers, they asked for volunteers to cut out large paper hearts of various colors. Once several such hearts were carved out, the children from Delhi reflected on what they had just heard and penned a letter on the cut-out heart to the prime minister. The name of the campaign gave away its affective ploy. The
“Have a Heart, Prime Minister” campaign played with the idea that these carved hearts were a donation to the prime minister, to make up for the lack of his obviously missing organ. If his heart were indeed in its place, it would not allow him to turn a deaf ear to the suffering of the activist children. Gifting in this activist mobilization stalled at the heavily guarded gates of the prime minister’s residence, just a few miles from the site of the protest. The survivors could only look on as an aide finally took the hearts into the guarded compound and disappeared down the long pathway toward the residence bungalow.

Resembling the blood-writing campaign, the “Have a Heart” campaign was sarcastic: it entailed medical philanthropy (altruistic organ donation) from Bhopali children; those that had been denied care from the government, to the highest functionary of the government—the Indian prime minister. The paper hearts offered a metacommentary on the indissociable relation between the gift of blood as a ritual of sincerity on the one hand, and of graft and dissimulation on the other. In other words, if we saw how the heart vis-à-vis Hussaini might carry the weight of an “inner essence” of a person, in the Bhopali action we see how its absence can index a most crippling biomoral deficit. It is no accident that the heart is not a replaceable organ; in a biological sense, its “donation” implies death for the donor. In a biomoral sense, the absence of a heart indicates a moral death. In a
faux-philanthropic gesture that was both playful and sobering, the poorest and most medically deprived donated a pseudo-organ to the person they saw as responsible for their deprivation. The “philanthropists” here were those without the resources to gift in the first place.

While Cohen points out the symbolic valence of blood donation as a marker of solidarity in early postcolonial India, he goes on to argue that such an integrative imagination is succeeded by one that is extractive and exclusionary (Cohen 2011a; 2011b; 2013). That is, if blood was linked to an ethics of secular citizenship in the heady first decades of decolonization, as the promises of caste and class solidarity failed to materialize, the imaginary of a forcibly extracted organ took center stage in the country’s disillusioned later years. Cohen’s ethnographic engagements in contemporary India detail the illegal organ trade economy, as the poor sacrifice bodily material for temporary relief from debt. The gift from a child to the prime minister—from the politically “naive” to the highest functionary of the state—refigures this practice of bodily deprivation to powerful effect. The faux donation of the hearts revealed the intimacy of donation and extraction under duress and identified a biomoral pathology in the recipient of the gift—a corrupt government unwilling to relate to its citizens.

**Rethinking Bodily Evidence**

While so far we have detailed blood writing as an unstable and shifting art of moral persuasion, the most successful of the activist strategies was an indefinite hunger strike. In beginning this chapter, we gestured to the particular capability of the fast as an activist form to index a conviction unto death; while bloodletting promises transparency, it very rarely evidences the same principled intimacy with death. Yet we indicated the breakdown of the fast as a medium of communicating political sincerity. The Bhopali activists at Jantar Mantar were well aware of the deficit of public trust in this activist mode. Since they shared the bathrooms at Jantar Mantar with other protesting groups, they were privy to a common practice among politicians ostensibly on hunger strike: privately devouring glucose biscuits in the enclosed stalls. How then were they able to rescue the fast from accusations of corruption and dissemblance?

