

The Didactic Death: Publicity, Instruction, and Body Donation

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DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION OR FURTHER CIRCULATION

What value does death acquire when body organs are pledged for transplantation? Deaths may be made public by a stated desire to donate, and a matter of public debate precisely because the desire is denied. This essay explores two case studies from India of attempts to donate organs: that of a condemned prisoner, and a former Marxist Chief Minister of West Bengal. One of these attempts was idealized and exalted, the other thwarted; both gave rise to considerable public conversation. We treat the public nature of these deathbed wishes as moral dramas, for at the heart of each is a quite wrenching contest over the donor's soul - or its this-worldly equivalent, his legacy - that serves equally as an opportunity to reignite projects of social reform and (re-)educate different social constituencies. We thus focus on the didactic functions of donation, where the principal issue at stake is the intention of the dying person to gift his or her organs. We ask: what does organ donation mean at the point of death? We argue that there is more at stake than just the possibilities of saving lives. Rather, these unfolding moral dramas become opportunities for, amongst other things, Brahminism to be rejected, superstition to be transcended, the values of a modernizing state to be reaffirmed, and a broad spectrum of civic virtues to be inculcated. Pledging one's body when death is imminent and inevitable becomes the final chance to re-write the course of a life, to make a worthy biographical statement, but ultimately to turn the intimately personal into something of public value. How does the dying donor speak? As murderer, Marxist—or more?

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This essay concerns the tutelary value of death. Focusing on India, we examine several recent highly public deaths that were the subject of considerable media commentary and deliberation, which suggest the emergence of an instructional idiom of dying. Imminent, expected deaths, made public by a stated desire on the part of the dying person to donate his or her organs and/or body, may be received either with public approbation or denunciation. Consequently, such a death may open out as a kind of moral drama, in which the attempt to donate can acquire a role both exemplary and pedagogical.[1] These deaths become rhetorical sites for elaborate public contests over biomoralities, particularly tensions between claims to modernization, reason, and scientific temperament on the one hand, and perceived superstition, ritual, and cultural narrow-mindedness on the other. The dying donor's gesture may become the final chance to re-write the course of a life, to make a worthy biographical statement. Such gestures may also set out examples and teach lessons, becoming occasions for, amongst other things, Brahminism to be rejected, superstition to be transcended, the values of a modernizing state to be reaffirmed, and a broad spectrum of civic virtues to be inculcated. Yet also important are the rhetorical and practical limits that may be placed on all these 'good things'; attempts to make a death didactic in a particular (modernising) manner may be countered by an emphasis on quite other forms of instruction occasioned by the public death.

We focus on two noteworthy 'didactic deaths': that of veteran Marxist and long-time West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu (1914-2010), and of convicted murderer and rapist Dhananjay Chatterjee (1965-2004), sentenced to death by hanging. Both figures publicly expressed desires to donate their organs upon death; both cases drew out ethico-moral lessons centred on the values of reason and public interest over

superstition and narrow family-mindedness. Basu attained the status of positive exemplar, his wishes honoured, idealized, and performed with considerable ceremony. Chatterjee, however, was ultimately held up as a different kind of example, a warning to other would-be rapists and murderers, his wish to donate becoming a matter of public debate precisely because it was denied.

The *locus classicus* of the didactic death in modern India is the anti-colonial freedom struggle, with ‘freedom fighter’ martyrs dying instructional deaths of a different kind. For instance, patriotic paintings of these heroes of the nationalist movement—their bloody heads offered to Mother India—were designed, in part, to offer their martyrdom as worthy of emulation (Ramaswamy 2008: 836). The first of our case-studies was offered by public officials and the media as a mode of dying similarly worthy of emulation, though for a different reason – for Basu’s passing was glorified as a prototypical and exemplary reason-valorizing death. In the second case, however, we find multiple rejections of a model of death that attempts redemption via the same ‘rational’ means so widely lauded in the prior case: its didactic value is that of negative exemplar. We emphasise therefore that the status of this kind of instructional death as an enduring feature of social life is not yet assured: it is, so to speak, a contested and an emergent genre of dying.

Barber (2009) has noted that analysis of news reports grants the possibility of attending to emergence: the reporting of events in piecemeal fashion, as they happen, and the recording of reader reactions, as these are being formed, creates both a testing-ground for new narratives as well as a record of the fragile contexts of their coming into being. In her comments on *Telling Lives* (2004), Arnold and Blackburn’s

recent edited work on biography and autobiography in India, Barber (2007: 183) notes further that the long-established South Asian genre of the exemplary narrative—a mode of life-writing ‘written not about oneself but only about others whose example one would wish to emulate’—persisted throughout the colonial period in tension with new forms of autobiographical writing. We see newspapers as key sites in which the genre of the exemplary narrative endures: a public re-writing, even a re-claiming, amidst the many dead-ends, thriving or faltering notions, trivia, and big stories of daily reportage. The result: exemplary lives (and deaths) are now writ far larger, thrust onto the national, even global, stage, courtesy of the processes of intense mediatisation through which the genre persists.

The sections that follow draw out the differing ways in which modernising significance is read into each of our two principal case studies. We ask how these publically stated, publically claimed desires to donate organs turn personal, biographical statements into something of wider instructional and civic value—recasting the value of death and life in the same broad stroke.

Pedagogical contexts

At least part of the utility of colonial (Western) medicine in India for many of its advocates and practitioners was as a tool to sweep away caste, custom and superstition; an explicit method, in India as elsewhere, of curing not only bodies, but also superstition (Arnold 1993: 58). Indeed, Western medicine, as a pedagogical project, was the therapeutic arm of a wider civilizing process. Of paradigmatic importance here was the matter of anatomy and dissection.

Local negative attitudes towards dissection were viewed by colonial commentators as evidence of the superstition from which colonial rule would liberate them. But anatomy was considered not only practically ‘necessary’, but (iconically) ‘exemplary’ according to Arnold (1993: 5). It had become firmly established as the ‘scientific keystone to the study of medicine’ (Gorman 1988: 284) and it was so heavily freighted with taboo and stigma that the project of fostering a cluster of eager trainee dissectors become representative of the wider civilizing mission invoked by the British as justifying their presence in the subcontinent.

