

HEMATOLOGIES

The Political Life of Blood in India

**Jacob Copeman and
Dwaipayan Banerjee**

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BLOODSCAPE OF DIFFERENCE

In October 2013, a medic from the Archana Pathology Lab and Diagnostic Center posted a Hindi poem on the company Facebook page. Titled “Story of Blood,” the poem was written in the voice of blood itself (“*Rakt kahe apni kahani swam ki zubani*—Blood tells its own tale by its own tongue”).

*Hindu ho ya musalmaan, nirbal ho ya pehalwan.
 Sikh ho ya isai, moulvi ho ya kasai.
 Khojte hi reh jaayenge, Par mujme fark na kar payenge.
 Koi sarhad mujhe rok sake aisa kisi mein dam nahi, mein kisi bhi mulk
 mein rahun mujhe koi gam nahi.
 Bush ya Obama, Chahe jo le lo naam, Rang bhed se pare hun raktva-
 hiniya mera dham.
 Mujh par rajneeti karne ki, mat karna tum bhul, bas insaan ki rago mein
 behna, yahi mera usool.
 Samaj ke rakhwalon se karta hun apeal, Mera vyapar kar ke, Mat karo
 mujhe zaleel.
 Jati dharm aur warg se bana raha pehchaan, Kitna chota ho gaya lahu
 bech insaan.
 Noton ke iss khel mein rehna chahtahun azad, Kash! ki meri soch ka, Ho
 pata anuwad.
 Jeevan mein karna ho, yadi kaam mahaan, To niyमित karte rahen
 swam raktdaan.*

Whether a Hindu or a Muslim, weak or strong.
 Sikh or Christian, Mullah or butcher.
 They'll keep searching, but won't be able to find any difference in me.
 No political borders are strong enough to stop me. I can reside in any
 country, I don't mind.
 Bush or Obama—whichever name you take, I am above racial
 differences, arteries are my only destination.
 Do not make the mistake of dragging me into politics. To flow in
 humans' veins, that is my only essence.
 I appeal to people with intelligence, don't abase me by transacting me
 in business.
 Mired in caste, religion and *varna*, how man has diminished himself
 by selling blood.
 I want to be free from this game of money, I wish that this thought of
 mine could find voice.
 If you truly aspire to do something great in life, then you must yourself
 donate blood regularly.¹

“Do not make the mistake of dragging me into politics,” says blood. This book concerns the many manifestations of that “mistake” as found in a variety of North Indian contexts or sanguinary scenes.

“Where blood was, there politics shall be,” says Gil Anidjar (2011). There is an apt sense of pursuit in Anidjar's remark: politics seems to pursue a path that blood seeks to evade, that abases its essence. All it wants, in the words of the poem, is to “flow in humans' veins.”

On 9 January 2017, Hindi daily *Dainik Times* reported the following: “Though Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains a target of the Congress and other opposition parties, those impressed by Modi's policies are *ready to do anything for him* (*kuch bhi kar guzarana*). . . . One young resident of Baghpat made a painting of the PM with his blood. . . . Nitin Tyagi, in order to make this painting, drew his blood with a syringe and filled the painting with the color of his hopes (*umeed ke rang*)” (emphasis added). Tyagi is reported to have said, “Our current PM is the first leader I have seen who has a unique style of functioning, be it demonetization or surgical strike.² He has taken some bold steps for the benefit of the nation. Drawing a portrait of Modi is my way of paying tribute to his leadership.”³ The poem and the portrait congeal the themes of this book. Blood flows both away from and toward politics. It has various destinations: other bodies, certainly, but also letters, petitions, and portraits of politicians that represent not just their subjects but the artists' willingness “to do anything” for them. This book explores the relation

between the substance's multidirectional flows and unpredictable clotting, often utopic, sometimes cynical, but always enmeshed in sociopolitical aesthetics.

The political hematology we trace is one in which the "p" in "politics" figures in both the upper and lower cases.⁴ In the domain of overt big-P politics (which is to say in situations defined by their own actors as belonging to the domain of the political [Spencer 1997, 4]), contestations take place *through* the use of extracted blood. Blood flows in acts of violence or national solidarity, into syringes, art brushes, and pens, all in order to compel actions and persuade imaginations. Here our area of inquiry is that of hematology as a sort of political style.⁵ How and why did publicly enacted blood extractions—principally political rallies, memorials, protests in the form of petitions or paintings in blood—become such a noteworthy form of political enunciation in India? Complementing this approach is a counterpart focus on less overt, small-P politics, which we gloss as the domain of contestations *about* blood and its use. Exploration of this domain takes us into hospitals, blood banks, and campaigns aimed at getting people to understand and use the substance "correctly." What are contested here are definitions, economies, and practices of blood, both inside and outside human bodies.

