

FROM EARTHQUAKES TO TSUNAMIS, from AIDS to hunger, our moral horizon is increasingly global. Televised images of catastrophes around the world make it difficult to ignore remote suffering as distinct from one's immediate concerns. All disasters, in an important sense, are global, and as such, our attention is drawn, justifiably, to the victims of misfortune. Yet the story often fails to include the other side of the equation—those who want to help the victims: poor students sending money for those in need, activists struggling to help the injured, wealthy philanthropists seeking to make a difference. The subtle shades of humanitarian efforts—differentiated by varied imperatives, impulses, and systems of obligation and assistance—remain less visible. Alongside the heroic efforts of professional aid workers and the dramatic suffering of disaster victims are those who provide care inaudibly, without recognition and without status.

Humanitarianism occurs in particular settings, and it is in such a setting that my story unfolds. Winter morning sun warmed me and a sari-clad widow in white as she sorted biscuits for tea. Hundreds of girls would partake of tea that January morning in 2005, with biscuits provided by an anonymous donor. The woman had been working and living at the Hindu reform orphanage in south Delhi for the thirty-five years since her husband had died. Although the orphanage was a residential school for girls, primarily supported by donations of sponsors who paid for their education, it also received assistance from the Government of India (GOI), and relied on the labor of destitute women, as well as on the efforts of volunteers, who, inspired by religious piety, gave their time. The orphanage was at once a realm of Hindu *dān*, a form of

nonreciprocal giving that does not demand a return; a site of state welfare, where citizens enjoyed certain rights; and a place where volunteers responded to social obligations and the impulse to help others. Destitute women lived with the girls and oversaw their care. Volunteers arrived weekly to distribute food and drop off clothes. Some visited regularly to care for the cows that provided milk for the school. Others made monthly payments to sponsor a girl's education, or eventually to sponsor her wedding. The orphanage was not a permanent home for many of the girls; most had a living parent who had placed them in the institution because of poverty. One could interpret the institution as a form of state-sponsored social welfare. The girls, as citizens of India, had rights and entitlements; it was the obligation of the state to care for its citizens. Yet the volunteers who donated their time did not fit into this frame. They practiced what in India is called *seva* (service). The sponsors who supported a girl's education or wedding did so through the Hindu lens of *dān*. As to the women who worked at the institution, some were welfare recipients who took refuge at the orphanage school, and others had renounced their families to serve society.

Most scholars of economic development, philanthropy, and humanitarianism would agree that sponsoring the education of an orphan or giving to beggars on an urban street is not usually considered to be in the same category as the institutional complex of international humanitarian aid. Yet the two forms are linked through the gift—connecting those who are excluded from resources with those who are willing and able to actively engage. One aim of this book is to dissect how social acts often academically considered to be in separate realms—of development, charity, and humanitarianism—are part of a larger universe of giving marked by notions of global citizenship, relations of social obligation that entail rights and entitlements, and sacred conceptions of religious donation. The subjects of this book are engaged in the contemporary practice of helping others in New Delhi, India, situated against a backdrop of the global economy of giving. Their efforts contrast with those of professional aid workers who adamantly assert, “We don't do charity.” The subjects of this book are Indians and foreigners who attempt to alleviate suffering as activists, volunteers, professional NGO workers, and citizens who give spontaneously, religiously, and/or impulsively. Expectations surrounding humanitarianism for urban Indians and non-Indians differ, of course, but they intersect in the charitable sector of global India. This book is about humanitarianism as a transnational form *in* India; it is not about Indian humanitarianism.

Intentions of giving may not translate across groups, especially as prestation is embedded in and defined by particular social logics. In the United States, for example, a “thank-you” is expected in exchange for a gift. Imagine giving a gift to a child. What is the anticipated normative behavior? It may include the child opening and publicly appreciating the gift and expressing thanks with sincerity. How many times have I heard at a child’s birthday party, “Say thank-you, nicely”? How many times have I provided the same pedagogical directive to my own son? The trend is exaggerated by the proliferation of thank-you cards that perfunctorily follow attendance at children’s birthday parties. This norm is perpetuated in the immediate letter of thanks one receives after donating to a charity. With online donations possible through the Internet, the speed with which thank-you letters arrive almost threatens the potential for social obligation to accrue. Meanwhile, thank-you letters are tax receipts that gain legal lives of their own.