The British achieved a measure of success, resulting in a torrent of triumphalist rhetoric (Gorman 1988: 285). Upon the first dissection by an Indian in 1836, Fort William fired a gun salute in order to celebrate Indians having—in the words of one commentator—finally risen ‘superior to the prejudices of their earlier education and thus boldly flung open the gates of modern medical science to their fellow countrymen’ (Arnold 1993: 6). And, notwithstanding present-day reports of discomfort experienced by Hindu vegetarian medical trainees when dissecting cadavers (Vijayabhaskar *et al.* 2005), it is certainly true that one rarely hears nowadays of trainee doctors declining to dissect cadavers. The question now concerns less demand than supply, with a corresponding displacement of obstructionist ‘superstition’. The present situation therefore parallels that of the earlier career of anatomy: those who do not sign up for the post-mortem donation of their bodies and/or organs (because, usually, of their wish to undergo conventional cremation rites), like the medical trainees who earlier withdrew in disgust from dissection classes, become, by default, less-than-modern. As was the case in colonial times with reference to dissection, the donation of the body and/or its parts takes on a

paradigmatic status as a means to shed – or to emphatically demonstrate having shed – superstition, and to make modern subjects. Now, as Arnold (1993: 294) notes, ‘the colonizing processes of colonial medicine could never find their fulfilment in colonial hands alone’. The successor to British colonial physicians and administrators is an enlightened Indian elite, usually embodied in civil-social institutions with connections to the nationalist movement, which exists less ‘as a quaint remnant of colonial modernity’ than as a ‘serious protagonist of a project of cultural modernization still to be completed’ (Chatterjee 1998: 63). But where for colonial officials it was a readiness to dissect cadavers that was saturated with modernizing significance as a critical marker of rationalization, the equivalent marker for the present-day progressive elite is a readiness to voluntarily donate bodily material.

The medical community’s attribution of people’s reluctance to donate body substances with superstition and benightedness is not, of course, limited to India. [2] But in contemporary India, the donation of bodily substances—whether organs, blood or the body in its entirety—has attained a very particular stature as both critical *means and evidence* of scientifically oriented ‘reform’: a stature consequent on the widespread opinion that it is in this domain that an intensely concentrated set of taboos, rituals and other assorted forms of ‘backwardness’, compelling to the population at large and extremely disruptive to the cause of donation, reside. Backwardness, as Cohen (2007: 107) explains, ‘enjoys a sort of national conversation’ in India, and the domain of biological exchange—the hindrances, indicative of backwardness, to which it is subject—is a particular locus of this conversation. Indeed, a brief review of news reports on campaigns to foster acts of blood and organ donation turns up references to ‘superstitions, taboos, obscure ideas

of bygone centuries [that] stand in the way of progress', 'inherent prejudices and religious taboos', 'poor people with religious biases', and the need to 'serve' society by 'trying to rid it of superstition'. [3] Recent research reports on obstacles to organ and cornea donation broadly confirm these media assessments—in fact calling upon the media to embark on enhanced public awareness and education campaigns to address the problem (Dhaliwal 2002; Gupta 2009; Shaishav and Desai 2011:271). Briefly, some of the most significant inhibiting 'taboos' and 'misconceptions' recorded are (1) the idea that any organ taken from a person will be missing in their next birth; for example, an eye donor will be reborn without eyes or else blind; (2) an attachment to cremation as an integral and indispensable life cycle ritual (known as *dah sanskar* (the 'sacrament of fire') or as *antyeshti* (the 'last sacrifice') (Parry 1994: 178), understood to preclude body donation; and (3) the idea that blood, once donated, results in a permanent volumetric deficit, so that its donation becomes equivalent to an amputation.

Of course, there is a credible argument that progress in this area is hindered more by the lack of an adequate organisational framework or coordination between governmental and medical agencies than by such popular 'beliefs', but it is the latter explanation that often dominates discussion of 'shortages' of this or that bodily substance. Given the distillate of taboo and misapprehension that is said to characterize responses to donation prospects, the perception has become entrenched amongst rationalist groups and other social reformers that to persuade a person to accede to such exhortations *is to persuade them to accede to much more besides*. Thus have body, organ and blood donation come to be situated at the heart of Indian projects of social reform – defined as iconically reformist medical practices and

pressed into service as instruments of pedagogy. As with the performance of dissection in 1830s India, pledging one's body and/or organs provides dazzling evidence to social reformers that, in the words of a colonial anatomy professor, 'the prejudices of ages [may indeed be] overthrown and the iron bonds of a most debasing and mischievous superstition burst asunder' (cited in Gorman 1988: 285).

Dying demonstrations

The professor's words echo through contemporary rationalist activism, which institutes reason as the only logical foil to the superstitions associated with religious belief and practice. While the Indian rationalist movement by no means encompasses all Indian attitudes toward rationality and humanism, and is itself significantly internally differentiated (Quack 2011), it does in certain key ways set the terms of debate that critically frame each of our case studies below. To offer only a brief background: Indian rationalists first organized at around the time of independence, inspired by such radical social reformers as Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), Periyar Ramasami (1879-1973; founder of the Tamil Self-Respect Movement) and famed atheist Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, more popularly known as Gora (1902-1975). Each of these reformers was particularly concerned with addressing caste inequities and Brahminical hegemony, and contemporary Indian rationalism is similarly invested in undoing the ritual authority traditionally vested in the Brahmin priest. Rationalist organizations include the Delhi-based Indian Rationalist Association (IRA; founded 1949) and the Satya Shodhak Sabha (Society of Truth Seekers), as well as others like West Bengal's Gana Darpan that take their cue from the rationalist movement but have more specific agendas (motivating body donation as a means of promoting scientific temper). Still other organizations focus emphatically on secular

social development work, as on myth- and ‘guru-busting’: sometimes dramatically exposing religious ‘miracles’ as essentially shams, and gurus as leaders who propagate fears to hold their followers captive. In 1997, the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations was established to coordinate the work of a growing range of rationalist, atheist, skeptic, and secularist groups in different regions of India. FIRA is affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union, suggesting an increasingly international framework of operation. Rationalist organizations are not typically political parties, though their agendas, approaches, and membership overlap considerably with those of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)—parties which have been particularly influential in West Bengal – significantly, the state in which our two cases are situated - and Kerala.

