

## Foreword

IN *DISQUIETING GIFTS*, Erica Bornstein both observes and makes her way within the interlocking social networks that mediate between global registers of humanitarianism and what she calls the “business of everyday life,” which is itself shaped by pressing material needs, culturally inflected impulses, and changing historical conditions. Her point of orientation is New Delhi in an economically liberalizing India that has come to embody a set of contradictions in which the logics of human rights, democratization, and free markets have underwritten the emergence of a real middle class (not to mention a class of now-famous technology entrepreneurs) without providing clear answers for India’s enduring poverty. Despite having one of the fastest growing economies in the world, there is a massive gap between the institutions that comprise social welfare bureaucracies and the sheer magnitude of need, especially in India’s cities. As Bornstein explains, this gap—which opens up as much between the promises of economic liberalization and its consequences as between the state and its inefficiencies—is being filled by several different kinds of social, political, and religious philanthropy. Much as religious and moral mutual aid organizations rushed to the assistance of the passive victims of the Industrial Revolution (think Manchester in the 1840s), so too in contemporary urban India, where both neighbors and outsiders take it upon themselves to try to alleviate the experiences of vulnerability and suffering through a thousand “small gestures,” as Bornstein puts it—culturally articulated actions that are often “spontaneous, informal, unmediated, and habitual.”

This book is both a deeply reflective and deeply personal ethnography of these overlapping cultures of giving and receiving, one that also illuminates a central paradox of the contemporary life of human rights. As Bornstein notes, as elsewhere, the discourse of human rights made its mark in India during the early

years after the Cold War. Transnational human rights nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental agencies played their part in shaping national debates through which endemic social and economic problems were reinscribed within an ethical grammar that provided new grounds for self-reflection and social and political action. Key to this grammar was an account of the abstract human person that suggested a radical normative equality. Moreover, much like earlier cosmopolitan ethics, the rhetoric of the newly reinvigorated ethics of human rights suggested a stark and unmistakable ethical hierarchy: one's primary and most enduring commitments should be to the whole, all humans, as expansive and utopian as this moral ideal might be. Smaller circles of commitment were treated with ever-increasing degrees of suspicion so that by the time one's obligations were circumscribed by, say, the boundaries of neighborhood or extended family, one's ethical position had become dangerously untenable.

This is the double-layered nexus that interconnects both international human rights—primarily as law and political institutions—and humanitarianism: a horizontal conception of the person that is all-inclusive and the equally horizontal ethics that it implies. But here is where the nexus between the two breaks down. The success or failure of human rights compliance very much depends on the state, which means that the nation-state is responsible for reforming society and creating institutions for moral education that ultimately, and paradoxically, are meant to transcend the state. It is not surprising, therefore, that well beyond the constraints of both economics and neoliberal political ideology a chasm continues to separate a state like India from its human rights obligations to the most vulnerable of its citizens. But as Bornstein demonstrates, the international and transnational institutions of humanitarianism—while animated by a similar global ethics—are not constrained in the same ways. They constitute an important part of what she calls the “global economy of giving,” and they are less concerned with the long-term programmatic dimensions of the post-Cold War normative revolution of which human rights is in the vanguard. Instead, their concerns are more immediate, simpler, defined by the most pressing of material needs: bodily security, food and water, medical care, shelter. And perhaps more importantly, the global economy of giving is also constituted by national, regional, and local institutions and actors, whose motivations for giving might or might not harmonize with the global ethics of their transnational counterparts.

Even more consequential for our broader understanding of the relationship between human rights and humanitarianism is Bornstein's analysis of the

tension between the kinds of expectations that surround giving and those that surround rights-claiming in India. Indians are informed—by both the state and global institutions—that they are rights-bearers who are entitled to make legitimate claims on various institutions of the state. But as elsewhere, effective rights-claiming is for most a practical impossibility. Instead, people must rely on the social and religious networks of obligation to meet what John Burton has described as basic human needs. Although participation in these networks does not, as Bornstein explains, give rise to rights-as-entitlements in the strict sense, the results are more immediate and usually more visceral. And these networks of giving do something else that rights-claiming cannot: they reaffirm the value and meaning of quite local categories of belonging—those that people actually inhabit. This is what makes Bornstein’s study of humanitarianism so “disquieting” for both scholars and practitioners of human rights: giving cannot be compelled or legislated by the state; it takes places within social networks that value relationality over the individual; the humanitarian impulse does not usually ground broad programs for social change; and yet the rhythms of giving and receiving are what define for many people the expected—and thus organic—practice of everyday life.

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