In the context of simple gifts (rather than humanitarian aid), different cultural codes define giving. One could say, rather generally, that in New Delhi it is considered rude to open a gift in front of the giver. There is no Hindi word for “thank-you.” Its counterpart, *dhanyavad*, is a relatively recent translation with a short cultural history. One explanation is that saying “thank-you” in the Indian context threatens to turn social relationships into transactions, which obliterates the possibility of social obligation. Imagine the difficulty of translation this poses for foreigners in New Delhi and, one can deduce, for Indians in other parts of the world. For instance, in Delhi a British friend complained to me about her driver, about whom she was perplexed. She repeatedly gave him what she considered gifts—of clothing, extra money, and food—yet she considered him rude and ungrateful for not saying “thank-you.” I explained to her that his appreciation might have been expressed in a different manner, such as through action, perhaps by putting an extra shine on her car, which she may not have noticed. Moreover, in his cultural logic these gifts were expected and taken for granted. They were not extra-ordinary acts. In fact, the driver may not have perceived them as gifts at all: they were relational obligations. It was her duty as his employer to give gifts, and their hierarchical relationship was strengthened through these gifts of obligation, which were so unremarkable that they did not require any comment.

Another example of the challenge inherent in the cross-cultural translation of gifts will clarify the distinction I am making. During my fieldwork, my mother-in-law (who is Indian) was living with us in south Delhi. She expressed

her motherly love by making tea for me as I sat at my desk and typed up field notes after a day of interviews. Each time she brought me tea, I would say, without thinking, “Thank-you.” How nice it was to have someone bring me tea! However, my appreciation was a source of confusion for her because thanks are not commonly expressed in India. Soon she was bringing me tea and saying “thank-you” to me as she set the tea on my desk. After a year in Delhi, I began to see the depth of this mistranslation: in India, donors are grateful to recipients for receiving their gifts. You may say this conceptual stretch is too vast—from children’s birthday parties; to thank-you for tea; to philanthropy, humanitarianism, and social welfare. You may exclaim that comparing the micro-practice of giving gifts to humanitarianism poses a logical fallacy of scale. But if you bear with me, I hope to make larger social processes visible through the detailed ethnographic accounts of daily life, showing how gifts to beggars and donations to organizations are infused with cultural codes that structure the expectations and experiences of giving.

Theoretically, my research is inspired by a debate surrounding Marcel Mauss’s classic work *The Gift* (1990 [1950]). For Mauss, the gift involves social contracts and reciprocity; every gift demands a “return,” and in this manner gift exchange is, by nature, reciprocal. Giving manifests social solidarity, for it is through the exchange of gifts that individuals are hierarchically connected to a larger society (also see Bourdieu 1977: 1–30). However, scholarship on giving in north India in traditional settings such as village prestation (Raheja 1988), funerary priests (Parry 1994), and Jain mendicants (Laidlaw 1995) has challenged Mauss’s assumption of the reciprocal nature of giving. In north India, those who give strive to release themselves from any future contact (Parry 1986; Laidlaw 2000). With *dān*, no social obligations are incurred.¹ Jacques Derrida (1992) weighed in on this debate and argued that Mauss mistook the concept of exchange for the gift: the only real gift is one that can be neither identified nor returned. The minute one acknowledges a gift, it is no longer a gift; the ultimate gift, for Derrida, is the gift of time.

While Mauss’s concept of the gift offers a basis for relations of social obligation, Indian ideas of *dān* are precisely the opposite. Mauss’s concept requires a return, whereas *dān* is a gift that is not reciprocated. *Dān* is a liberating mechanism that releases the giver of social obligation and eventually frees the giver of the constraints of the material world.² As I set out to examine the difference between the Maussian gift and Hindu *dān*, my ethnographic research centered on an eclectic group of informants that included Indian philanthropists; em-

ployees of transnational foundations; Indian NGO directors and employees; Indian and expatriate volunteers who cared for children in orphanages and slums, provided tsunami relief, and devoted time to development programs; Indians who built schools for slum-dwellers and the disabled; and Hindu temple priests and devotees who donated to Hindu temples and their associated charitable medical clinics.