Rationalist and science promotion organizations throughout India stage blood donation ‘camps’ and events at which people can sign their ‘last will and testament’ to donate their bodies and organs after their death—as declarations of their undying rationality at the point of death. We offer the following examples as indicative of the iconicity of bodily donation within movements to promote a ‘scientific temper’ and its stature as not only evidence but means of reform: an Indian *Telegraph* news article headlined ‘51 donors follow Ellora example’ describes a function organized by the Ellora Vigyan Manch in Guwahati in honour of Ellora Roychoudhury who, five years earlier, her death imminent, had pledged her body for medical training and research. Fifty-one ‘philanthropists’ followed her example in pledging their bodies in the presence of the local senior sub-registrar. Local social activist Anima Guha, who also pledged her body at the same event, reportedly ‘appreciated the efforts of the mancha

in spreading scientific temper and fighting superstitions... “The Ellora Vigyan Mancha, since its inception, has launched a movement to spread scientific temper among the people and to fight superstition. In response to our campaign, 219 people have so far pledged their eyes and bodies for the service of humanity.” [4] We think this example demonstrates that it is precisely because cadaver donation, as one news report put it, ‘is still a radical idea in society’, impeded by ‘useless rituals’, that it has become both icon and instrument for a rationalist movement engaged in a pedagogical mission to change a purportedly backward society. [5] Of particular interest is the report’s emphasis on Ellora Roychoudhury’s original pledge: as an *example* inspiring others to likewise pledge their bodies. Deaths, where body donation is successfully facilitated, become a site of moral instruction, a way of dying that others are now encouraged to emulate.

Elite rationalist institutions are not by any means the only proponents of bodily donation in India. We have written elsewhere of north Indian devotional movements as some of the most prolific providers of voluntarily donated blood in the country, and of the invocation of Hindu ethics and imageries in promoting the cause of body donations (Copeman 2006, 2009*a*; Reddy 2007). When rationalism replaces religion as inspiration for social reform, however, or when religious organizations endorse modernizing, democratic logics so as to become platforms for tissue collection, our point is that these modular forms acquire a distinctly demonstrative edge. The obituaries of noted rationalist activists nearly always record that their bodies were donated to medical science. So, for instance, after the Keralan rationalist leader Joseph Edamaruku died in 2006, it was noted in the second paragraph of his official obituary that, ‘As per his wishes his eyes were donated to All India Institute of

Medical Sciences (AIIMS). The body is now kept at Kerala House for Public Homage. Later in the evening the body will be handed over to the anatomy department of AIIMS, for the use of medical students'. [6] The prominence of this biographical detail in Edamaruku's obituary is surely telling: doubly powerful as a means to circumvent normative rituals of death *and* as a contribution to medical science. Body donation fulfilled is an article of faith in reason, a proof of atheism and self-consistency.

Three years later in 2009 the eminent Indian atheist and figurehead of the contemporary Indian rationalist movement B. Premanand lay dying in a hospital in Coimbatore. As he did, the editor of the journal *Bangalore Skeptic* sent an email to a rationalist list detailing Premanand's deteriorating health. He asserted that while 'his vital organs have been affected', his 'brain and his ideology remain intact, and we wanted the world to know about it and to make a declaration on his behalf that it remains so'. This was important because there was apparently a rumour that, on his deathbed, this noted atheist had 'started believing in god and supernatural powers'. His rationalist-friends therefore put a statement to him for his signature (his hands were weak so a thumb impression was taken) to counter the rumors and allegations. This 'declaration of attitude and temperament' stated:

It is common for the purveyors of superstitions and such anti rational forces to start spreading rumors about rationalists turning to god and other supernatural forces at the end of their lives and becoming devotees of gods and god men of various types. It is also claimed that at times of crises that we staunch rationalists turn to spiritualism and religion. I wish to clarify that as on today the twentieth of September 2009 I remain a staunch rationalist and wish to

place on record the following: A. I continue to be a rationalist of full conviction. B. I do not believe in any supernatural power. All the powers that we encounter are in the realm of nature and nothing exists beyond that. C. I do not believe in the existence of the soul or rebirth. D. I have not turned to any religion, god or any sort of spiritual pursuits. E. When I pass away I shall be leaving only my body which is to be donated to a medical college and no spirit or soul to cause problems for the living. [7]

The final point about avoiding causing problems for the living is significant. This is a reference to the widespread understanding that dead persons possess a continued (and unwelcome) existence in disembodied, ghostly form, and that they must be placated with a variety of offerings. In a reversal of this idea of the dead causing difficulties for the living, the director of an atheist organization in Vijayawada states that atheists who, ‘in recognition of the fact that there’s no life after death pledge for organ, eye and body donation’, devise ceremonies which ‘try to improve the quality of life here on earth’. [8] The contrast is clear: the dead may, via body donation, not disrupt but *assist* the living. Moreover, the critical reassertion of a commitment to body donation in Premanand’s rejoinder to the rumor that he had recanted seems to point again emphatically to the status of body donation as a special indicator of self-consistency and steadfastness. Premanand’s atheism transparently endures and the lesson elaborated in his life reaffirmed in his dying commitment to the donation of his body.

‘What Jyoti Babu did in his death...’

We turn now from the indicative to the precipitative function of this form of dying. How does such a death teach? We begin with a scenario which, though rare for being smooth around the edges, is important for demarcating the space in which this sort of ideal gets manifested. This is the case of Jyoti Basu, the former Marxist Chief Minister (state-level head of government) of West Bengal (1977-2000), who died on 17 January 2010, aged 95. We seek to show how newspaper obituaries' unyielding attention to the former Chief Minister's donation-in-death brought the virtues of body donation fully into 'charismatic focus' (Mazzarella 2006: 482). Our argument therefore connects with Cohen's (2008: 35) observation that the biographies of Chief Ministers, across India, constitute a distinct charismatic form which 'collapses [together] a series of ideological and policy commitments, distinct populist aesthetics, and biographical narrative'. Here, the charismatic 'life story' of the former Chief Minister becomes the stimulus for a major media campaign to boost body donation. Together with the solemn ritual aesthetic of a state funeral, this death is glorified and offered up to citizens as worthy of emulation. The politician's biography is thus mobilized as a key contemporary instance of the Indian tradition of 'lives as lessons', which crosscuts religious denominations (Arnold and Blackburn 2004: 8, 20). A tradition, we argue, that finds one of its most vital present-day manifestations in the print media.