The 2009 strike was led by nine of the more experienced activists at Jantar Mantar; several were experienced in the form, having conducted similar fasts in preceding years (figure 8). The only nourishment they allowed themselves was water mixed with hydration salts—a concession to the scorching heat of the Delhi summer. The veteran hunger strikers among them told me how the first few days were the most trying. If one could tide over the first five days, the body stopped
producing the sensation of hunger. By the second week, the bodies of the hunger strikers had begun to produce ketones. Ketones are compounds produced by the body when carbohydrate intake drops dangerously. They assist in the metabolic breaking down of fatty acids for energy in states of fasting and starvation. While ketones are not known to be harmful by themselves, prolonged production might lead to ketosis or ketoacidosis—conditions in which ketone production has reached dangerous and unregulated levels. After three weeks, these conditions could lead to a variety of possibly fatal complications, including the disastrous consequences of protein metabolism. A report from the thirteenth day of the hunger strike showed already dangerous levels of ketone production among two of the hunger strikers at the Bhopal site. Thus, over these weeks, the hunger strikers allowed their bodies to produce a substance that simultaneously kept them alive and could have led to their death. The levels of this toxic product—ketones—were recorded meticulously every day by a roster of doctors who had agreed to come to the site to monitor biomedical measures (figure 9). It was precisely through this quantification and medicalization of the hunger strike that the Bhopali activists could validate its authenticity and fatal possibility, as opposed to those that undercut it with private eating. At the same time, ketones—like blood—became a scientific mode through which a previous history of biomedical triage was con-
tested. One might read this practice as both guided by and critical of the increasing metric-driven orientation of public health, where the bare facts of bodily vulnerability must speak in numbers to evidence the quality or lack of care. Regardless, during the strike, the body became a medium of communication, authenticated and disseminated through the medical document. The deployment of ketones through fasting is crucial to understanding the substantial politics of the fast. It shows an innovative resignification of fasting as itself a verifiable ritual. If the verifiability of blood extractions helped the practice accrue the moral weight of authenticity and sincerity, the hunger strike indicated a fascinating response. Like blood, ketones were demonstrable and verifiable enactments of the fast. In much the same way as blood, ketones were a gift that produced an insistent and urgent demand of intimacy, reciprocity, and obligation from its addressee. In the same way as blood, ketones addressed a deficit in public trust about activist mobilization (a trust eroded in part by the participation of corrupt politicians), promising a new economy of transparency and sincerity.

After twenty-two days and close to the imminent possibility of long-term medical damage to their bodies, the activists began a relay, with a fresh set of strikers
taking over from the previous ones. Finally, after 172 days of relayed hunger strikes, the Indian minister for chemicals and fertilizers arrived at the site, with sweets for the hunger strikers and an announcement of an empowered government commission that would look into Bhopal—a key demand of the campaign. Previous government commissions had lacked the ability to take immediate action; the introduction of the term “empowered” encoded the promise of swift redress. Among this and other victories, the negotiated truce also put in place a plan to pursue legal and criminal liabilities against Union Carbide and Dow Chemical (the current owner of the subsidiary), as well as a plan of action for the rehabilitation of the gas victims. In the years since, many of these negotiated declarations fell far short of their promise. This has led to repeated hunger strikes, actions, and campaigns in recent years, both in Jantar Mantar and in Bhopal; the story of governmental neglect and partial legal recognitions continues to unfold in the present.

**Blood, Period**

In 2015, the controversial Indian-Canadian artist and poet Rupi Kaur posted a self-portrait on Instagram that pictured her seemingly asleep, face turned away toward a wall, wearing pajamas stained by a spot of menstrual blood. This self-portrait was part of Kaur’s final year university project that she had developed in collaboration with her sister Prabh. Their intention was to provoke a response from the social media site and its users—which it did. Instagram deleted the post within twenty-four hours, but not before Kaur had received a barrage of abusive threats in the post’s thread. She then posted the photo once again, checking to see if the site’s deletion had been an error. This time, Instagram removed the post almost immediately. In response, Kaur turned to other social media platforms to express her outrage. She posted the following statement about this short-lived social media visual experiment on her website:

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i bleed each month to help make humankind a possibility. my womb is home to the divine. a source of life for our species. whether i choose to create or not. but very few times it is seen that way. in older civilizations this blood was considered holy. in some it still is. but a majority of people. societies. and communities shun this natural process. some are more comfortable with the pornification of women. the sexualization of women. the violence and degradation of women than this. they cannot be bothered to express their disgust about all that. but will be angered
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and bothered by this. We menstruate and they see it as dirty. Attention seeking. Sick. A burden. As if this process is less natural than breathing. As if it is not a bridge between this universe and the last. As if this process is not love. Labour. Life. Selfless and strikingly beautiful. \textsuperscript{18}

Kaur’s controversial self-portrait was one of a series. Other photographs included images of her sitting on a toilet and dropping a sanitary pad into a bin, of blood in a pristine white toilet bowl, of a white washing machine with blood-stained clothes ready to be washed, and of drops of blood entering a shower drain flanked by her feet.