Giving may well be an ethos of our time. Humanitarianism is a form of the gift; although not a right, it may be considered a duty or righteous action. The humanitarianism I write about occurred in the capital city of New Delhi, in an India aiming to configure itself as a global superpower and a benefactor in the geopolitics of aid. Amidst this transnationally oriented national identity was also the reality that with increased wealth, existing poverty came to be seen anew in stark relief. As the GOI began to liberalize its economy in the early 1990s, issues of inequality and social welfare entered a transitional period during the next decade. In 2000, the Charities Aid Foundation documented that India had close to one million voluntary organizations registered as trusts, societies, trade unions, or charitable companies (CAF India 2000; Sen 1992; Tandon 2003). It also had the largest number of voluntary organizations in Asia. It was in this context that Indians and expatriates alike found themselves compelled to engage with the urgency of social welfare. While some of this engagement was formally registered with the GOI, much of it was spontaneous and undocumented. This diverse context of donation in the political capital is also categorized according to those who practice it as charity, philanthropy, or humanitarianism.

Contemporary India is a globalizing nation of technological innovation, shining skyscrapers, and new wealth—but also of vast poverty. Although giving is a symbolic platform upon which many claim firm ground, in addition to those who assist the needy are those who do *not*, those who ignore suffering and despair in the name of hierarchical relations of destiny, chance, circumstance, and fate. In India, poverty is part of life—if not yours, then of others in close proximity. People engage with need, broadly defined, in daily life at the interstices of formal, accounted-for charity, manifest in the work of NGOs registered with the state, and informal giving, much of which is constituted by religiously motivated donation.³

The significance of humanitarian activity is evident through its extensive media coverage, the copious transnational humanitarian organizations that toil in emergency contexts, and the force of voluntary efforts that are inter-

national in scope. However, one may still ask what humanitarianism looks like for those who practice it. Why do people engage in philanthropic activity, and what sorts of ethical and political dilemmas do they encounter? How do they make sense of their work? I hope that readers will read this book as encouragement to pay attention to the impulses that inspire people to engage in humanitarian action instead of solely paying attention to outcomes. I realize this is somewhat controversial, as most people aiming for social change, whether through philanthropy, development, or humanitarianism, reach toward specific results. Yet, as historians (Haskell 1985a, 1985b) and philosophers (Foucault 1973) have noted, different historical moments offer varying conditions for action. Specific eras articulate what makes something thinkable and possible at a particular time. For example, the relation of capitalism to humanitarianism, as Thomas Haskell (1985a, 1985b) has noted, is a particularly fruitful conjunction that emerged in the eighteenth century. The growth of development as a project in the wake of World War II also had much to say about its own time, with metaphors of construction articulating aims to rebuild a world broken by war and transformed by colonies declaring independence from imperial rule. Building nations and supporting economies seemed pertinent causes of that era. Now, many readers will agree, development has lived past its prime. Some theorists (Sachs 1992; Rahnama and Bawtree 1997) have pronounced it dead, although many in the “developing” world (or, the “global south”) still clamor for resources promised through its institutions. Some call development a right.

Economic development is currently being met by an older form of helping: philanthropy, which is taking on a new valence with the emergence of technologies, such as the Internet, that facilitate a gift going to a needy stranger across the globe. And it is not just the Internet that signals such a shift. Some scholars go as far as advocating direct cash transfers to the poor, bypassing NGOs and government institutions altogether (Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010). Cell phones in rural Bangladesh make it possible for women to benefit from micro-enterprise programs; airplanes take volunteers to remote sites in times of disaster—all responding to the new urgency of the gift. Perhaps humanitarianism and philanthropy—the gift of an individual to a cause—have become the new development.⁴ As much as development-inspired teleological metaphors of construction, humanitarianism inspires metaphors of repair: saving others, rescue, and other immediate or impulsive responses to violence, disaster, and human misery. Humanitarianism is urgent and relevant right now, in our world. It has

an intensity of purpose that compels university students in Wisconsin, where I live and teach, to donate to strangers halfway around the planet at the click of a mouse and, more importantly, to march into my office each semester and inquire how they can volunteer, and eventually work, for an NGO overseas.

