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# Portraits of substance: image, text and intervention in India's sanguinary politics

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# Portraits of substance: image, text and intervention in India's sanguinary politics

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*Abstract*: This essay examines the way extractions of human blood – for medical donations, portrait paintings, and petitions – have come to form a significant means of political communication (particularly as a means of political protest) throughout India, focusing in particular on a case study from the south of a karate teacher and artist who, through painting multiple portraits of the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister with his blood, sought land for his karate school. The second half of the essay explores wider features of India's 'sanguinary politics', focusing in particular on ways in which publicly witnessed deployments of political activists' own blood once seemed to promise both intensification and purification of mass political idioms. It also considers how and why this promise has largely remained unfulfilled.

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## Introduction

Publicly enacted blood extractions (principally blood donation events and petitions or paintings in blood) in mass Indian political contexts (for instance, protest or political memorial events and election rallies) are a noteworthy present-day form of political enunciation in India, for such extractions – made to speak as and on behalf of political subject positions - are intensely communicative.[1] Blood extraction may thus be considered a kind of political 'body language'. The key point is not that blood actually *is* 'pre- or extra-discursive' (Frazer & Valentine 2006: 98), but rather that it is frequently taken to be so. In the public political contexts explored in this essay, part of its potential as a mode of political enunciation lay precisely in the fact that it appeared to possess a communicative efficacy free from the ready deception of political symbols, thereby embodying a superior 'reality calibre' (van de Port 2011: 75) than more conventional political discourse. Somewhat akin to the transformative fasts undertaken by Gandhi, such blood extractions seek to persuade from the moral high ground of political asceticism (Copeman 2009: 122-130; Nandy 1970). They are a means of presentation and public positioning of self and cause.

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[1] See Bairy's (2009: 112) consideration of political enunciation.

This essay seeks to shed light on how and why these extractions have become such a means, with a particular focus on blood-based portraiture. Such portraits are chiefly of politicians and 'freedom fighter' martyrs[2] and possess an *immanent persuasive relationality* that is central to the effects their creators hope they will have on their viewers.

Political blood extractions take and have taken a number of forms. Some examples: political parties frequently compete to collect most donated blood in West Bengal; anti-superstition campaigners and the followers of a maligned guru each organise letter-writing campaigns in their blood;[3] the Communist Party (CPM) in 1980s West Bengal lined up its activists to sell their blood to raise funds for the building of the Bakreswar power plant (hence the CPM slogan: '*Rokto diye Bakreswar gorbo*' – 'We shall build Bakreswar with our blood'); blood is donated by various political parties to mark their pledge 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;[4] blood is donated in protest at 'political' attacks on it by devotees of a controversial devotional movement with ambiguous ties to Sikhism.[5]

Blood donation is conducted within a multitude of ostensibly non-political situations, too: blood is donated at colleges, places of worship, corporate locations and elsewhere. What I focus on here though is the dramatically observable prevalence of blood donation and other forms of blood extraction in explicitly mass political contexts. Such political blood extractions appear to accord with the scholarly understanding that political potency in South Asia may be achieved via an ascetic modus operandi of 'self-abnegation' and 'impulse-control' (Nandy 1970: 72). The classic example, in this respect, is the political fast. If fasting withdraws the body from the world, blood donation seems to extend the body into it. However, like fasting, blood extractions are enacted by and/or on the political subject and involve a measure of physical subjection. In both instances powerful political images are formed that complicate the notion of simple self-subjection – for far from being passively represented by others, the protesting faster or blood extractor enforces or inflicts an image of him or herself on others. In the case of blood extraction the image is inflicted through visceral presentation of bodily substance. These are thus interventionist images – images that (seek to) move the viewer to action. How does the Indian blood portrait 'intervene'? The answer, I suggest in this essay, lies in its capacity to bring together and present for display bodies, persons and relationships in a manner that is affectively compelling.

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[2] Known as *shaheed*.