The chapters in this book reveal a productive and dynamic relation between overtly political blood flows and an imaginary of blood as an aspiration to transcend politics. We find that new ways to take the politics out of blood are constantly discovered, yet each attempt ends in a kind of failure; the "amoral" world of the political inexorably tarnishes the secular and technoscientific utopias imagined through the substance.⁶ It is, as a substance, laden with hopes, wishes, and possibility, but also with the twin poisons of politics and violence. We shall argue that blood is the exemplary subjunctive substance, but in as much a negative as a positive sense, where its sense of possibility always includes the dangerous threat of its future spillage.

A recent newspaper report headlined "Hindu Activists Paint Lord Rama with Blood to Protest against Sethu Samundram Project" shows how bloodshed in the present may be used to preview just such a future spillage. The report states that the use of blood as a medium is intended to show the anguish of the Hindu community: "We have expressed the pain we have felt regarding Ram Sethu [a chain of limestone shoals which featured prominently in the famous Hindu mythological text the Ramayana and was believed to have been threatened by a government project to dredge a channel between India and Sri Lanka]. If one can give blood [for the cause] he can shed it as well." In addition to being an ascetic demonstration of bodily commitment to the cause, the article reports a threat of further bloodshed: "This is a message to those who are opposed to [the Hindu god and king] Ram and the ones concerned with the project that they should

relinquish the idea of destructing the bridge or they will have to face the consequences,' said a leader of [Hindu right activist organization] the Bajrang Dal."⁷ The blood portrait is thus a kind of premonitory bloodshed, a sanguinary forewarning. There is a staging of analogical connection: blood extraction, in such instances, is ostensibly for the nonviolent purpose of devotional image-construction. But it points forward toward future violent bloodshed, should the image-as-warning go unheeded. The image seems to both intimate and prefigure future violent bloodshed.

The present-tense bloodshed of the portrait may be made to form analogies with past bloodshed or future bloodshed (as with the Bajrang Dal). Exploring this problematic in chapter 2, we enter a neglected corner of Gandhi's political thought—his preoccupation with blood—as it indexed a past and present colonial violence, as well as the future possibility for an ascetic transcendence of both politics and the body. In the same chapter, we go on to discuss how past, present, and future bloodsheds are evoked simultaneously in the iconography of fallen freedom-fighter martyrs. In this genre, heroes of India's independence struggle who shed their blood for the nation are depicted in portraits composed of human blood in the present, the aim of which is to inspire others to willingness to shed their blood, and that of others, in the future for the nation.

Similar temporal dynamics unfold in protests by activists that deploy blood as a medium of writing. For example, in chapter 3 we describe the work of feminist activists who use menstrual blood and writing on sanitary pads to evoke and critique the violence of sexual assault and gender segregation. Unlike right-wing Hindu visions, these activists appraise the past critically rather than nostalgically: for them, the past is a time of the religiously mandated discrimination against women who bleed. In the same chapter, we examine the work of activists that have emerged in the wake of the Bhopal gas disaster who write with blood to evidence the durability of toxicity in the present. And through the force of blood as a medium, they seek to enforce a relation of duress upon political figures to demand a more habitable future. Thus, we shall be concerned to show how political blood extractions and displays such as these act as both mnemonic devices that review past violence at the same time as they serve as templates for future action and change. Blood, we argue, is a transtemporal hinge (Pedersen and Nielsen 2013) that flows between times, connecting and separating them.

The book further explores ways in which blood is considered to transcend differences, as in the words of the poem, even as it marks and accentuates them. To return to our opening poem: in order to "not do business with [it]" anymore (paid donation is now officially banned in the country), new bodily understandings must be communicated to a new voluntary donor constituency in order to persuade them to do "something that is great in life [and] donate blood regu-

larly.” We find that these new, utopic imaginations of a disinterested, secular giving constantly come into friction with durable conceptions of bodily integrity, religious practice, and even astral reckonings. Further, campaigners must topple existing understandings according to which one’s lifeblood subsists as a finite store. A new antisacrificial hematological economy must be made convincing. We follow the work of these campaigners as they try to make persuasive a new imagination of hematological exchange, one that reckons with past and present conceptions of giving and receiving blood simultaneously. Relatedly, what of the legal status of blood as a drug? This does not accord well with campaigners’ hematological humanism. The contested economy of the blood bank is also at issue: How do medical reformers seek to persuade recalcitrant medics to prescribe blood transfusions with due care (economy)? The matter of temporal economy is also vital; rather than one-time family-replacement blood donations, the ideal voluntary blood donor gives repeatedly, every three months, over time. How to secure such a hematic economy of repetition? Contests with blood and campaigns about blood are thus the constituent ingredients of India’s hematic political economy.