Responding in part to the widespread public controversy around Kaur’s project, anthropologist Chris Bobel suggests that 2015 was “The Year the Period Went Public” (Bobel 2015). Bobel borrowed the title of her short piece from an article in Cosmopolitan, the popular global magazine marketed to women. In playing with Cosmopolitan’s title, Bobel signaled how a long history of feminist activism around menstruation—a central theme of her ethnographic work—had suddenly become mainstream. In other words, Kaur’s project was not unprecedented. Menstrual blood has been a key bodily substance in feminist activism since at least the mid-to-late twentieth century (Bobel 2010). Kaur’s aesthetic protest echoed the stance of two generations of feminists who have fought to destigmatize the bodily process and contest its pathologization. In this, Kaur’s work aligns itself with particular groups of menstrual activists that Bobel studies who seek to establish that menstruation is not only normal but also evidence of women’s intimacy with a deeper, natural world—in Kaur’s description, “a bridge between this universe and the last.”

At the same time, what was different about Kaur’s entry into this longer history of menstrual activism was that she was a woman of color reaching out to a diverse global audience. As Bobel’s work has shown, menstrual activists in the United States have been and are predominantly white (Bobel 2010, 10). Bobel conjectures that the absence of women of color from the movement has much to do with a historically derived politics of respectability. Drawing on the work of Evelyn Higginbotham, Bobel suggests that one response of women of color to racism has been to mask and mute their sexuality, rejecting historical constructions of their bodies as promiscuous, overly fertile, and sexually available. Such a politics of respectability, Bobel contends, has made it difficult for women of color to enter into the activist modalities of exposure and celebration that characterize menstrual activism. Further, Bobel shows how feeder feminist movements that comprise menstrual activism have traditionally been dominated by white women, adding another barrier to the entry of racially diverse activists. In this context,
one might think of Kaur’s work as an effort to bring a new demographic with whom she is especially popular—a global cohort of women of color—into an activist fold from which they might have previously felt alienated.

Over the last decade, Kaur’s project has become more the norm than the exception; a significant number of women of color have joined the project of menstrual activism and similarly captured media attention. For example, Daniela Manica and Clarice Rios write about the performances of Spanish artist Isa Sanz and Brazilian artists Maria Matricardi and Carol Azvedo, among others, who use menstrual blood as an aesthetic medium of protest (Manica and Rios 2017). And the Indian diaspora has been a big part of this diversification of menstrual activism. In 2011, Indian-Canadian Miki Agrawal (who had started an underwear company to replace tampons) drew intense public controversy when she claimed that the New York transportation authority had tried to censor her menstruation-positive advertisements (Bellafante 2016). In 2015, Indian-American musician Kiran Gandhi ran the London Marathon without pads, to bring attention to the global taboo and shame that accrues to menstruation. And in 2017, Indian-American Amika George founded the #freeperiods movement in Britain, bringing attention to “period poverty” and the unaffordability of sanitary pads and even drawing a pledge from the Labour Party to commit £10 million to the issue (Ram 2018). In her ethnographic work, Bobel found a range of politics in mobilizations around menstruation in the United States: from feminist-spiritualist celebrations of blood as a source of female power, to consumer-rights and environmental-justice advocates, and radical third-wave queer and anticorporate activists. Mobilizations around menstruation across the Indian diaspora similarly occupy a diverse range of political positions. Kaur’s project draws most apparently from the feminist-spiritualist celebration of womanhood that Bobel describes as a significant constituency of menstrual activism in the United States. Miki Agrawal’s politics aligns more closely with a global discourse of socially minded business entrepreneurs. Amika George comes closest to the more radically minded activists that Bobel describes, as she frames access to menstrual hygiene as an issue of social welfare and class politics.

While many of menstrual activism’s celebrity figures are in the Indian diaspora, our particular interest here is in how the movement has taken shape in the mainland. In 2015, the poet and writer Nabina Das began a piece in the Economic and Political Weekly titled “Blood, Period” with the claim: “Suddenly, blood is in the news” (Das 2015, 95). In part, Das was responding to Kaur’s Instagram post. The photograph reminded Das of a widely publicized sexual assault on a Delhi public bus in 2012. The incident set off a series of national and international activist campaigns that ultimately resulted in some limited legal reforms (Roychowdhury 2015). Das, however, was drawn to a very particular aspect of the attack:
the spillage of blood on the bus that the perpetrators claimed that they had been shocked by and had even attempted to clean. This spilling of blood during an incident of sexual violence led Das to suggest that the misogyny responsible for rape was a product of the same patriarchal structures that lashed out against Kaur’s aesthetic display. Through blood, Das linked two separate aspects of the relation between gender and blood: the substance could serve as an object and medium of feminist celebration while at the same time evidence and dramatize the violence of sexual assault.