For many students, the work of humanitarianism consists of abstract policy initiatives undertaken by governments and international organizations. They cannot often connect their own experience working on humanitarian issues with the broader picture of global humanitarian aid. In the courses I teach and in this book, I aim to address this translation. Voluntarism is a classic component of a coming-of-age ritual that has become popular in American higher education. Building on American civic and associational engagement and its link with character building, many students engage in voluntarism in order to have something that appears worldly and morally good on their resumes. However, the current population of university students are of a new generation. They have grown up during the era of globalization. They are not activists, yet they want to engage with the world and change it. In state universities such as the one where I teach, these students are neither worldly nor privileged; yet they perceive a need for global engagement. Majoring in anthropology or global studies, their motivation hovers among curiosity, impulse, and obligation. While perhaps utopian or naive, this desire for global engagement is particularly dynamic. University students today have their fingers on their iPads and their cell phones to their ears. Some might say that, glued to their computer screens, they are out of touch with the types of grave social concerns that compel humanitarians to work for Oxfam, World Vision, or a community-based organization. However, these students desire engagement with humanitarian issues of philanthropy and development, and they are not satisfied with existing institutions. They, like the subjects of this book, donate, volunteer, and work temporarily for humanitarian causes.

Helping others in need has touched a nerve among young people today. I have come to realize that engaging with global charity and humanitarianism has become, for some, a way of engaging with a world in dramatic flux. Students long to work for an NGO, to have an internationally oriented internship, to get “global experience.” NGOs become portals for entry into an international arena. “How can I volunteer?” some ask; others return from Rwanda or China, having had their worlds cracked open through their experiences. Perhaps helping others is a form of ritual passage for global citizenship in a global age (see, for instance, Kristof and WuDunn 2009). Maybe it is a new version of adven-

ture, an echo of earlier colonial missions and travels. In any case, these adventures are purposive and productive. They are temporary, yet they have lasting effects. These stints, or shocks, in extreme circumstances, put the lives of the privileged in relief. Some might argue that charity is a means for reproducing inequality, and that only those who are well off have the luxury of travel. This may be so, yet we come full circle to a philanthropic mode. From development, we have returned to philanthropy, and this, I argue, is not a regressive move. Rather, it marks a moment in history when charity has become urgent again—like the moment at the turn of the twentieth century when philanthropy became scientific and foundations were established (see Howe [1980] for the United States; see Jurgensmeyer and McMahon [1998] for India). We now find new forms emerging. Hybrid, transnational, cosmopolitan, and ad hoc, many of these forms are underground, undocumented, and discounted by those whose eyes focus solely on institutions. Much of the charitable activity I document exists alongside institutions and may even be collaboratively part of their efforts.

Unfortunately, we live in a world in which disasters seem to be the norm. From the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, to the Haitian earthquake of 2010, to the Japanese tsunami of 2011, humanitarian emergencies are recurring phenomena that challenge the world to assist. Craig Calhoun uses the term “emergency imaginary” (2008: 73–97) to reference the growth in complex humanitarian emergencies worldwide since the Cold War and the capacity for comprehending these emergencies as a counterpoint to global order (also see Barnett and Weiss 2008: 24). Writing on the subject began in political science, with a focus on large institutions, foreign policy, and international relations (see, for instance, Barnett and Weiss 2008; Minear 2002; Weiss and Collins 1996; an exception is De Waal 1997). Some anthropological work on the aid industry focuses on aspects of economic development (Bornstein 2005; Stirrat 2008) and global governance (Mosse and Lewis 2005). Humanitarian practitioners (Terry 2002) and public intellectuals (Hancock 1989; Rieff 2002; Sontag 2003) have offered stringent critiques of the aid industry, often with an insider’s knowledge of the complexity of humanitarian endeavors. These critiques emphasize the murky arena of humanitarianism in practice—a gray area beyond the polarized good and evil of more superficial accounts found in aid industry marketing materials aimed to solicit donations. Some are more hopeful about possibilities for social change resulting from humanitarian work (Kristof and WuDunn 2009). More recently, works have

focused on the relationship of humanitarianism and armed conflict (Duffield 2001; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Pandolfi 2011; Goodhand 2006; Hoffman and Weiss 2006).