[3] On the former, see below. The latter is a reference to Karnataka-based guru Swami Nithyananda, whose devotees in 2010 reportedly sent 1,200 letters in blood to the Bangalore High Court in order to protest the legal charges he faced.

[4] http://www.rajasthantalkies.com/2009/08/abvp-protest-for-forced-blood-donation.html, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/Story/58059/India/Kids+forced+to+donate+blood+on+Rajiv+b%E2%80%99day.html.

[5] See Copeman (2012).

**Blood portraits**

There is a well-established tradition of explicitly patriotic art in India, insightfully documented by Pinney (2004) and Ramaswamy (2008). Such art often depicts nationalist heroes having spilled, or in the act of spilling, their blood. Portraits in blood likewise frequently depict martyrs revered for having shed their blood, but differ, of course, in also being composed *of* human blood. A prominent instance of Indian political blood portraiture is the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi exhibited in the National Gandhi Museum in New Delhi. The 'literally bloody painting shows Gandhi with not one but three heads (two of them painted in the colours of the national flag), signifying his apotheosis into the Hindu pantheon with its many multiheaded and multilimbed gods' (Ramaswamy 2008: 838); while the Delhi-based Shaheed Smriti Chetna Samiti (Society to Awaken Remembrance of the Martyrs; henceforth 'the Samiti') has produced blood portraits which depict 'freedom fighter' martyrs (sacrificial heroes of the independence struggle) that are displayed around the country both in schools and in richly symbolic nationalist locations such as Delhi's Red Fort. Their purpose is to reawaken the spirit of sacrifice that the Samiti considers to be sadly absent in a contemporary India all too willing to forget the sacrifices that brought the nation into being. The exhibition has received national media coverage in vernacular as well as English forums (see Copeman 2013). Such paintings are doubly mimetic: mimetic insofar as 'originary' blood sacrificers are paid homage to by (the artist's) bleeding in turn; but also in terms of the willingness to sacrifice one's blood (for the nation) that it is supposed to incite in the viewer. The paintings call for emulation as models of and models for sacrificial bleeding.

[Figs. 1 & 2 about here]

Such blood extractions take place within a larger field of extractions across time, form and scale. It is frequently by way of the reflective production of analogies with other modes and times of bloodshed that they obtain representational power. In the cases just discussed an analogy is set up between the blood shed by those depicted and the blood shed by the artist in depicting them. Not only are the subjects depicted, they are, so to speak, imitated – the artist enters into the sacrifice s/he commemorates. Consider now a further example of the blood portrait. Ayurvedic doctor and social activist Mahesh Yadav, from Bhopal, frequently visits Delhi to campaign for Tibetan freedom. There, in the presence of members of the press, he draws his own blood and with it paints portraits of Gandhi, the Dalai Llama and others, usually for the purpose already mentioned but also to highlight the necessity of fighting corruption, the plight of victims of the 1984 Bhopal industrial disaster (see Banerjee this issue), and other causes besides. He presents his political methodology in explicitly Gandhian terms as a non-violent means of struggle – a 'Blood *Satyagraha'.[6]* The literal meaning of *satyagraha* - a term and concept developed by Gandhi - is 'truth-force'. Most commonly associated with the Gandhian fast, it is mode of political action

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[6] *Indian Express*, 21 Jan. 2010. See also: http://www.campaigncentral.org.uk/drmaheshyadav

through which, in Gandhi's words, truth is vindicated 'not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self'. Yadav states: 'I am dedicated to Tibet freedom and peace on earth...and being deeply moved by the ever increasing blood-shedding in the world...I decided to utilizingly offer my blood for the sake of peace on earth....hence I initiated a "BLOOD MOVEMENT FOR PEACE" in which I inject out my own blood and utilize it [in works of portraiture] for the sake of stopping the ever increasing shedding of the blood in the world...and since last 14 years I am incessantly and unabatedly going on with this "blood-movement" with my own blood...' Shedding his blood 'for peace', and with a very specific political goal in mind (Tibetan freedom), the analogy is with violent bloodshed elsewhere (in this instance, Tibet). Analogies both conserve and extend: negative analogy is only able to have persuasive force (extend) because of the retained (conserved) positive analogy (Strathern 2006: 91). Yadav's analogy both conserves (in each case blood is shed) and extends (Yadav's blood is shed 'for peace' in contrast with the violent bloodshed perpetrated in Tibet). Like the portrait of Gandhi, then, Yadav's bloodshed in the present principally refers back to prior bloodshed (albeit a bloodshed that extends into the very recent past), while the Samiti's portraits are temporally more diverse: they not only remember bloodshed through bloodshed but almost will into being - or *preview* - future spillage.