Broadly, then, the first half of the book concerns contestations with blood: protests, public spectacles, campaigns, and art that employ the substance as political media (blood as a big-P political substance). The second half focuses on contestations about the substance, as it flows inside and outside of bodies, within and outside biomedical discourses (blood as a small-P micropolitical substance). At the same time, we should note here that our “with blood-”/ “about blood-” division is merely a heuristic for navigating the themes of the book. There is no hard and fast binary between the hematological modes; contestations *with* blood inform and affect contestations *about* it, and vice versa—blood is a “recursive” political substance in this sense due to the dynamic relation between the way it forms both the subject of political arguments and a liquid infrastructure through which such arguments can be made (Kelty 2008; Corsín Jiménez and Estalella 2016). But if differences between activism *with* and *about* blood blur at the edges of practice, we retain the distinction here as an organizational heuristic that allows us to see how they have such a relation. We further elaborate the intermingling of the two modes of hematological contestation at the end of this introductory chapter.

Juxtapositional Ethnography

Although we carried out our respective stretches of fieldwork in North India independently, in order to avoid unnecessary distraction we do not differentiate between ourselves when presenting ethnography in this work. Jacob’s first main

stretch of fieldwork on blood donation took place in Delhi, Kolkata, and elsewhere in North India from 2003 to 2005 and has continued intermittently since that time. Dwaipayan's fieldwork presented in this book took place in Bhopal and Delhi in 2009, and discontinuously until 2011. Interviews with significant figures in India's political hematology continued into 2012.

We present an ethnography composed of disparate materials—"a juxtapositional ethnography of sorts" (L. Cohen 1998). Anthropologists in the 1980s took to reevaluating the discipline's ability to comprehend the complex flow of global processes, paving the way for experiments with research methods and widening the domains of legitimate inquiry (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Anthropological examinations of global biotechnology have been particularly enlivened by this upheaval of methods and objects (Dumit 2012; Ong and Collier 2005; Petryna, Lakoff, and Kleinman 2006). As Sunder Rajan (2006) has suggested, following processes of biotechnology requires attentiveness not only to shifting scales but also to temporal uncertainties. Possible biotech futures are filled with promissory hype for some populations, while others are experimented upon and sacrificed—as they remain durably embedded within histories of inequality. In a similar spirit, we follow how transactions in blood promise aspirational technoscientific futures that transcend class, caste, and religion. At the same time, we discover older vocabularies of blood-based difference, purity, and hierarchy reanimated within contemporary worlds.

While grounded in sustained, long-term fieldwork in Delhi in medical and activist contexts, this kind of inquiry requires us to shift temporal and spatial scales. We draw promiscuously on historical materials, newspaper articles, Facebook entries, exhibition visitor-book entries, related poetry, and other materials, interested—as we are—in discursive constructions of what goes on and of what should and should not go on, as well as in what actually goes on. None of these are isolates, but rather they inform one another in intimate and complex ways.⁸ This book shows that *imagination* of blood economies—noetic spaces of blood's own voice (as in our opening poem), of "as if" blood units and donations, of possible future blood flows—is a key part of the story of the economic and political life of blood in India. Therefore our consideration of written accounts of hematic extractions in a wide range of contexts—both literary and otherwise—was for us an important component of fieldwork. If analysis of poetry, fiction, and other media borrows from literary criticism, such texts also comprise people's own reflexive ethnographies of themselves (Barber 2007); one engages, then, with other people's engagement with their own social circumstances.⁹ Particularly in the anthropology of biomedical and scientific worlds, anthropologists have understood the vitality of examining "reflexive social institutions within which medical,

environmental, informational, and other technosciences must increasingly operate” (Fischer 2009).

In Delhi, we accompanied blood bank teams—small teams composed of medics, technicians, and a “social worker,” or donor recruiter, who campaigns to attract donors and who liaises with local institutions to set up collection events—as they took “donor beds to donors,” a key strategy for promoting the voluntary mode of donation throughout India and elsewhere.¹⁰ We set off each morning in a dedicated “blood mobile” to conduct the day’s blood donation “camps” (or in Hindi, *shibir*). Mostly we accompanied the Red Cross team, an affiliation that was sought (and kindly granted) due to its central place within the capital’s campaign to promote voluntary blood donation, which affords it a larger reach; it is the most prolific collector of voluntarily donated blood in the city. Its destinations are diverse: they may be broadly categorized as corporate, educational, devotional, and political, but each of these is in turn internally diverse. Corporate camp locations run the gamut from shabby dilapidated offices to corporate social responsibility initiatives in gleaming new shopping malls. “Religious” camps, too, are multidimensional: churches, *gurdwaras*, temples, and a variety of *satsang bhavans* associated with specific gurus all form camp locations.