Das was not alone in recognizing this political polyvalence of blood as an aesthetic substance. In early 2015, the same year as Kaur’s project, German teenager Elona Kastrati hung sanitary pads all around Karlsruhe with messages such as “Imagine if men were as disgusted with rape as they are with periods.” Her campaign—Pads against Sexism—caught the imagination of university students in Delhi. In March of the same year, a group of students from the city’s Jamia Millia Islamia University reproduced the strategy, hanging sanitary pads on trees, walls, and campus buildings. When university officials took the pads down, the students took the campaign outside campus and around the city. Over the next weeks, the campaign spread to other universities across the country. The messages written on the pads contained variations on Kastrati’s original theme. They included “Period blood is not impure, your thoughts are,” “Menstruation is natural, rape is not,” “Streets of Delhi belong to women too,” “Rapists rape people, not outfits,” “Kanya kumari, gandi soch tumhari—You talk about virginity, when your thoughts are dirty,” and “Red here is just paint. But rape draws real blood.”

For the activists Bobel follows in the United States and in the Indian diaspora, the targets of intervention include the pathologization of female bodies, heteronormative discourses around menstruation, and environmental and anticorporate justice. The Pads against Sexism campaigners in India share the aesthetic deployment of blood as a political strategy with their global and diasporic counterparts. And like their diasporic counterparts, their public display of menstrual symbols—red paint, sanitary pads—makes public a bodily domain usually understood as shameful and private. At the same time, this campaign identified as its target a controversy that has dominated mainstream media attention and public feminist mobilizations in India in recent years—namely, sexual assault. That is, while sexual violence is one of many concerns for the global and diasporic menstrual activists, it has emerged as the overwhelmingly central focus of attention for campaigns within India. Specifically, Pads against Sexism emerged in the aftermath of many other recent student mobilizations around sexual assault. In 2014, the “Let There Be Noise” protests after allegations of an on-campus sexual assault had led to the resignation of the vice chancellor of Jadavpur University in West Bengal. After the Pads against Sexism action in Delhi, students at Jadavpur University
quickly mobilized around the same strategy. The same year also saw the “Kiss of Love” protests against the policing of public intimacy. The campaign began on the campus of Ernakulam Law College in Kerala and then spread to universities all across the country. Nabina Das and the Pads against Sexism campaigners in Delhi drew upon these prior mobilizations and adopted their framing of sexual violence as an immediate and urgent problem.

While Pads against Sexism attracted some short-term public visibility, another menstrual activist campaign in India has had a much more sustained public and political impact. In 2006, the Indian Young Lawyers Association filed a public interest litigation seeking the entry of women in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. As anthropologists Filippo and Caroline Osella have described, Sabarimala is a South Indian all-male pilgrimage site, whose deity Ayyappan is hypermale, since he is the offspring of two male gods (Osella and Osella 2003). The temple has traditionally denied entry to women of menstruating age, citing the god Ayyappan’s perennial celibacy, which leads to his disinterest in women devotees. The long convention was legally authorized in 1965 in the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship Act. The issue had come before the Kerala High Court in 1991. A canny move at the time by the head priest reinforced the practice of gender discrimination in temple entry. The priest had reasoned that “custom” dictated that only devotees who had practiced penance for forty-one days were allowed in the temple, and that menstruating women were temporally and biologically incapable of maintaining such a period of purity (T. Singh 2016). As is often the case with litigations in the slow-moving Indian legal system, the 2006 petition was heard and debated several times. And over the next eight years, it seemed as if the issue had lost momentum. However, a set of incidents in 2015 catapulted the issue to international visibility. In 2014, a woman traveling in a state transport bus was forced out as it headed toward the temple. When she sought to file a police complaint, the local police refused to recognize her claim. A few days later, five female protestors rode the same bus but were detained by the local police before they could complete their journey. As Chitra Prasanna describes, the incident laid bare the inextricability of religious, patriarchal, and police authority in the region (Prasanna 2016).