Blood portraits may thus act as both mnemonic devices (that of Gandhi, those produced by Yadav) and templates for action (the Samiti). The present-tense bloodshed of the portrait may form analogies with past bloodshed (Yadav) or that yet to be shed (the Samiti). In the case of the Samiti, past, present, and future bloodsheds are evoked simultaneously. The production of productive analogies across time and form is indeed a structuring element of India's sanguinary politics, particularly in respect of blood portraits. In order to explore the more representationally complex features of these portraits, however – their dynamic relational features – I turn now to my principal case study of blood portraiture.


**Case study**

Shihan Hussaini of Chennai, Tamil Nadu state, is a Karate teacher, but he also runs a fine arts academy offering instruction in sculpture, dance and painting. I sat waiting for him in his office, which displayed swords, guns, arrows, daggers and a huge Buddha head. Through a window I watched an attendant arrange 57 paintings of the then former (now current) Chief Minister (state-level head of government) of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha – all painted using the artist's blood. There were mirrors on each wall. The bloody images were multiplied.

[Fig. 3 about here]

Why did he engage in such an exercise? The reason, he explains, was simple: he needed land for a karate school. For this he required an appointment with the Chief Minister. 'After I had 101 cars run over my hand [Hussaini is known for such spectacular feats] I did a portrait of Jayalalitha. Had I just done a painting and no blood it would have achieved nothing'. As this suggests, he had a measure

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of success: 'She brought me to her residence and promised me 1 million dollars and 3 lakh rupees'. During the appointment 'she asked why did I do it. I said I knocked on your door several times, but there was no reply. I had to run trucks over my hand and paint your portrait in my blood!' However, 'once [the promise] was announced, some bureaucrats changed the decision and the land was taken [off me]. The next year she turned 57 so I did 57 portraits. But she was subjected to 60 [legal] cases so couldn't give me the land. When she comes back I will influence her to get the land. This is to influence decision-making'.

Hussaini is explicit concerning his theory of art: 'Blood art is a tool of propaganda, communication and influencing decision-making... I go and ask for a favour and I give them a painting in my blood. I have influenced several people with my own blood portraits of them. For me, it is not aesthetic – it is to influence thought, decision making, people, an entire idea to be implanted in people.' This, then, is interventionist art, created in order to compel particular outcomes. As Hussaini put it to me, 'All poets play praise for rulers. Unless you eulogise and iconise your kings and CMs you're not going to get your commission'. The portraits, for Hussaini, are thus a tool - a means to an end. But how does such a means operate? What made the portraits effective?

That the artist is substantially present in the portraits themselves provides part of the answer. In a consideration of Berger's (2007) writings on drawing, Taussig (2009) highlights the intimacy between drawer and thing drawn: 'Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become... a drawing is an autobiographical record of one's discovery of an event, seen, remembered, or imagined' (Berger cited in Taussig 2009: 269). In drawing, one thus gets close to an object. The drawing forms an intimate material relation. In the case of Hussaini's portraits, the act of representation no doubt brings the artist closer to the represented in the manner suggested by Berger. But there is an intensification of the relation achieved by way of the artist's indexical physical presence in the portrait - substance delineating subject. The aniconic element – the sanguinary medium as literal index of the artist – is present as substantive delineation of the icon it comprises, the relation both formed and displayed in the space of the portrait itself. The image objectifies a relation and *is* that relation.