Blood donation camps, as we encountered them in Delhi, crosscut the two main public arenas identified by Partha Chatterjee (1998, 57–69): state and civil society on the one hand (the legal and formal apparatuses of governance through which interests are negotiated), and political society on the other (the more chaotic space of interaction between state and population as mediated by political parties and other more informal networks). These included collaborative endeavors between state or NGO-run medical institutions, and a mixed assortment of associations and *samitis* of primarily religious, corporate, educational, and political provenance. Quickly, we discovered that state ventures of medical provision were always entangled with the divergent priorities and imperatives of an array of informal networks and competitive-minded groupings, some of which enlisted the camp as a medium for their agonistic relations with one another. To borrow a term from Jonathan Spencer (2007, 151), blood banks and donor recruitment organizations employ “pluralizing strategies” in their attempt to form viable blood donor communities. The “great muddle of the plural,” which characterizes Indian civil and political society, is treated as a resource to be harnessed. The quest for donor communities leads to blood banks operating within and courtesy of an array of associations that bestride civil and political society, with donation camps organized in conjunction both with Rotary clubs and student bodies (in other words, in the realm of the “properly constituted” civil society of the urban elites [Chatterjee 1998, 64]), but also with devotional sects and political

parties seeking, through their largesse, to outdo other sects and political parties (this is the realm “built around the framework of modern political associations” but that “spills over its limits” such that it is “not always consistent with the principles of association in civil society” [64]).¹¹

We have written about devotional blood donation elsewhere.¹² Guru-led organizations, in particular, have developed into a significant resource for bodies such as the Red Cross and others tasked with promoting the voluntary mode of collection. The Sant Nirankaris, a devotional movement that we shall encounter at several points in this book, account for as much as 20 percent of Delhi’s voluntarily donated blood. Most recently, we have suggested the term bi-instrumentalism to acknowledge the processes by which “religion” may be mobilized as a toollike resource, but also to acknowledge that such mobilizations may be marked by instability and disjunctions so that it is not always clear who is “using” whom.¹³ In turning to overt politics in this book, the intention is not to downplay the political nature of the devotional modes of collection we have discussed elsewhere; donated blood was the very stuff of contestation between devotional orders. Yet the particular focus of those works—what their ethnography revealed—is how gurus and their devotees themselves instrumentalize the Red Cross and others in employing blood donation to define themselves and their internal struggles in becoming new kinds of devotional subjects. In this work, we move away from blood donation theologies to consider other modes of hematic instrumentalization.¹⁴ The form of the camp remains central as we shift to consider blood donation in the domain of overt politics, but we also consider here nondonative scenes of extraction, such as portraits, petitions, and letters in blood (chapters 2 and 3), seeking to lay the foundations for a political genealogy of blood in India (chapter 2), before considering contestation *about* the substance (chapters 4–6) and the modes of economy it demands and that enfold it. We do not cease to consider blood donor devotionism in this work, but train our sights on its overtly political and conflictual manifestations.

During the initial Delhi fieldwork, we attended roughly thirty “political” camps (mainly organized by the two largest Indian political parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress Party) on the birthdays of current leaders and death anniversaries of former leaders.¹⁵ Subsequent to that initial fieldwork, we conducted archival research on camps conducted by the Samajwadi and Shiv Sena political parties, and we also conducted *post hoc* interviews with attendees of those camps: donors, activists, organizers, and medical teams.

What is a “political” blood donation event like? The first we ever attended was a camp organized by the Youth Congress in conjunction with the Red Cross in 2003 on the birthday of then-party leader Sonia Gandhi.¹⁶ In this camp, situated in central Delhi’s Talkatora stadium grounds, activists and supporters were bled

beneath a colorful marriage tent, as is the case in most outdoor camps. Even as they donated their blood, activists signed an anticorruption pledge, joined hands with other activists standing near the donor beds, and chanted “Sonia Gandhi *zindabad*” (“Long live Sonia Gandhi”). The chant was fervent enough to intermittently drown out the Rajasthan steel band playing beside a giant poster of Sonia Gandhi, and the words “To all people, let’s join together and finish corruption. We will begin a new, fresh India.” Over a loudspeaker a local leader encouraged everyone to donate their blood, declaring that it is a safe thing to do: “It comes back again in forty-eight hours only.” Speaking with us later, he referred to the party’s recent humiliating losses in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan; the camp formed part of an effort to raise the spirits of party workers. Activists framed their donations as gift-sacrifices to the party leader: “Giving blood is a sign—we are ready to work and do anything for Sonia Gandhiji and our party.” “We are making a sacrifice of one unit, but she sacrificed her family.” “We dedicate ourselves to Soniaji on this auspicious day—we are showing our love and affection for her.” “We are the only party which gives its blood. Giving blood in these camps is not only Congress-support, it is nation-support.” “Donating our blood today shows that we are Soniaji’s *Fedayeen* (self-sacrificing fighters)—we are the soldiers of Soniaji and we want to give her homage and show our commitment both to Soniaji and the Congress.”¹⁷

But we must emphasize that by no means are all political camps so carnivalesque. We attended one organized around then-BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s birthday that involved virtually no donors at all. On such occasions, blood bank teams understandably mutter about donation camps wasting everyone’s time. There was brief enthusiasm when the local BJP MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) arrived to inaugurate the event, and a flurry of activity as local workers queued to donate in his presence. But after he left, they too quickly departed. In Kolkata, where political camps are more routine than anywhere else, there is little fanfare—just a few exhortations by local leaders and one or two garlanded portraits of the politician being remembered or celebrated. The party’s temporary taking of ownership of the road—as frequently happens for camps but also for many other reasons—may cause minor local controversy, but this is also quite routine.¹⁸ Sometimes on death anniversaries, such camps may be genuinely somber occasions.