These protests might well have remained a brief, localized reaction if the temple’s board president—Prayar Gopalakrishnan—had not offered a novel solution to the problem: “These days there are machines that can scan bodies and check for weapons. There will be a day when a machine is invented to scan if it is the ‘right time’ (not menstruating) for a woman to enter the temple. When that machine is invented, we will talk about letting women inside.” This tone-deaf response was widely reported by the media and catalyzed a national backlash. In late 2015, a twenty-year-old student from Punjab—Nikita Azad—posted an open
letter online to Gopalakrishnan protesting his remarks. Her letter was accompanied by a picture of her holding the words “Happy to Bleed” written in red across two sanitary pads (Azad 2015). Her letter was remarkable in how it expressed devout traditional values, along with her list of a range of pilgrimage sites that she had already visited with her family. She also sought to make clear that she had always carried her sanitary pads in a discrete black bag so as to “protect her honor” and never let her male relatives know when she was menstruating. In other words, she had “tried my best to uphold the sacred culture of our society.” Why then, she asked, was she made to bear the responsibility of a curse—the murder of a Brahmin by Indra—in which she had not participated? (Azad was referring to a common origin myth of the ban on menstruation.) All she knew, she added, was that “blood flows out.” Azad then turned a corner and, in consonance with the Pads against Sexism campaign, connected the issue directly to sexual violence:

We live in a nation, “a democratic nation,” where a woman is raped every twenty minutes, and every second woman is subject to domestic violence. According to you, perhaps the reason behind these is also blood. As you have given the solution to protect the sanctity of temple by not allowing bleeding women inside, do you propose that bleeding women should be caged in homes to prevent such incidents?

In a follow-up letter in 2016, Azad further clarified the importance of linking menstrual activism with the ubiquity of sexual violence:

A man with equally active reproductive organs is allowed inside the temple while a woman is not. Is semen purer than menstrual blood? However, for us, it is not a question of pure v/s impure or men v/s women. Our fight begins from our homes and workplaces. Relatives who beat our mothers to abort us, to in-laws who burn us, to those who rape us, to temples that denigrate us, it is a struggle inherent to the struggle against patriarchy.

With the 2015 letter, Azad began an online campaign with the hashtag #HappytoBleed. The campaign gathered force and enlisted India’s foremost feminist lawyer, Indira Jaising. They then filed a petition to the Supreme Court of India to be made party to the legal dispute over the temple (Rajagopal 2016). Partly in response to the public media attention that the campaign received, the Supreme Court brought the case of temple entry out of its long stasis in early 2016. The campaign has continued to receive sustained media attention since that time. Late in 2016, the Washington Post reported that an estimated five hundred women inspired by the campaign traveled by bus to Sabarimala to “storm” its sacred altar (Gowen 2016). That year also saw the return of the Marxist Left Democratic Front
government to Kerala that reversed the prior government’s opposition to women’s entry to the temple. At the time of writing, the matter of temple entry remains under the adjudication at the apex court.

While the resonances between Kaur’s art campaign and the Pads against Sexism and Happy to Bleed campaigns are clear, there remains one key difference. The first two campaigns took inspiration from a long history of menstruation-related activism whose vocabularies were explicitly secular and global. They framed the issue as one of the right of women everywhere in the world to menstruate without shame or stigma. The Happy to Bleed campaign adopted a different citational register. It approached the question of menstrual freedom from within the vocabularies of constraint that are operative in the experience of many groups of women in India. The anthropologist Sarah Lamb writes about meeting a woman on a bus pilgrimage to the holy city of Puri in Orissa (Lamb 2005). Controversy erupted at the pilgrimage one morning when menstrual rags were found near the guesthouse in which they all stayed for a night. The matter was dropped after a while. Lamb talked to the woman who was menstruating and found that she knew that she might begin her period on the journey but had really wanted to go on pilgrimage for a long time and took the chance that she might be able to conceal its onset. The woman added that she believed no sin or harm would accrue (dos) because her devotion was pure, even if the substance was not. This conversation led Lamb to reflect on her ethnographic work in Bengal, where menstruation played a key role in demarcating gender and caste boundaries. Lamb also looked back to the canonical work of Mary Douglas on purity and pollution and found that examples from India were crucial in developing the anthropological argument that impurity and pollution had often to do with violations of bodily boundaries and were therefore often tied to the bodies of menstruating and reproductive women (Douglas 1966 [2002]). Douglas’s understanding has been refracted through the anthropological scholarship on India that demonstrates the close linkage between menstrual blood and the policing of caste and gender boundaries (Leslie 1989; Marglin 1977; Thompson 1985). At the same time, Lamb developed the work of Marriott and Inden we referred to earlier in this chapter to move beyond Douglas’s insistence on the seemingly static correlation between substances and social order. In her discussion of the socialization of menstruation, Veena Das too argues for a dialectical relationship between the control of bodily boundaries and the possibilities of flux and transformation, as she traces it in a life course. Thus, both Lamb and Das emphasize the ethnosophological insight that substances are continuously transacted and constantly transform persons and their place in social hierarchies (V. Das 1988). And both document the small and furtive acts—transacted through veiled utterances and glances—through
which women inhabit and subtly resist kinship and ritual gender norms around menstruation.