This relation – made and displayed in the image itself – is integral to its ability to affectively persuade. Hussaini ultimately might not have obtained the land he sought, but the mere granting of an audience with the Chief Minister attests to the success of the propaganda of the image. As Carrithers (2010: 255) points out, direct access to political leaders – ordinarily extremely difficult to secure - may be 'vital for life chances, in politics, in business, or in education'. The fusing of subject and object in the medium of the portrait forces a relation upon the anticipated viewing subject/recipient. Hussaini's portraits compel, then, by materialising (and inflicting) a relationship between the corporeal self and the recipient *onto the recipient*. Encoding the relation in the image was thus, in Hussaini's own words, a tool. The relational portrait, tool-like, caused an

invisible (or conceptual) relation between ruler and unknown subject to become a visible (or interpersonal) relation between ruler and known subject – the portrait a kind of relational intervention. Just how did it do this?

I have stated that the portraits objectify a relation - let us consider more carefully the properties of the 'blood tie' created in the images. First of all, Hussaini's portraits form a part not only of the wider sanguinary politics but also of a tradition of political praise offering in south India that is characterised by relations of 'hierarchical intimacy' (Bate 2002). Poems and images printed in local newspapers by local political functionaries or low-level community leaders in honour of visiting political leaders (in particular, Jayalalitha) 'aestheticise power as an intimate being, such as a family deity or mother, who will grant us the benefits of her presence and respond to our appeals' (ibid: 309). Locating its roots in the medieval *bhakti* tradition of devotional love, Bate describes how images of Jayalalitha are framed in ways that underscore her royal cum divine identity. Yet such 'hierarchical distancing' of the leader is fused with tropes of intimacy: the example is offered of a central print of Jayalalitha surrounded by sixty smaller images of exactly the same image, with their warm gazes seemingly directed downwards towards the advertiser himself – the head of the Tamil Nadu Sales Board - whose image is located at the bottom right of the advertisement (ibid: 318). In tying the advertiser's name to that of political leaders, what such images and their attendant poetry achieve is, of course, a relation. In other words, these 'portraits' are not simply of the leader; neither are they simply self-portraits. They are portraits of the advertiser in a relation with the political leader that also create this relation.

Hussaini's portraits, of course, partake of this genre – the relation both made and made visible in the space of the portrait. But use of blood heightens the intimacy of the relation discussed by Bate. The portraits adhere to – but also go beyond – the regional convention of political praise offering. This brings us back to Berger's account of drawing. As was noted earlier, the material qualities of Hussaini's portraits embody an intensification or literalisation of the process described by Berger: Hussaini 'adds substance' to the already intimate process of physical portrayal. Indeed, Hussaini repeatedly emphasised to me the provenance of his artistic materiel *in the heart*: 'This is an amazing and personal medium – when you draw people it is said it should come from your heart and this literally comes from the heart'. He has faced criticism from several quarters; in particular for 'wasting' a medically valuable substance, and for proliferating new icons – not an uncontroversial practice for a Muslim who claims direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad: 'People have said it's sacrilegious. But I say it is the most special substance because it comes literally from the heart'. And again: 'They say that you can see the artist in the art, and when I do my art it is literally true.' That the substance of his paintings derives from his heart is a key aspect of his self-presentation in media interviews as much as in interviews with me, and the connection, far from being only his own, is a recurrent motif of the Indian sanguinary politics (see Copeman 2013). What we witness in his blood portraits, then, is substance literally from the heart commingle with – intimately delineate – the features of its subject.  Of course, even works considered by critics to dismantle longstanding aesthetic conventions are assessed according to

an authenticity criterion – they must be 'from the heart': 'modern art is required, not to please, as in earlier aesthetic theories, but to provide its audience with examples of authenticity' (Handler 1986: 4). Hence the recent controversy concerning Damien Hirst's spot paintings, famously made by a team of assistants. Defending himself against accusations that he was making millions of pounds from artworks he had little to do with, he is reported to have stated: 'assistants make my spot paintings but my heart is in them all' (Singh 2012). Well, not literally.