Press reports focused unremittingly on the fate of Basu's corpse:

Muted slogans...wafted in the chilly afternoon air as Basu's body wrapped in the red flag emerged from the hospital in a hearse after 3pm...Groups of mourners stood by the side of the road as the hearse made its way in a 30-car convoy to...the mortuary Peace Haven...Basu's body will lie embalmed there

all of tomorrow. On Tuesday, it will be taken to...the CPM party office and finally to SSKM Hospital. As Basu had wished, the body will be donated to the medical school. [9]

Subsequent articles lingered on the donation, and they soon began to seek lessons from it:

Basu's eyes were removed soon after his death this morning. His body will be handed over to the SSKM Hospital authorities on Tuesday...Roy, the general secretary of Gana Darpan, an organisation that promotes the cause of body donation, said: "The nonagenarian Basu's organs (almost all dysfunctional when he died) will not be of much use any more. But his body will help medical students learn more. *Above all, it will inspire many people to donate their mortal remains for the benefit of future generations.* [10]

Reports emphasized the novelty of a state funeral which incorporated the choreography of a cadaver donation:

Till the sonorous strains of *The Last Post* being played by the army band began wafting in the winter air, there had been nothing to suggest that this wasn't a conventional state funeral. The gun carriage bearing Basu's body stood in the middle with four pall-bearers. [A party official] made his way through the throng of VIPs, carrying the document Basu had signed pledging his body to the cause of medical science. Son Chandan had handed the certificate to the front chairman moments earlier, so that Basu's "last rites" could be completed in the manner he had wished. [The] Health minister...joined...a team of doctors in receiving the document. The front

chief then took the microphone. “In keeping with Jyotibabu’s last wish, the body is being handed over to the [hospital]. They have received it and have given us a receipt in exchange”. [11]

The concern with the former Chief Minister’s body was marked by intense fascination. Conscious of the preserved bodies of Lenin and Mao Zedong, one report was headlined ‘Party balks at embalm tradition’. [12] Another was headlined ‘Pioneer seeks Basu brain: Good mental faculties make organ ideal sample’. [13] Several days later came confirmation: ‘The brain that had ruled Bengal for 23 years has been permanently preserved’. [14] Strikingly, though the party may have balked at the embalming of the body á la Lenin, part-preservation *is* achieved (by other means, and – ostensibly, at least – for other purposes): ‘Basu’s body was donated to the hospital’s anatomy department on January 19...After that it was injected with embalming fluid and put in a temperature-controlled cold chamber’. Intimate procedural and corporeal details are then extensively elaborated:

According to doctors, the dissection of Basu’s skull started from his forehead. “After taking the brain out, we dipped it in formalin solution”... The doctors also plan to preserve the other body parts over the next four days. “...we will dissect his body to bring out his lungs, intestines, kidneys, heart and liver. The condition of the body is still very good for preservation of its organs,” said a doctor.

The doctors stressed that Basu’s body was fit for preservation, though there was fluid accumulation in several parts:

“Our doctors did a real good job. The fluid was partly drained out by cutting the skin in some areas. Some of it was dried inside the body with the help of chemical embalming.”...The doctors also plan to preserve Basu’s bones [but] are uncertain about [their] condition [...] which may have become fragile because of fluid accumulation and old age. However, the authorities are still undecided on whether to put his organs in the department’s anatomy museum. “We are waiting for instructions from the state government.”[...] [A] number of senior professors and students from the other departments wanted a glimpse of Basu’s body”. [15]

A number of points proceed from this complex signficatory conjuncture, some of which, for South Asianist scholars, will appear strangely familiar. Now the political-institutional form of the south Indian ‘big man’ may equally be a guru, politician or another category of leader. Reminiscent of charismatic kingship, they embody a redistributive centrality, their constituents attracted by their altruistic patronage (Mines & Gourishankar 1990: 763, 780). Basu, of course, appears to fit just such a template of the generous leader, even if his kingly zenith was reached only in death. Connected to this is a preoccupation with the power after death of the deceased’s body parts: the dispersal of powerful figures’ limbs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries could result in their becoming shrine centres, with the figures’ dominion being therefore, ‘still...an active and expanding network of power even after his death’ (Bayly 1989: 403). Though the news reports pay attention to the frailty and fragility of Basu’s cadaver (the ‘fluid accumulation and old age’ of his bones, etc.), the will to preserve, the lingering enumeration of the individualized parts of Basu’s body and the capture of knowledge through them, and finally the seeking of

understanding through the very organ of Basu's own understanding – his brain; all this, perhaps, suggests an attempt to incorporate the political big man's power, *especially* at the moment of his death.

But probably most telling here was the former Chief Minister's communism. His donation was the post-mortem enactment of a 'physiological collectivism'. [16] Basu's body was donated *by the party*, the stately handing over itself being incorporated into the high drama of communist political ritual. Several of Basu's relatives were reported to be reluctant to honour his pledge, feeling 'it would be better not to put [Basu's corpse] under the scalpels of anatomy students in view of his advanced age and public sentiments'. [17] Ultimately, though, the family 'left the decision to the party', and the donation was effected. [18] The collectivist (and emulative) connection is made explicit: 'Yesterday, I heard what Jyotibabu had said after pledging his body – "I knew that communists worked for the people till their last breath. But I didn't know it would be possible to serve the people even after my death." I was so moved that I decided to donate my body'. [19]

This is framed as a redemption of the CPI(M)'s political mistakes. Obituaries refer to the 'stagnation' that he oversaw and other 'failures of Basu's long reign', but laud his exemplary pledge and its honouring, with Basu becoming an even better Marxist in death than he was in all his life. We argue that in some respects, pledging his body allowed Basu, at the point of his death, to re-focus his political legacy. We also see as significant the heavily orchestrated visibilization of this act of service. For it was in part its extreme visibility which made Basu's donation ideal for a programme of public instruction. As mentioned above, local newspapers turned the event of Basu's

death into a campaign for body donation. The *Calcutta Telegraph* headlined its January 22, 2010 front page report, 'Body pledged to be like Basu', and presented sound bites from people who had previously been reluctant to donate their bodies, but who now, having witnessed Basu's corporeal magnanimity, had had a change of heart.