As we became more and more intrigued by both the prevalence and differential nature of modes of hemo-political expressionism, we conducted participant observation with Bhopali activists, whose use of their own blood as a political substance, and other body imagery, has been prominent as they continue to seek redress and support so long after the devastating gas disaster of 1984. This fieldwork too continued the “para-ethnographic” orientation of our work, as the term

describes fieldwork conducted alongside subjects that are themselves engaged in reflecting upon the force and meaning of their bodily practices (Holmes and Marcus 2008).

The Bhopal activist network comprises of several subgroups that come under a broader conglomerate organization: the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB).¹⁹ In several spells between 2009 and 2012, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork alongside the ICJB across Delhi, Bhopal, and New York. In this book, we pay particular attention to a sustained activist campaign in 2009, when the ICJB gathered about fifty survivors and activists and set out on foot from Bhopal to Delhi. We spent several weeks with the activists here, as they encamped at Jantar Mantar—an oddly shaped eighteenth-century observatory in the capital city. In the present, the observatory plays a different role: the streets around it have been designated by the city administration as the space within which groups of civil dissent can make public displays and be observed by the police. Here we observed and recorded—both for this book and for the organization—campaigns that mobilized blood and metaphors of other bodily substances, particularly hearts, to shame and make claims upon the national and state governments. At the same time, we continued to conduct interviews with various political actors and artists who employ their blood as an artistic medium on research visits into 2012. Fieldwork conducted in Kolkata in 2004 and 2008 with a prominent voluntary blood donor organization, which we introduce fully later in the book, informs chapters 4 and 5 on the political economy of blood and efforts to reform prevalent popular and medical understandings of the substance.

We have anticipated already how we understand blood as a transtemporal hinge. We have also gestured to why we are attracted to studying the substance—namely, for its generative ability to flow spatially and congeal in unpredictable forms and arenas. In what follows in this chapter, we first lay out the conceptual and contextual ground in relation to which the figures of extraction and donation that we describe take shape. As throughout the book, we tack between the domains of overt nationalist and party politics, as well as a subtler politics of bio-medical transactions.

Political Style

How did political involvement in blood donation activities begin? India's first prime minister—Jawaharlal Nehru—was himself known to donate blood, and central and state government ministers donated blood in front of the media at the time of China's invasion in 1962 (Naipaul 1964, 79). But from the perspective of the present, when senior blood bank employees speak about their memo-

ries of political involvement in blood donation, it is Sanjay Gandhi's name that is most often invoked. In recounting Indira Gandhi's youngest son's role in campaigns to boost voluntary blood donation, a donor recruitment specialist at Delhi's Red Cross blood bank (situated across the road from the national parliament) revealed her intimate knowledge of the blood groups of Indian political leaders:²⁰ "Sanjay Gandhi started the movement of voluntary donation in politics. He made it his mission. He gave blood himself to start it off. Indira Gandhi was O negative. We took two units of this type every 15 days to [her residence at] Safdarjung Road and exchanged it for the previous units in her fridge (we had a special refrigerator). Rajiv Gandhi was B negative, and when he was PM we had to take the blood to Race Course Road [the location of the prime ministerial residence]."

Another blood bank recruitment specialist recalled to us, "Sanjay gave the youth a four-point program: (1) blood donation, (2) tree plantation, (3) dowry abolition, and (4) family planning, and Rajiv also donated blood before he was PM. There is none like [Sanjay Gandhi] now." In fact, blood donation did not form a part of Sanjay Gandhi's youth program. Though Sanjay Gandhi did indeed put forward a program of promoting literacy, birth control, and planting trees at the time of the Emergency in 1976, blood donation was not among these priorities.²¹ However, even though blood donation was not a part of the official program, it is significant that it is remembered to have been (and not only by this recruitment specialist), and it was most certainly a key focus of Sanjay Gandhi's activities at various points in his political career (as one of his "pet themes").²² For example, blood donation was particularly prominent during his tenure as leader of the Youth Congress.²³ It was probably at blood donation events organized by the Youth Congress that being seen to donate blood became so prized as a means to gain advancement. (The Youth Congress was described more recently as a "rag-tag bunch of petty wheeler-dealers and politically ambitious wannabes"—a label befitting the earlier incarnation as well, even if in the 1970s it had far more clout.)²⁴ If fasting and spinning were the iconic practical compulsions Mohandas Gandhi had imposed on the Congress in its early years, Sanjay Gandhi supplemented this demonstration of bodily commitment with the donation of blood. As a result, it became a key means for political parties to display their *seva* (service) of a generalized *janata* (people, public) to the media—a generalization well afforded by anonymous blood donation.