[Fig. 4 about here]

In Hussaini's case, because the medium of the portraits has literally passed through his heart, the sentiments of the works are considered to be more forcefully conveyed and authentic. Indeed, there is the suggestion that the blood medium does not merely connote the sentiment that gave rise to its extraction but that it is, quite literally, that sentiment as unmediated affect. I have discussed elsewhere understandings in South Asia that see the heart as the literal repository of sentiments (Copeman 2013). From love and pride to shame and fear, feelings 'belong to the body and they flow [literally] from the heart' (Krause 1989: 568). The de-metaphorised portrait's material composition from a substance delivered, literally, from the heart, and partaking of the sentiment it embodies and produces appears to lend force to its affective efficacy. Certainly, it was central to the propaganda of the image in Hussaini's own terms.

Portraits of what, then? Hussaini *builds in*, or encodes, a figure-ground reversal – we are directed to concentrate at least as much on the substance of composition as on the 'figure'. If in the classic understanding of portraiture, 'the portrayer makes visible the inner essence of the sitter' (van Alphen 1997: 241), in Hussaini's case the portrayer makes his own 'inner essence' visible in relation to the portrayed. That the word for heart, '*dil*', is frequently used for 'I' in parts of South Asia (Krause 1989: 568) might support a figure-ground reversed understanding of Hussaini's paintings as non-representational *self*-portraits. Of course, it is not so simple. They are not self-portraits, but 'self-in-relation-portraits' (i.e. they are not simply reducible to the non-representational element). But the instability of figure and ground is an important facet of Hussaini's relational industry. The easy switches from figure to ground, and vice versa, remind the viewer of the relation the image comprises (i.e. that the portraits make evident not only the one who is represented). Matter here is a kind of relational reminder.

Of course, one might object that the tool-like nature of the relation does not square with Hussaini's insistence that the portraits are composed via 'the most personal medium' and my own insistence, with reference to Berger and local understandings of the human heart, upon the achievement of relational intimacy. But it is not simply a question of either relation as tool *or* relation issuing pristinely 'from the heart'. The relation works so well as a tool precisely because it elaborates an aesthetics of presentation and commitment – is undergirded by an artistic sensibility fully cognisant of the persuasiveness of form. Issuing 'from the heart' via 'the most personal medium' - this is precisely how the tool works.

The portraits - as emotive instanciation of a relation between icon and iconizer - thus possess affective power; the Chief Minister was emotively compelled to respond. To conclude this section, then, I briefly consider the nature of the image-maker's sway. van Alphen (1997: 240) explains how the portrait conventionally bestows power on the portrayed: 'It is because we see a portrait of somebody that we presume that the portrayed person was important and the portrayed becomes the embodiment of authority… Thus, authority is not so much the object of portrayal, but its effect' (ibid). It is possible that Hussaini's portraits did augment the Chief Minister's authority and that her prestigious invitation to the artist and promise of property were merely acts of *noblesse oblige*. Such a view, however, discounts the capacity of the affective image to influence or compel its viewer to action. Rather than augment her authority, the portraits demonstrate her essential vulnerability when subjected to the relational industry of another. This was not a relation she chose; Hussaini acted according to the principle that 'one cannot point to a relation without bringing about its effect' (Strathern 2005: 64). The image was the occasion for a kind of relational binding; a blood-*tie*.

Jayalalitha is hardly alone in such vulnerability. Visual representation, as Gell (1998: 102-3) explains so well, is always a kind of binding, for 'the image of the prototype is bound to, or fixed and imprisoned within, the index'. Rather then merely 'the foible of innocent tribesmen who believe that their souls are in danger of being stolen away therein… vulnerability stems from the bare possibility of representation, which cannot be avoided'. There is thus 'no reason to invoke magical or animistic beliefs in order to substantiate that idea that persons are very vulnerable indeed to hostile representation via images, not just to cruel caricatures, but even via perfectly neutral portrayals, if these are treated with contumely or ridicule' (ibid). Indian politicians are intensely cognisant of this and often act in heavy-handed ways in attempts to control representations of themselves (see Mazzarella & Kaur 2009).[7] But, crucially, Hussaini's images do not unambiguously depict their 'target' - they are also, as we have seen, portraits of the artist. Hussaini's use of his own blood accomplishes the portrait as a binding relation that moves its target to action. In extending the south Indian aesthetics of commitment via the use of his own corporeal substance in depicting the Chief Minister, Hussaini came to be seen in an aesthetically compelling way. We know this because his images elicited the 'right' response.