An obituary published in the Kerala-based e-magazine *CounterCurrents.org*, however, drew a more radical set of lessons from Basu's death which related to waste, superstition and anti-Brahminism. [20] Roughly half of the lengthy obituary focuses on Basu's donation-in-death. The author asserts that 'Jyoti Babu has created an example. He has proved that a true Marxist remains true to Marxist philosophy or not succumbing to any religious rituals...[he] lived up to his convictions, a true Marxist, an atheist and a firm believer in science'. As in the cases of Premanand and Edamaruku mentioned earlier, the emphasis here is on legacy and self-consistency, body donation affirming the former and providing redoubtable proof of the latter. The donation provided a further confirmation: 'Jyoti Basu has debunked all those who feel that India cannot be a country of nonbelievers'. [21]

From the radical humanist vantage point of this obituary, Basu's gesture offered the tantalizing prospect of taking away one of Brahmin priests' principal means of employment – the conduct of funerary rituals. His donation, moreover, is the *reverse* of political double standards:

Claiming to die for the masses, we have seen our political class like to be cremated among weeping people and amidst the chant of Vaidik Mantras by

aristocratic Brahmins...The cremation of a political leader is again an opportunity for greedy priestly class to pontificate us on greatness of religious virtues for the purpose of spreading their virus.

Further:

The racist brahmanical philosophy has preached us that donating your eyes and body is dangerous. Jyoti Basu has saved us from priestly pontification...In the villages, people offer their income to Brahmins in hope the dead person would get it. If we have to make the brahmanical priestly class redundant, we must follow what Jyoti Babu did, by donating our bodies and shunning the rituals, we are so fond of, in the name of our culture. One hope, our political class will learn a lesson from this that life is meant to serve the people and it ends here, there is no point in getting yourself purified by the priestly class which has cheated the people for centuries in the name death and birth. [22]

Though the obituary does refer to the furnishing of medical science and possible saving of lives consequent on Basu's gesture, there is clearly far more at stake. Basu's public donation became an opportunity for, amongst other things, Brahminism to be rejected, humanism to be emphasized, and superstition to be transcended. An exhilarating prospect of humanistic reversal and subtraction is speculated on: not gifts from the living to the dead, but gifts from the dead to the living. And in the process, the mediation of the grasping Brahmin priest is eliminated.

Reformist anti-Brahmin movements have sought, of course, to bypass the priestly class for centuries. Here, however, we witness a new and hitherto unexplored manner

of achieving this. Pinney (2004: 190) has described how mass-produced images of the gods 'gives formerly excluded classes access to all the high gods, whom they can [now] approach directly without the intercession of priests'. Copeman (2011) has explored controversies generated by the giving of ritual donations online – donations conventionally given via Brahmin ritual specialists. If the internet is a near-classic example of a disintermediating technology, we see that the logics of body donation that emerge from Basu's death suggest equally rich possibilities for disintermediating the Brahmin priest. That is, by recasting the mediations involved in handling death and the dying, and replacing one set of social contingencies with their purportedly more modern and transparent others.

The lessons learned from Basu's exemplary death were thus numerous and varied. The aforementioned polemical obituary might constitute an 'alternative' understanding of the death's didacticism—certainly, we did not find the anti-Brahminical angle replicated in many other sources dealing with Basu's death—but online commentators seemed to agree that the donation-in-death possessed instructional value for the eradication of superstition and inculcation of civic virtues. There was also agreement about the donation itself: Basu commits publicly to donating a year before he dies; his family, though to some degree hesitant, does not object. His eyes go to a recipient, the rest to 'medical research'; his 'political mistakes' are redeemed. No one tries to obstruct the donation. Indeed, it is universally extolled. This is not the case in our second case-study which complicates the idea of exemplarship as it has been manifested thus far. The events we turn to now offer a form of exemplarship less simply emulative and more in accord with Humphrey's (1997: 41, 43) model of Mongolian exemplarship as providing a

discursive space for deliberation and contestation about ideals, and the extent and place of 'reason' in Indian modernity.

What Dhananjoy Chatterjee did in his *life*...

Set against the idealized scenario of Basu's death, is that of Dhananjoy Chatterjee in August 2004. Dhananjoy Chatterjee was sentenced to death for the rape and murder of a schoolgirl in Kolkata in 1990. He had migrated earlier from his ancestral village Chhatna, also in Bengal, to work in the city as a security guard at the building where the victim was a resident. During August 2004 the Indian press relentlessly, and in great detail, covered the build up to India's first execution in 9 years. For many years Chatterjee's lawyers had sought to have his sentence overturned, but as the date of the execution approached, Chatterjee is reported to have 'calmed anxious officials' at [the] Central Jail in Kolkata, telling them, 'Don't worry, I will walk to the gallows'. He is said to have asked for *bhajans* [devotional music] to be played, so that in the hours before his death 'strains of devotional songs played on a music system outside his cell, filled the jail', and his last words, spoken on the morning of August 14th [reportedly] were: 'I forgive you all. May God bless you'. Of particular significance, for our purposes, was Dhananjoy's reported wish to donate his eyes and kidneys.

As it happens his request was not fulfilled—newspapers reported that nobody wanted the kidneys of a murderer, and his family members did not provide the consent that would have enabled his eyes to be removed. The publicization of Dhananjoy's wish to donate his organs gave rise to a vigorous public debate, which we explore here. We pay particular attention to how Dhananjoy's (at this point prospective) death was framed as possessing compelling didactic value, but for a different set of lessons to