Unlike the practices of resistance, concealment, and negotiation at the everyday level that interest Das and Lamb, the campaigns we have examined here are mediatized political projects directed at disruptive and systemic change. They take place not in the give and take of everyday life but rather are performative and aesthetic strategies at a heightened and explicit register of a confrontation with norms. At the same time, this activist project is reflective of the ethnosophiological insistence on flux, contestation, and transformation in the transaction of bodily substances. As we suggested in the beginning of this chapter, reformist and political projects that deploy blood imagine a rupture in the relation between substance and code and seek their realignment. While the projects of most diasporic activists and the Pads against Sexism campaign adopt a global, secular vocabulary in an outright rejection of “tradition,” the Happy to Bleed campaign frames its intervention as reform. In her letter, Azad emphasizes that the “pollution” of menstruation and the “purity” of sacral space are not fundamentally contradictory but have been put in opposition by patriarchal conventions. In other words, much like the Nirankari activists we discussed earlier in this chapter, Azad suggests that substance and code are in misalignment. But differently from the Nirankari reformists who believe that substance and code have fallen out of alignment in contemporary times, Azad does not participate in a narrative of decline. Rather, she suggests that “traditional” norms around menstruation are incorrect from the point of view of a pious, feminist politics, even as they have been historically durable. In other words, even as menstrual blood is a substance out of place in the temple and its potential understood as polluting, the fact of convention does not in itself mean that the substance-code relation is in proper alignment. Further, her project then is not to throw out tradition entirely and reject religious conventions but rather more subtly to realign the substance-code relation in a way that menstrual blood no longer enacts temple pollution. Finally, the strategy through which she seeks to achieve this realignment is through the mediatization of menstrual blood as writing. By circulating a representation of menstrual blood in the domain of a visual public, Azad aims to achieve its authorization in the public space of the temple.

Further, we argue that the transformative alignment of substance and code in the Happy to Bleed campaign has had a persuasive impact also because it has deep roots in the region’s political style. As Robin Jeffrey has shown, the lower-caste strategy of demanding temple entry as a cipher for equality and inclusion had proved extremely successful during the colonial period in the same region as the Sabarimala temple. From the 1860s to the 1940s, politically mobilized lower-caste
college-educated men deployed the strategy of temple entry to widen the popularity of the anticaste movement. The strategy of inclusivity proved radically successful, rallying low-caste peasants and workers and finally leading to the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 (Jeffrey 1976). Azad’s campaign for the entry of menstruating women to the Sabarimala temple astutely drew upon the long and successful history of political styles in the region that had previously sought in their own way to reorient the relationship between substantial purity and pollution in public spaces. The ethnosociological insight about the potentiality of flux and transformation thus plays out powerfully in two arenas that are explicitly about the control of boundaries—bodily and spatial.