[Fig. 5 about here]


**Enunciation**

I return now from an elucidation of Hussaini's blood portrait to the wider sanguinary politics in which such portraits are embedded; specifically, I seek to elaborate the characteristic enunciative features of the Indian sanguinary

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[7] For instance in 2012, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, imprisoned a professor at Jadavpur University after he circulated an unflattering caricature of the politician.

politics. In tune with my focus on the enunciative qualities of political blood extractions, I follow Antze (2010) in employing the performative as a linguistic category. The performative, I suggest, acts as a critical supplement to the constative element of political appeals enacted via blood extraction. The distinction between the constative and performative dimensions of language is a distinction 'between what is said and what is performed in the saying of it' (ibid: 312). Antze (ibid) offers as an example the rhetorical persuasiveness of stories told in the first-person: 'On the one hand there is the story I tell you about myself, subject to the usual tests of plausibility, consistency, and so on [i.e. the constative]. On the other hand there is me telling the story, and thus a series of questions about the "felicity" of my whole presentations [i.e. the performative]. Do I seem to be sincere? In claiming remorse, do I actually sound remorseful? Or, when I insist on my mental or moral competence, do I perform that competence or subtly undermine it?'

Following from this it would appear that enunciative bloodshed performs the 'good faith' of the message that is being conveyed. It is in this sense that I mean that the performative supplements the constative. Blood extraction becomes a kind of felicity condition that underscores the veracity of the message being transmitted – it is an intensifier. Intensifiers, in the linguistic sense, are modifiers used to give force or emphasis, for example, *very* in *the weather is very mild*. Political blood extraction, likewise, is employed to lend force or emphasis during mass political occasions. It acts as a performative felicity condition for the political appeal being made. For instance, at an event organised by the Youth Congress[8] in 2004 on the birthday of party leader Sonia Gandhi, activists signed an anti-corruption pledge, chanted 'Sonia Gandhi *zindabad*' ('Long Live Sonia Gandhi') and donated their blood to the Red Cross. At a constative level what is being stated, of course, is that the Congress is robustly anti-corruption and devoted to the party leader. At a performative level, the message is verified (or intensified) through enacting the political asceticism and devotion these constatives demand: they are shown as well as stated. Such performances ritually verify the constative element of the political utterance. Many such examples of blood extraction as a political intensifier might be given. [9]

The phrase 'rituals of verification' is borrowed from Power's (1997) work on practices of audit and accountancy, and the connection with accountancy is apt. The blood extracted on political occasions may be termed, following Brown et al (2006), *promissory matter*, for the reason that such blood extractions held out - continue to hold out for some political actors - an elusive promise of political transparency. There is, in general in the Indian subcontinent, an extremely

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[8] Youth wing of India's Congress Party. A 'delinquent boys' club' (Khilnani 1997: 47) under Indira Gandhi's son Sanjay in the 1970s, it now conducts social service activities and campaigns for the Party.
[9] E.g. the Youth Congress also stages blood donation events on the death anniversaries of Indira, Rajiv, and Sanjay Gandhi, respectively. Politicians vie to organise such events themselves, and disclose on their CVs the number of blood camps they have arranged and number of times they have personally donated (see Copeman 2009). During a recent demonstration, members of the Hindu nationalist groups the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) used their own blood to sign a petition that announced the 'death' of Islamic terrorism, and so on.