those that we discussed above. Two principal lessons emerged. First, there is the idea that an ethical narrative of retribution and deterrence must not be diluted or in any other way subverted. There are two rejections here: the state's rejection of his plea for mercy, and onlookers' rejection of his organs. Both rejections rest on the 'heinous nature' of Dhananjoy's crimes. While the state affirms the court directive to capital punishment (in the face of human rights protests), the commenting public reject Dhananjoy's body as now inherently unworthy of further circulation. Thus both the modernizing Indian state and informal online contributors, for their independent reasons, *reject* Dhananjoy's wishes precisely in order to claim his body as an ethical example—and to serve as such, any attempt to write his story as something other than a murder and violator must be denied. Second, a set of lessons are directed towards Dhananjoy's family. In believing that Dhananjoy's caste status would save him, and in refusing consent for organ removal, the family is depicted as mired in ritualistic brahminism and other non-rational sensibilities, narrowly familistic, lacking in public spiritedness. So if the didactic value of Jyoti Basu's death originated in his laudable intension to donate his body, in the case of Dhananjoy Chatterjee, for many onlookers, the prisoner's express wish to donate his body is precisely that which could – and therefore must not be allowed to - inhibit this death's didactic value (as an exemplary deterrent). But what we find is not so simple as one value (that of medical usefulness) being outweighed by another value (that of exemplary deterrence) – competing instrumentalisms, so to speak. Other lessons are there to be learnt, too. The obstructionist family joins Dhananjoy as negative exemplar, for if Dhananjoy's organs must not be circulated the grounds of their non-circulation must nevertheless not be those laid out by the family. The grounds of the family's objection are themselves exemplary, in a negative sense.

For some commentators, Dhananjay Chatterjee's desire to donate his organs was indeed proof of his repentance. For others, however, it was simply a kind of subterfuge to gain public sympathy and thus to avoid the execution he deserved. In one Internet chat room, under the heading 'Should Dhananjay be hanged?', 'snowpony' writes that 'the poor thing has agreed to donate his organs that only the selfless or those who pray for God's forgiving could do'. 'Debasish Ghoshal' declares: 'I always wanted him to die, but now that he wants to donate his organs, I feel that the devil in him has changed'. Under the heading 'Noble work at last!' one contributor states: 'At last, God has given him a chance to do something good. Let him go ahead with donating his body parts'. For this minority of sympathetic writers, then, an ethic of deterrence should not be extended in order to block Dhananjay's laudable attempt at recouping the remaining value his life has. [23]

However, these contributions provoked numerous heated objections. "I may not be all for capital punishment," 'Sahani Joshi' remarks, "but its kinda irritating to see a sympathetic tinge added to the whole drama." Another quotes a proverb in Hindi, *sau choohe kha ke billi haz ko chali* ('after having eaten a hundred mice, the cat goes on Haj'), suggesting that we should be suspicious of Chatterjee's turn to virtue, given the dreadfulness of his prior actions. 'Sanjaychande' suggests that one has to attain the status of donor, and that Chatterjee doesn't qualify: 'He has committed a heinous crime...He is no noble soul to donate his organs. I can't even imagine the sympathetic wave you are trying to create. It's absurd to show even a tinge of pity.' The acuity of such arguments is further underlined when one considers that giving in India is frequently understood as a sign of superiority (Appadurai 1985: 237). Indeed, giving

may be used politically by hitherto symbolically peripheral groups and individuals as precisely a means of asserting (and attaining) a dramatically higher (caste and/or class) status (Säävälä 2001). Hence, these writers' forceful attempt to negate what they see as a contrivance on the part of Dhananjoy to attain the prestigious position of benefactor. As another contributor bluntly put it: 'do not accept his anything. Let us finish him completely'.

Dhananjoy's desire to donate thus conflicts with these contributors' desire that he die a particular sort of didactic death—an execution, in public view, one which consequently stands as an example to other would-be rapists and murderers. Dhananjoy's claim, in their view, is to a nobility that would render his death a martyrdom, a claim that per force must be denied for it hints at a most offensive analogy: to the revered Punjabi revolutionary and freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, hanged by the British on March 23, 1931, a date now tellingly marked as Shaheed Diwas, or Martyr's day. 'Sahani Joshi's sardonic: "Is Dhananjoy some Bhagat Singh, is he dying a martyrs death?" is matched by 'Sanjay's much more definitive assertion, "He is no Bhagat Singh goddamn!" The now-iconic 1930s portraits of Bhagat Singh offering his severed head to a deified Mother India point to the exemplary character of his martyrdom (Pinney 2004: 126-130). Accepting Dhananjoy's other body parts would be tantamount to placing him in Shaheed Bhagat Singh's own esteemed lineage, a parodic travesty of the Indian ideal of bodily sacrifice. Dhananjoy's desire to donate his organs here appears a means of re-writing a biography and creating an alternative legacy that has no legitimacy in the narrative these commentators seek, and therefore must stand rejected in order to retain its particular didactic value. A

legacy of corporeal magnanimity must not be allowed to undermine the legacy *they* intend (exemplary deterrence).

A further objection is aired, hinted at already, by ‘Manoj Tuli’:

I wish he had never been born and many will agree with me. Now, please do not give the eyes of this bugger to anyone else. These are the same pair of eyes who saw the poor girl (Hetal) and sent a message to the brain to rape and then kill her. And don’t give his kidney to anyone else, this is the same kidney which used to be of a rapist. The DNA might just match the recipient and he might just become the next Dhananjoy. And please do not use his blood or skin or heart or any other replaceable part of his body not even bones and bone marrow. Don’t even think of using his body as fertilisers of crops! No leather work out of him also. Just get rid of him somehow, with minimum pollution to the environment. [24]

The disquieting idea that recipients might unwittingly incorporate Dhananjoy’s moral qualities along with his organs connects with a large body of literature that focuses on the particulate transmissibility of personhood and the politics of substance in India. Cooked food, cloth, unreciprocated gifts and detached parts of the body may all serve, in certain contexts, as ‘powerful media for the flow of bio-moral qualities between persons’ (Laidlaw 2000: 629).[25] The dangerous potential for the corporeal distribution of murderous intentions—the possibility of yet another deviant legacy—becomes a further reason to refuse Dhananjoy’s donation, or to establish, beyond doubt, his essential bioineligibility. [26]

Such objections on the grounds of corporeal transmissibility operate in a biomoral register that would be inadmissible from the standpoint of Indian rationalist activists who would read Dhananjoy's body as holding nothing more or less than biomedical value. And yet, the value of even Jyoti Basu's body was not in the first instance biomedical. On the contrary, in both cases presented, the worth of donor bodies, and the exemplary value of the respective deaths, was assessed first on the bare evidence of their lives. Whatever his failings, Basu died still as the 'the best Prime Minister India never had'—he was offered the country's Prime Ministership in 1996, but was compelled by the Party to turn it down on concerns over whether the Left would be able to control a coalition government without compromising its Marxism—his donation a commendable final affirmation of the steadfastness of his rationalist atheism that ultimately could forgive all flaws. Dhananjoy Chatterjee, by contrast, had no such legacy or philosophical convictions to affirm, only his legal conviction to contest and the worth of a life to redeem.