A little higher up the political food chain, organizing (as well as donating at) such events became a means of getting noticed and is still marked in bold letters upon political CVs. Sanjay Gandhi's association with blood donation was such that Rajiv Gandhi himself is reported to have donated blood at a meeting held in memory of his younger brother (Siddiqui 1982, 271).²⁵ It is also worth noting that

Sanjay Gandhi's systematic promotion of blood (and eye) donation among Youth Congress workers was done at a time when he was promising to "donate new energetic blood [to] old senile Congress" (J. Singh 1977, x)—that is, to produce a new generation of leaders, for "in any revolution, reconstruction or rejuvenation, cultural, social or political, young blood of the nation plays a major and decisive role" (28). His camps were part of his constructive program for invigorating the Congress, and there is a sense in which they also sought to transfuse the nation with youthfulness, the literal and symbolic exchanging their properties. Unlike the "forcible deal" (Tarlo 2003) of Emergency-era mass sterilizations, there was no suggestion here of forced blood donations (though there have been accusations of forced political blood donations in other periods, discussed elsewhere in this book). Yet Youth Congress blood donations certainly formed part of the mood music of the Emergency and have ever since formed a template for mass political communication: internally in respect of the observing leader, and externally in respect of the observing public.

Most blood bank professionals in Delhi have little positive to say about collaboration with political parties. One former blood bank director we spoke with was repelled enough by the spectacle to want to put an end to such camps:

Political camps are terrible. When I was [employed] at [a Delhi government hospital] I said, "Let's stop going for these—but we can't stop because they're so powerful—because they call everyone and when the VIP comes, whether it's Sonia Gandhi or Sanjay Gandhi or whoever, they make such a big noise. And the moment he or she goes, that's it—they've all gone. We don't need such camps. There's no other motivating factor other than "I'm trying to please the leader." I hate all these things. I find them so disgusting. But those are the realities.

Another blood bank director—a pragmatist prepared to enter the "dirty" world of politics if it means replenishing his always-fragile stocks—recounted one such political blood donation camp:

Last year I got a call in the evening: "There is some political leader who wants a camp to be held." After great difficulty I reached that place—I met those people—totally, totally disorganized. But they wanted a camp tomorrow. Next day when I reach there with my team, we organize everything, and then a girl is brought who happens to be the daughter of that political leader for whom the blood donation camp is being held, and the political leader is behind bars, and he is fighting an election from jail. Now to give an emotional backup to vote in his favor, the daughter is brought and they say we are to weigh the daughter against the blood.

It is an election point. Now the daughter is weighing 48 kg. And they asked me to translate it into blood. So I roughly translated that this is the amount of bags, and he said, “No problem, we’ll provide you with more than that.” And believe me, he was the only person who won as the independent candidate. His followers wanted to take advantage and make it an emotional upheaval to draw the sympathy of the voters—wanted to draw advantage out of the situation. The votes were to be cast on that day. It is a *tamasha* [show-off, spectacle], but I just took the blood. Blood is blood.

These two quotations underline that the importance of display at these events is twofold: the political party makes visible its committed *seva* (service to society), while—as was suggested in the first quotation—the activist may donate in order to be seen by the leader they wish to impress.²⁶ The political camp aims to rejuvenate an ailing political class through demonstrating a renewed political commitment to a generalized *janata* (public). The political camp thus entangles an abstract *janata* with particular, political self-interest. The figural tie between party-activists and leader is enacted as *seva* even as the party performs *seva* to the *janata*. Blood bank officials resent overt politicking; blood donation as pristine service, or *seva*, is considered by them to be beyond politics, or to belong to the sublime (i.e., not the dirty, competitive, profane) dimension of politics.²⁷ But beggars can’t be choosers. As a Kolkata-based donor recruitment specialist put it: “Actually, we do not consider political donation to be strictly voluntary—there is a political compulsion. They use us [i.e., the voluntary blood donation movement] to get votes on the basis of the consciousness we created among the public. They utilize this to get votes: ‘Look how much we contributed in giving blood.’ They have never done it. Making people conscious was done by us. They are reaping the harvest.”