Within this quickly expanding literature is a new body of anthropological work in critical humanitarian studies (for example, Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Lakoff 2010). While the work in academic disciplines of political science and international relations tends to emphasize large-scale NGO and state interventions, anthropologists write about humanitarian engagement as it is lived, focusing on immigration asylum in France (Fassin 2005; Fassin and D'Halluin 2005; Ticktin 2006); Médecins sans Frontières (Fassin 2007; Redfield 2005, 2006), trauma and rights (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), refugees (Feldman 2007; Malkki 1996), Islamic charities (Benthall 1997, 1999; Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan 2003), and the military-humanitarian apparatus (Pandolfi 2003). For an overview of the anthropology of humanitarianism, see Minn (2007) and Redfield and Bornstein (2011).

This book focuses on unofficial and ad hoc humanitarian work, largely composed of people who find themselves in circumstances that compel them to initiate humanitarian projects. It addresses the tremendous amount of humanitarian activity that is currently off the radar of more formal humanitarian organizations (by some estimates, 77 percent of donations in New Delhi are unofficial and undocumented [Sampradaan Indian Centre for Philanthropy 2001: 48]). The people in this book—positioned at the intersection of formal accounted-for charity manifest by NGOs registered with the state and the informal practice of donation and voluntarism—are Indian volunteers, foreigners who travel to India to engage with suffering, and diasporic Indians who have lived abroad and return with the desire to help their homeland. Those who engage in humanitarianism do so with varied intentions, desires, and outcomes. Difficult to classify and difficult to ignore, variation is key.

Each chapter of this book explores a theme through specific cases, or portraits, of people engaged in humanitarian endeavors. Chapter 1, “Philanthropy,” examines how the fleeting impulse to give to immediate others in distress is tempered by its regulation. Whereas impulsive philanthropic giving allows no claims on the donor, welfare-oriented giving transforms recipients into claimants with rights. The chapter analyzes how some contemporary practices of philanthropy in India are related to sacred conceptions of *dān*. When scriptural ideas of disinterested giving intersect with contemporary notions of social re-

sponsibility, new philanthropic practices are formed that highlight the tension between the immediate impulse to end suffering and the social obligation to create a just society. It is a tension between giving away to proximate strangers in need, and giving to organized charity that is regulated by accounting systems. NGO and government efforts to regulate one of the most meritorious forms of *dān*, *gupt dān* (anonymous *dān*), articulate a critical issue in philanthropy and a scriptural concern of *dān*: the tension between the urge to give without attachment in response to immediate suffering and the social obligation to find a worthy recipient for the gift. The chapter is structured around three portraits: a family who gave *dān* daily out of their home, a woman who started an orphanage and sponsored the education and welfare of needy children, and a man who built a temple and an associated school for girls. These three cases of philanthropy question who deserves to receive assistance, and why.

In addition to the dynamic tension between giving to immediate others and giving to society, those who give are concerned with finding suitable recipients for their gifts. Chapter 2, “Trust,” deals with this. The response to the 2004 tsunami disaster in India was a moment in which tensions of aid provision became public discussions of truth. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s decision not to accept aid from the United States was in harmony with a new positioning of India as a nation ripe for investment and not in need of charity. Parallel to this public statement was an outpouring of media reports of corruption and inefficiency as well as the difficulties that local government and NGOs faced in their efforts to reach those in need of aid. Chapter 2 draws on the activities of schools raising money for tsunami relief, NGOs delivering charitable goods, and print media coverage of six weeks following the tsunami to show how rational modalities of accountability and calculation did little to assuage distrust in the NGO industry. Behind public demands for accountability and transparency in aid lay a simultaneous distrust of the charitable aid sector and a dependency upon it. The efforts of NGOs mirrored larger struggles about how money should be spent and tracked, how need was identified, and what constituted a worthy charity. This chapter explores how noninstitutional forms of social welfare—unregulated by NGOs and the state—intersect with institutional ones through two case studies: a wealthy school and its relationship with a slum school, and an American doctor who provided cash deposits to sponsor medical care for four HIV patients in India. In both of these cases, we see how suspicion and distrust may function as a social audit when it comes to providing humanitarian support.