In the latter effort, he was blocked not so much by the biomoral objections of the newspaper reading public who remained uncertain about how his body might cause 'problems for the living,' but by the backwardness and incivility (as it is presented in the print media) of his own family, who refused their son's claim to modern subjectivity via organ donation. For the execution, the family remained in their ancestral village of Chhatna, several hundred kilometres from Kolkata, and they did not pick up the body. Dhananjoy's father had refused to believe that his son would hang: 'Dhananjoy is the son of a Brahmin and I believe Goddess Kali will not allow the hanging of a Brahmin'.^[27] The father's statement harks back to colonial debates about capital punishment and the 'inviolable' body of the Brahmin. Killing a Brahmin

has traditionally been understood as the most heinous of crimes (Lipner 1989: 45, 47). Controversy arose in colonial India about whether law codes should exempt Brahmin caste members—even convicted murderers—from execution (Bayly 1999: 87). Dhananjoy’s mother fasted for the week before the execution and the family threatened to commit suicide *en masse* if the sentence was effected. Chatterjee himself, though, had begun to accept that his hanging was inevitable, stating that he hoped to be reborn as a rich man because only rich men get justice—a statement poignantly insisting that it was class rather than caste that counted in his circumstances. [28] This was one difference between Dhananjoy and his family.

Another difference lay in their commitment to divergent categories of donation. Even as commentators in the blog world were rejecting Dhananjoy’s claims to nobility, alternative biography, and even to a rationalism achieved via organ donation, his parents were simultaneously portrayed as thwarting a worthy, civic-minded donative act. On the one hand, Dhananjoy’s mother is reported to have spent the night before the execution in the village’s Kali temple, presumably making offerings there.[29] On the other, the family is subjected to criticism for its failure to provide consent (as the law requires) for the fulfillment of Dhananjoy’s virtuous donation. When, after the execution had been carried out, the family was asked for its consent, it reportedly reacted with incredulity: ‘They didn’t let him live, now they want his eyes and kidneys’ (cited in Roy and Dutta 2005: 7). Dhananjoy’s family is thus depicted as inhabiting an abject space of backwardness. Unwilling to suppress their grief and ‘superstitious’ beliefs concerning the inviolability of the Brahmin body in favor of the abstract precepts of bourgeois civic-mindedness and modern legal norms, they stand, in this narrative, distinctly on the verge of civility (Cohen 2007: 107).

So how and what did this death teach? One lesson was, of course, to do with social position. The rejection of Dhananjoy's Brahminism as forming a bar to his death is the rejection of the argument that his social position will save him, which has an ironic resonance with the anti-capital punishment support that Dhananjoy also plentifully received. Anti-capital punishment activists paint a picture of Dhananjoy as impoverished, lower class and disenfranchised—a person who, although Brahmin, is without political connections and thus without hope of escaping the gallows. If class trumps caste in this narrative as a major determinant of social worth and influence, in Basu's case they were more tightly imbricated. After all, the eulogies and outpouring of grief upon the death of Basu were conditional, said one article, on his caste status: 'It would not have been the same if he did not belong to an aristocratic family or upper caste bhadrak'. [30] The public mortal event thus brings to the fore *without resolving* contestation over what counts as a worthwhile social position in a 'time of expedited social transformation' (Battaglia 1999: 136).

Further, South Asian 'kin-mindedness' has long been seen by both colonial and postcolonial commentators as detrimental to the formation of Western-style 'bourgeois civic culture' (Mazzarella 2003: 139). The media's negative portrait of Dhananjoy's family indeed feeds into a wider narrative about the problems of narrow familism as an obstructive force in the arena of post-mortem bodily donations. Even in the idealized case of Basu his relatives are reported to have expressed reservations. Though the following quotation from the *CounterCurrents.org* obituary refers to the political class, its complaint about families frustrating body donation reflects a more generally felt grievance amongst those wishing to foster bodily donation:

Politicians and their *chamchas* i.e. followers [or sycophants], use this opportunity [of the death of a political leader] to declare their undenyng faith in God as well as on priestly class. Most of the politicians in India have succumbed to this as they might have been atheists in their personal lives but their family never let it be so. At the end despite their being atheists or non believers, their family opted for a religious cremation for various political purposes. [31]

Dhananjoy's obstructionist family thus stands at one end of a wider field of familistic blockage: where the political *chamchas* are apparently calculative about how best to integrate rationalist sensibilities with more conventional beliefs and practices, Dhananjoy's family places its faith in caste and the goddess Kali, thereby assuming the status of negative exemplar. The public is taught, via their example, how *not* to behave. It is the reportage on Dhananjoy's family, then, that returns us, from differing rationalities and intense biomoral contestations over the value of life and the meaning of death, to the simple imperative to undo the sorts of 'misconceptions' and backwardness that block organ donation as a key route to that utopian object of impossible fullness that would be a fully rationalist modernity.[32]

Conclusion

This essay has explored the media genre of the public death in India, where such a death is either recent or imminent and made use of for its instructional value. The two principal case studies we presented share a concern with bodily donation and both

were turned into educational episodes or moral dramas. Much also separates them: not least the contrast between smooth facilitation in the first case and the multiple refusals amidst a swirl of public debate in the second. We argued that the event-space of imminent or just-effected bodily donations has become centrally important to anti-superstition campaigners and other actors seeking to promote ‘a sense of civic life and public interest’. This is because of the understanding that it is in the domain of death and dying that one can find a consummate concentration of super-charged superstition: dislodge those taboos which obstruct bodily donations, this logic asserts, and much else will follow. We see the mediatized moral dramas of the public death as a critical instructional idiom for present-day secular social reformers in the subcontinent.