The director of a blood bank run by an internationally known NGO in Chennai recalled to us a Congress-organized camp at the very site, twenty-five miles from the city, at which Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated: “This was on May 21 [his death anniversary], and we received eight donors. Two hundred people were there for the photos, and then they went.” For this doctor, that was the final straw. He no longer conducts “political” camps. A blood bank technician at a Delhi government hospital recounted a similar experience:

One camp I attended, most probably it was for Rajiv Gandhi—you will not believe—there was a corridor full of refreshments: all sorts of bananas and apples. There were about twenty-five beds. The workers were waiting for the VIP, Sonia Gandhi, to enter. Then Sonia came and about fifty people rushed and pushed into the tent; they all occupied one bed each. Their leader came. Only then would they let us prick, and they took

photographs, and the moment she left they gobbled the refreshments and ran away. I have seen this with my own eyes. So I feel it's nothing to do with doing good deeds on someone's death anniversary. Because when you do something like this you should do it very quietly, not with so many cameras around.

Similarly, we heard several complaints from doctors about last-minute cancellations of blood donation camps scheduled by different parties after it was announced that the party leader was unable to attend.

We are particularly concerned here with what we have called the "truth-force" of substances (D. Banerjee 2013, 240). Throughout this book, we will witness a variety of episodes in which excorporation of substance is held up (more and less convincingly) as the stuff of communicative truth: blood donation as the truth of one's political convictions and self-constancy; extracted human blood as a substance of the real, so to speak, in contestations over "genuine" and "fake" gurus. Excorporated blood objectifies and thereby provides evidence of commitment and sentiment in making them available for inspection. Such extractions set up vital and powerful analogies with other spillages of substances across space and time. In providing an account of the different ways in which blood extractions as forms of political statement generate enunciative force, the present work joins studies by Bernard Bate (2002; 2009) and Michael Carrithers (2010) to show how present-day forms of Indian political rhetoric, though creative and novel, draw heavily on earlier conventions of political iconography. Indian hemo-politics often refer to a Gandhian tradition of austerity and restraint, which at the same time is also a politics of notable "semiotic excess" (Spencer 2007, 15) belying the austerity it had seemed to suggest.

Discussing artistic style, Alfred Gell (1998, 157) equates psychological saliency with "the capacity, possessed only by painters with a developed personal style, to so engage the spectator's attention that the aesthetically significant aspects of the work of art are the ones which actually do attract our notice." For the present analysis, such saliency refers to the effects the organizers or "donors" hope or expect to achieve in the viewer by way of such a style. But there is also a more prosaic sense in which we employ the term "style," for the expression also refers, of course, to "those characteristics of an artist's work by reference to which we assign works to him" (Wollheim 1987, 197). In this sense, the use of blood in mass political milieus constitutes a distinct style of political expressionism. This book seeks both to define the genre and to discern reasons for its saliency for those who perform and witness it.

Of course, blood extraction is not one representation but a protean family of representations.²⁸ Political parties compete to collect the most donated blood in

Bengal; antisuperstition campaigners and the followers of a maligned guru each organize letter-writing campaigns in their blood; blood may be donated to mark pledges to build a corruption-free nation; underage schoolchildren are “forced” to donate their blood by Congress Party functionaries on the birth anniversary of slain former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi; blood is donated in protest at “political” attacks on it by devotees of a controversial devotional movement with ambiguous ties to Sikhism (see chapter 6).²⁹ In the Indian context, blood has proved an extremely productive material and medium of political communication—hence our effort here to describe a diverse and disparate Indian political hematology.

The examples discussed so far have featured blood donation camps conducted by political parties in which the transactional form at stake is “voluntary” (anonymous, non-remunerated) blood donation. However, this has not always been the case, as the following critical episode in the history of political blood donations makes clear. A Supreme Court order banning payment for blood came into effect in January 1998. Prior to that, as much as a third of all blood donations in India came from paid “professional” blood donors (Mudur 1998, 172). While paid donors are stigmatized by voluntary donor recruiters and in public discourse more generally as drug-addicted rickshaw drivers who place others at risk, on occasion various kinds of political and social activists have sought to define a “social” model of paid blood donation, according to which the cash that is generated is immediately transferred to a particular cause.³⁰ So it was perfectly legal when in 1988, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in West Bengal lined up its activists to sell their blood to raise funds for the building of the Bakreswar power plant. The CPI(M) was not the first outfit to encourage its members to sell their blood “for a cause.” For instance, activists belonging to the organization that later became the Association of Voluntary Blood Donors, West Bengal (AVBDWB, see chapters 4 and 5) in 1970s Kolkata sold their blood explicitly in order to financially support a funds-starved student medical institution. In instances such as these that figure throughout this book, the literal and the metaphorical properties of blood exchange places: “We founded a mobile medical unit *with our blood*,” an AVBDWB volunteer told us, while the CPI(M)’s slogan at the time was “*Rokto diye Bakreswar gorbo*” (“We shall build Bakreswar *with our blood*”).³¹