Suspicion is not only directed toward individuals and institutions such as NGOs and the state that are involved in disaster relief. It also enters the discourse of care for abandoned children and frames the potential adoption of orphans in New Delhi. India has some of the most stringent adoption laws in the world, and given these legal constraints, orphans, the topic of Chapter 3, are important targets of humanitarian activity and value. Orphans are protected, saved, and managed by humanitarian institutions and the state. As this chapter suggests, transnational adoption, which ultimately transforms an orphan's status as a member of a new family and new nation, is far from the only possible outcome for abandoned children. Other contexts of their care include orphanages and "social adoption," according to which the state remains the legal guardian and an individual (or family) economically supports an orphan's education and care. Taking as its locus specific laws governing the adoption of orphans by Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, Chapter 3 explores how in India, when children are orphaned, they literally become children of the nation. Although an orphan's religious or other identity may not be clear, the extensive legal procedures for adopting orphans differ according to the adoptive parents' nationality and religious identity. Most orphans in India are not adopted. Instead, they remain in orphanages, sponsored by the GOI and supported by donors who pay monthly for their education, upkeep, and eventually (if the orphan is a girl) for their marriage. This chapter focuses on the reasons why orphans serve as good recipients of gifts, and why orphanages are pure sites for those gifts, highlighting the work of one reform Hindu orphanage in Delhi that housed adolescent girls and employed destitute women as their caretakers.

In contrast to the welfare work of transnational NGOs or the efforts of the Indian state, Chapter 4, "Experience," continues the book's focus on humanitarian efforts that often go undocumented, this time through the work of volunteers. Unlike service to society (*samaj seva*) and donation (*dān*), volunteering in its organized form is relatively new to India. The bounded experience of volunteering brings the giver closer to the afflicted, the poor, the suffering, and the needy, if only for a short time. As such, volunteering also has the potential to provoke an emotional crisis of experience for those engaged in it. Although volunteering speaks to the potential of civil society, it is largely practiced because of the potential for a transformative experience for the volunteer. In this way, volunteering differs from other humanitarian forms of practice—such as financial donation and professional aid work conducted by NGOs—in that it is

undertaken as a leisure activity outside the productive realm of wage work. It is also a particularly powerful phenomenon that is gaining global currency. This chapter compares four groups attempting to organize volunteers to examine how some people seek out this dramatic experience and then try to encourage others to do the same. The first group is a pilot program that recruited students from Delhi's top universities to volunteer over the summer with NGOs in rural India. The second is a group of young urban Indians who volunteered at an orphanage in a slum. The third is an ad hoc group of expatriate women who met to hold orphans at Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity welfare home for children. And the fourth features two women: one an Indian who renounced her life of prosperity to start a school for disabled children in rural Rajasthan, and the other a young British volunteer who found herself seeking meaning while working in a lucrative career in the banking industry. These four groups differ in the type of experience of volunteering they provide, but the expectations of experience they elicit are central to all.

Chapter 5, "Empathy," explores the role of empathy in humanitarian efforts and engages with the Maussian theme of gifts and obligations: to known others, such as kin, and to abstract others, such as strangers and society. Much has been said about the capacity for the liberal imagination to provoke empathy, and for this to inspire altruism. I argue that there are other forms of empathy that cannot be understood through the framework of liberal altruism. I present a concept called "relational empathy," which I elaborate through four ethnographic cases that sit on a spectrum and challenge the empathy-altruism thesis: a group of volunteer knitters who distributed sweaters and organized a party for slum children in New Delhi; a foreign volunteer who found herself in Delhi longing for community through voluntarism; an Indian man who started a school in his home for the children of urban laborers; and a British nurse who worked in a leper colony for fifteen years in Andhra Pradesh. Whereas the first two cases fit within the bounds of the empathy-altruism thesis, the third and fourth cases provide a challenge. Liberal empathy seeks to assist abstract others in need; relational empathy turns strangers into kin.

Finally, a brief epilogue provides an overview and summary of the book, exploring the circumstances under which humanitarian acts can veer into the realm of rights and entitlements.