In concluding we want to read historian Partha Chatterjee’s (1999) compelling discussion of the ambivalences of ‘modernization’ in India through the events we described above. Chatterjee notes that the growing reach and swell of electoral politics since the 1970s has resulted in a pitting of democracy against modernity. With the dramatic electoral mobilization of an array of what had been previously politically invisible groupings—backward castes, tribal populations, religious minorities, even associations of cinema fans—‘the complaint is widespread in middle-class circles today that politics has been taken over by mobs and criminals’ (1999: 116). The result is that ‘the noble pursuit of modernity’ appears compromised by ‘the compulsions of parliamentary democracy’ (Chatterjee 1999). Chatterjee identifies two principal responses to this situation on the part of the governing classes. The first he describes as a suspension of the interventionist modernization agenda, which involves ‘walling-in the protected zones of bourgeois civil society’ in order that existing civil virtues

may be shielded from ‘the potential excesses of electoral democracy’ (1999: 118). The second is more pragmatic: it accepts the limitations of the state’s reach but does not abandon the project of social transformation, which it pursues determinedly but modestly—finding allies where it can, yielding to other authorities on occasion—through the contestations of what Chatterjee (1999: 118) calls ‘normatively nebulous political society’.

Not surprisingly, the instructional idiom of dying as expressed in the Basu case appears to us as an instance of the latter response. The putative project of modernization is clearly *not* suspended here, with reformist activists and their media allies evaluating Basu’s body and his legacy according to its service of a ‘propaganda of reason’ (Chakrabarty 2002: 25). Indeed, the harnessing of his public death as a means for the continued pursuit of ‘the project of enlightenment’ enables us to pinpoint one of the particular forms of the pragmatic response to which Partha Chatterjee refers: use of the media-created exemplar as a vessel for modernization by means other than the state.

Dhananjoy’s case, in some contrast to Basu’s, additionally offers an elaborate contestation over Chatterjee’s first response, posed as a question about *just what* aspects of ‘modernization’ should be suspended, and by whom. In their introduction to this volume the editors encourage us to recognize the interlacement of ‘bare life’ and ‘lives, biographies, and histories’. Dhananjoy’s express wish to donate parts of his executed body might be understood, like Basu’s own pledge, as a way of speaking at the last that recasts or augments the biography of a life. To do this, he would marshal his *bare life*. *Zoe* and *bios* are on intimate terms. And in a limited sense his

attempt 'worked', even though the donation was not brought to fruition - some of the public commentators quoted above appreciated the gesture, viewing it as critical evidence of reform and/or repentance. Others, however, saw only cynical strategy, and redoubled their denunciation of a figure whose prior actions they viewed as foreclosing any possibilities of such service.

We have seen, also, that Dhananjay's family had hoped that their son's Brahminism would save him. When it didn't, they prepared a pile of stones outside their hut gate to throw at enquiring journalists, his mother made offerings to Kali, there was talk of a plan to construct a 'martyr's statue' of Dhananjay in the village, and his dying wish to donate his eyes and kidneys was blocked to spite a state that had not in the first instance spared his life. If Dhananjay sought to mould himself into what Cohen calls an 'as-if modern' (2004: 166) in his desire for post-mortem organ donation, his family rejected his claims entirely and in fact countered them. Further, he was rebuffed both by the bourgeois state asserting its moral primacy and by blogger-commentators cordoning off zones of civility, each erecting distinct barriers to the excesses that Dhananjay, here reduced to an undesired type, represented. As media-created negative exemplar, he had no access, in the end, to the nebulous areas of possibility that lie beyond the state, though much of the debate about the worth of his life unfolded ironically in those very spaces. In the terms of this volume, then, what unfolded was a very particular biopolitics 'from the margins'.

Thus, the case-studies presented in this essay point on the one hand to domains of politics located 'neither within the constitutional limits of the state nor in the orderly transactions of bourgeois civil society' (Chatterjee 1999: 117), and on the other to the

processes by which such domains are claimed by individuals and institutions seeking to definitively determine what life and death can teach, and therefore what they can be worth, in each of their quests for a redemptive modernity.

Notes

1 We borrow the term ‘moral drama’ from Spencer (2007: 100).

2 As Sharp (2006: 24, 72) has shown for the United States.

3 *The Hindu* (Chennai), 25 September 2000; *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), 26 February 2006; *Daily Excelsior* (Janipura), 2 May 2005.

4 *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), 16 May 2008.

5 *The Hindu*, 30 January 2010.

6 <http://www.rationalistinternational.net/>

7 ‘Report on B. Premanand’, email from Bangalore Skeptic, 22 September 2009.

8 www.ihcu.org/atheist-ceremonies

9 *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2010.

10 *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2010, emphasis added.

11 *The Telegraph*, 20 January 2010.

12 *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2010.

13 *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2010.

14 *The Telegraph*, 28 January 2010

15 *The Telegraph*, 28 January 2010.

16 The phrase is Starr’s (1998: 76-77).

17 *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2010.

18 *The Telegraph*, 18 January 2010.

19 *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2010.

20 <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>.

21 <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>.

22 <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>.

23 The comments quoted in this paragraph and the subsequent two are (1) chat room entries posted at,

<http://mboard.rediff.com/board/board.php?boardid=news2004aug12dhan>, (last accessed February 2005); and (2) responses to an article “Dhananjoy wishes to donate eyes, kidneys” published on 12 August 2004, available at,

<http://www.rediff.com/news/2004/aug/12dhan.htm>.

24 We do not, however, wish to over-emphasize the connection. Lock (2001: 75) recounts a conversation with an American heart transplant surgeon who similarly expressed discomfort at the idea of receiving a heart from a convicted murderer. Many more examples could be provided of concerns about contagious bio-morality in non-Indian contexts.

25 <http://mboard.rediff.com/board/board.php?boardid=news2004aug12dhan>, (accessed February 2005).

26 The term bioineligibility was proposed by Copeman (2009b) in recognition of the fact that the story of transplant biopolitics is not only one of the incorporation of marked populations into bioeconomies. Also important are those political economies of non-availability whereby many bodies are rendered closed to biomedicine as well as open to it (cf. Cohen 2004).

27 *Deccan Herald*, 15 August 2004.

28 <http://www.dawn.com/2004/08/15/int13.htm>.

29 <http://www.espressodes.com/India/newsbriefs/aug/04/081304.html>.

30 <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>.

31 <http://www.countercurrents.org/rawat180110.htm>.

32 The phrasing here draws on Zizek (1999: 206).

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