The CPI(M) in West Bengal had then been embroiled in a dispute with Rajiv Gandhi’s administration in Delhi, whom it accused of restricting funds for what had become a centerpiece of the party’s industrial strategy: “The Bakreswar Thermal Project initially faced serious problems, specially resource crunch. The then rulers of the Central Government took this issue in a political way” (Bhaṭṭācārya, Bīśvāsa, and Bhaṭṭācārya 1997, 224). In a spin upon what is probably the most

famous hematic political rallying cry in Indian history—Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose’s “Give me your blood and I will give you freedom” (see chapter 2)—the CPI(M)’s clarion call became “Give us blood and we will give you Bakreswar power plant.”³²

An official party history recalls that the agitation caused “literally [the party to have] a blood-relation with the people of the State” (Bhaṭṭācārya, Biśvāsa, and Bhaṭṭācārya 1997, 224). In a column of the CPI(M)’s online news magazine headlined “People of the State Made Bakreswar by Donating Blood,” the episode is remembered thus:

The whole Left Strength of Bengal then in 1988 had taken oath to build Bakreswar project by donating blood. So it was not just a thermal project to have been established, it was rather a history of Bengal’s real political will. Jyoti Basu finally laid the foundation stone in 1988 and the Thermal Power Plant started production in 1999. A thermal power plant is a sign of progression. But Bakreswar Thermal Power Plant is not just another power plant. The then State Government’s blueprints were moulded by the thousands of students, young men and women, working class beings, labourers, farmers of the state. To stop the Rajiv Gandhi-led Central Government’s conspiracy the people of West Bengal gave blood to build the Bakreswar Thermal Power Plant. The present chief minister of Bengal being an [*sic*] Congress MP, helped Rajiv Gandhi in every possible way to stop the Left Front Government. A section of media also joined in to a crack a laugh about the passion of the people. But the crowd had spoken out to them in that matter.³³

In addition to enabling the party to (claim to) form a substantial political relation with the people of Bengal (see also the discussion of Shiv Sena blood donation camps in chapter 3), there is also the striking similarity between activists’ blood offerings for the building of the plant and the role of blood sacrifice, or *bali dan*, at foundation ceremonies. “You can’t have a foundation ceremony,” as a Saurashtra Brahman told David Pocock (1973, 73), “without a blood sacrifice, it’s essential and that’s that.” And as Jonathan Parry’s Bhilai informants put it to him, “There is hardly a bridge, a dam or an irrigation canal within a hundred kilometres of Bhilai which can have been constructed without a real bali [sacrifice]” (2015, 15). Moreover, it is a longstanding idea that the victim is often human. “Rulers properly make sacrifices *on behalf of* their subjects,” suggests Parry, “but [this] often turns out to mean offering their subjects *as sacrifices*” (14).³⁴ Similarly, when a ruling party’s activists donate their blood—especially where there is the understanding that an irreversible depletion will result (see discussion in chapter 4)—then the boundary between sacrificing *on behalf of* and offering subjects

as sacrifices is blurred. Substances of the civic (blood for medical transfusion, steam and electricity for nation-building) intersect with the substance of the *bali dan* (sacrificial blood). While the selling of blood makes the Bakreswar case unique in the history of India's political hematology, its sacrificial dimension is not in the least exceptional—as we shall see in chapters 2–4.

It is difficult to quantify the number of units for transfusion that political blood donation events provide. Such events are less frequent than student or corporate organized ones, certainly in Delhi. And there seem to be fewer in Delhi than in Bengal, where local political rivalries are more frequently expressed through the medium of competitive blood donation camps, with different activist groups attempting to out-donate each other. That political camps do form a significant resource for blood banks, however, was made clear during a shortage experienced in Bengal in 2016, when the leader of the West Bengal Voluntary Blood Donors Forum, Apurba Ghosh, directly attributed the shortage to a concurrent state legislative assembly election:

The situation has turned from bad to worse as the Election Commission [EC] has issued notification imposing a ban on political parties to hold blood donation camps till the election is over. The election will start on April 4 and continue till May 5. The results will be out on May 19. Then there will be swearing in ceremony of the government. Things will become normal and blood donation camps can once again be held in July. Ghosh has requested the EC to allow blood donation camps to be held without banners or symbols of a political party. The state requires 60,000 to 70,000 units of blood per month which means around 9 lakh units are required per year. Kolkata alone requires around 4.5 lakh units per year. But as camps cannot be held since the code of conduct came into force, the collection of blood has dropped sharply.³⁵

Epoch Sanguinis

Of course, the liveliness of blood as a substance of political imagination and mediation is not unique to India.³⁶ In fact, in his work on the relation between (predominantly Christian) blood and politics, Gil Anidjar makes an ambitious claim: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are liquidated theological concepts” (Anidjar 2011, 2).³⁷ Anidjar's work is an insightful rejection of conventional periodizations of European political history that posit that “archaic” blood ties have come to be replaced by “modern” contractual political relations. In other words, Anidjar's account of political hematology rejects the