While we have focused in this section on the activist association of menstruation with sexual violence and segregation, we would be remiss not to point out another mythic-religious imagination of menstruation in the region that understands bleeding as a source of divine, female power. Just as anthropologists have described the violence inflicted upon menstruating women across a range of contexts, they have also argued against interpreting cultural imaginations of menstruation as always repressive of female agency (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Scholars working in India have been keenly aware of the double-edged power and pollution that accrues around the substance. For instance, Nikita Azad’s reference to the relation between menstrual blood and Hinduism’s original sin of the god Indra’s killing of a Brahmin is more complicated than it first appears. Wendy Doniger traces a Vedic iteration of the myth that describes menstrual blood as a route through which Indira’s sin is expiated: women accept a portion of Indra’s guilt upon his request as menstrual blood and receive in return the gift of reproduction and sexual pleasure (Doniger 1976). Thus, the substance bears both the sin of an original impurity as well as the powerful and generative capacity of its expiation. Contemporary anthropologists too have documented examples of this intimacy of power and pollution in menstrual blood. For example, Jeanne Openshaw documents the practice of the ingestion of menstrual blood among the bauls of Bengal, as the substance is understood as a vital gift and a marker of great abundance (Openshaw 2002). But perhaps the most well-known example of the potentially generative power of menstrual blood in India is through its association with the Kamakhya temple in the state of Assam. As Hugh Urban writes (2008), the goddess Kamakhya is an embodiment of divine female power (sakti). According to several mythic sources, the temple is sited on the goddess’s sexual organ, which fell from the heavens when the overwhelming power of her body threatened to destroy the universe. As Urban explains, the contemporary goddess and temple represent a mixture of various religious traditions and their historical unfoldings—indigenous, tribal, and brahmanic. When she menstruates for three days each year, the temple is closed for her blood’s impurity. At the same time,
however, the same dangerous blood is understood as the source of life and creative energy; when the temple is reopened on the fourth day, red cloths representing the bloody flow are distributed to assembled devotees. Urban’s broader project argues that the kind of power embodied in the goddess’s blood erodes “modern Western distinctions between the religious and the political, and between the spiritual and the sensual.” Instead, he finds, categories of religion, politics, and sexuality have come to be historically interlinked around the temple in Assam, as the authority of male priests and kings depends vitally upon the female power of the temple (531).

The activist projects around menstrual blood we describe here do not explicitly evoke the mythic sources of its divine power. Of the projects we have described, only Rupi Kaur’s invokes the divine, cosmic power of menstrual blood. And even then, it does not do so through explicit reference to Indic traditions. And even as Azad evokes tradition, she writes of it as a “curse” that needs to be reevaluated and reformed. But we argue that in deploying the substance as a material and medium of protest, they implicitly express the double valence of blood identified by Urban in relation to the accrual of political power in Kamakhya. In a register they self-identify as Indian-feminist, the Happy to Bleed activists seek to reform through a reformulation of blood as substance-code. In this, their intervention resonates with those of the other activists in this chapter: they recognize the polyvalence of blood to connote violence and enforce segregation, while at the same time they deploy the substance as a medium of truth and a mechanism of exposure.

Blood as Critique

We have described a wide range of substantial activism in this chapter; the actors that have deployed blood as a material for critique have included the Sant Niran-karis, party politicians, Shihan Hussaini, activists from Bhopal, and menstrual activists. All of the practices we describe employ a partonomic script. That is, they address a prior deficit—in familial and national relations, or in political patronage and care. In the case of faux philanthropy—the Bhopali gifts of blood and hearts—the real and metaphorical bodily gifts seek to redress a prior failure in the extension of a biosocial relation of care. In the Bhopali case of faux philanthropy, the sarcastic undertone is in sharp contrast with the sincere intent of the Nirankaris. In the case of Hussaini and the Congress’s “fake” camp, we encounter differential performances of transparency. Among these latter forms, the Bhopali faux philanthropic gift comes closest to resembling Shihan Hussaini’s gift of portraits to Jayalalitha. Both share the hope that the excess of the gesture might compel a response. While such a compelled response might not promise a
fundamental biomoral change in the recipient of the gift (an aspiration the Nirankaris cannot shed), it serves at least as a critique of the denial of prior patronage and care. In other words, while the Nirankaris’ partonomic script rests on a sincere faith in the ability of the partonomic gift to enact biomoral change, Hussaini’s gift and the Bhopali actions rely on the duress that blood ties imposed upon the recipients of the gifts.

Philanthropy and faux philanthropy blur at the edges, but the distinctions between them are important. While both Hussaini and the Bhopali activists hope to put pressure on political figures, the substance-techniques of the Bhopali activists enact a further subversion: they undercut the association between blood and nationalism, between shedding and sacrificial devotion. In the broader sanguinary politics of contemporary India, many kinds of nationalist gestures of giving, spilling, and sharing blood contribute to both broad and narrow visions of a secular nation-state. Hussaini’s portraiture shares more in common with the nationalist portraits of Gupta discussed in chapter 2, since both seek to enlarge rather than curtail the power of those that they portray. While Hussaini might seek to compel and direct this power toward his own end, his intention is not to demonstrate the corruption of Jayalalitha but rather to become part of and benefit from it. The Bhopali faux-philanthropic gestures enact a far deeper criticism of political relations by seeking to reveal its biomoral pathology. In this, the Bhopali actions form the perfect conjuncture of the “fake” and “true” blood donation camp. They are inherently and intentionally paradoxical: they draw power from the indexical quality of blood to evidence sincerity, but they do so to communicate sarcasm and cynicism about the addressee. As a partonomic form, the gift of a heart is best described not as a part given that indicates a whole not given, but rather a part given that indicates a deep corruption in the part-whole relation—a corruption not easily remedied through either exemplary or compulsive philanthropy. It is as much a ritual of defamation as it is a ritual of verification; it aims as much to reveal the biomoral pathology of its addressee as it does to authenticate the addressee.

In focusing on the how of activism as much as the why, we have showed how donated and received bodily substances in different iterations are both reformist and remedial, extractive and poisonous. Disease is indexed by a disjunction between the substance-code relation, magnified upon the body of the putative Indian family, the divided postcolonial nation, and the corrupt postliberalization state. Its cure relies on an invocation of malaise, followed by the philanthropic donation that realigns cause, character, and the materiality of the substance at hand. We have called this form of exchange partonomic to characterize how that which is given indicates the whole that is withheld, thereby instantiating a mode of philanthropic critique.
Yet at every instance, substance-exchanges reveal the fragility of such scenes of critique. Thus, Nirankari blood donations sought to recuperate the family to the end of a common future humanity at the same time as they glorified a this-worldly satguru. The blood camps of political rallies too walk a fine line between sincerity and self-interest, between the camp organizers’ desire for a universal philanthropic good and the messy extractive modes of realpolitik. The blood writing of Bhopali children made this relation between instruction and corruption starkly explicit, where activists deployed the material index of sincerity to communicate sarcastic critique. Finally, the hunger strike deployed another bodily material—ketones—to return an index of sincerity that the blood as an activist medium was perceived to have lost. The material giving of blood and the metaphoric donation of organs allow us to point to ambivalence and fragility within philanthropic practices. The bodily gift is both a marker of conviction and the bearer of its own undoing.

In other words, hemo-political critique carries with it a circular threat; the utopic and the corrupt are joined in a dangerous, substantial proximity. The promise of a future through the gift is fraught with the danger of invoking violent pasts and revealing a divided present. The blood gift particularly points to a breakdown of the substance-code relation, a malaise at once material, biological, and political. But in the practices of its giving, its pedagogic and reformist aims never escape its messy origins. To understand the work of critique, then, is to understand its conjunctive tense—a fragile state between embodied critique and bodily extraction in which the scene of critique is never cleanly detached from the scene of corruption.

In the reformed (i.e., voluntary, non-remunerated) mode of blood collection, one does not know but may imagine one’s recipients. This widening aligns blood donation with the idea of service and sacrifice to broader imagined communities—the nation, the abstract entity of “society,” and of a “family” larger than immediate kin. We showed how the bodily philanthropy of reformed blood donation is made congruent with both reformist agendas as well as with political party activists and other dubious characters seeking access to the ethical surpluses generated by voluntary blood donation, grafting the aura and status of such practices. This trajectory of the sanguinary politics is thus in tune with Jonathan Spencer’s observation that one aspect of the opposition between “dirty politics” and imaginary antipolitics “is its constant productivity—new leaders constantly seek new ways to take the politics out of politics, yet each attempt ends in a different kind of failure as the amoral world of the political inexorably tarnishes the shiny new possibilities” (2008, 626). In the Bhopali case, writing with blood performs an interior, biomoral truth that enfolds a further threat; it aims to compel a response that promises not just political patronage but an acknowledgment of toxicity within the body politic. In each deployment of
practices of bodily giving over, that which is given threatens to spin “out of place,” causing witnesses to reflect on gifts not given and relations not established. These substances “out of place” gesture to an economy of recognition and misrecognition of substance ties and the unevenly distributed possibilities of political intimacy. As anthropologists know well, practices of gifting are hardly ever innocent. In the gesture of forming and reforming human communities, gifts reveal the vulnerability of social forms and stake the possibility of their deformation. As blood circulates in the social body in North India, we suggest, it acts both as remedy and poison; practices of blood donation hope to perform reformations of a national imaginary, while in the same gesture, counter-practices steeped in irony reveal the fragility of sanguinary visions.