negative valuation of the political (Spencer 2007: 22); at once 'appalled and fascinated' by political goings on, people of diverse backgrounds frequently comment on the unsavouriness of politics ('dirty work') and on the moral failings of particular politicians (ibid). Parry (1994: 127) comments memorably on the moral pollution thought to adhere relentlessly and invariably to politics in the region, recounting Banaras funeral priests' description of the great difficulty in making a politician's body burn due to 'the enormous burden of sin accumulated with his corrupt earnings'. So far as acts of political enunciation are concerned, people's scorn is particularly severe. Consider the fast: for Mahatma Gandhi, performed as a component of *satyagraha* (truth-force), fasting was the mass political tool par excellence, whereas if a politician now fasts, so the saying goes, he only does so between breakfast and lunch. If a political fast appears to be of a notable duration, the likelihood is that the figure concerned has been 'stealthily eating all night long' (Ramaswamy 1997: 230). Deception is built into all acts of signification, for 'a sign is everything that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else… If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth' (Eco 1976: 10). In popular opinion the deception of all symbolism finds its consummate realisation in the domain of Indian political signification.

Of course, from time to time there occur irruptions of political purification. The most recent example is Anna Hazare's middle class-backed anti-corruption movement that began to dominate news reportage in 2011 – a movement that continually proclaimed its non-political nature, despite Congress accusations that it was aligned with the Hindu right BJP party. As Spencer (2008: 625) notes, 'the use of a rhetoric of antipolitics as the ground for certain political interventions has a long history in South Asia'. Extracted blood is, or has been, definable as promissory political matter, due to understandings of it as a mode of unsymbolized (which is to say, less deceitful, or purified, even antipolitical) political enunciation. Criticised by political opponents in 2010 for arranging a massive blood donation event on Maharashtra Day – 'taking people's blood rather than providing them with water' – Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray is reported to have responded by stating that 'Blood donation is the real social work, and Shiv Sena has believed that social work comes before electoral politics'. Blood donation, it is argued, transcends the 'profane' politics of personal gain, instead opening up onto the politically 'sublime' or utopian (Hansen 2001).

But why, more specifically, was blood extraction a mode of political enunciation that seemed to promise unsymbolization and political purification? First, if a political fast contains easy avenues for sleight of hand, the visual spectacle of politicians or party activists 'bleeding for a cause' seems not to leave room for such speculation: the evidence is before your eyes – the blood bag is filled. Which is to say that the 'felicity' of the presentation successfully supplements the constative aspect of the statement or appeal. Extraction as enunciation could thus appear to move beyond the critique of political signs. Second, given the widespread understanding in the subcontinent that blood loss leads to permanent volumetric deficit and consequent depletion of strength, onlookers might be more willing to acknowledge that enunciation via bloodshed is less a matter of pure deception than of deep-held commitment. To adapt Bildhauer's

(2013) formulation, the extraction of blood as enunciative act promises to provide immediate access to the truth of the donor's convictions. Given the fears just mentioned, willingness to shed blood seems to demonstrate commitment 'that cannot be faked'. This argument is congruent with van de Port's (2011: 86) observation about the critical role of the body in seeming to 'precede' all opinionating and therefore in 'upgrading the reality calibre of social and cultural classificatory systems'. Much of the promise of this mode of political enunciation hinged on anxieties about depletion. We might put it thus: since enunciative bloodshed transcends my own willingness to do likewise, I am forced to construe it as compelling.

Connected to this is the particular nature of blood extraction as a mode of action. Discussing photographic portraiture in south India, Pinney (1997) questions the assertion of many South Asianist scholars (e.g. Marriott 1976) that exterior bodily signs are readily readable evidence of a person's internal moral character. Pinney (ibid: 135), instead, emphasises precisely the unreadability of such signs. There is no x-ray vision; persons remain visually indecipherable: 'The striking dualism espoused [by Indians] stresses the occlusion of character and the mystery of external surfaces'. Hence, photographic portraits are unable to capture 'the internal moral character and biography of a sitter, his *charitra*'. For central Indians, then, there is a disjunction between external signs and moral interior – the latter can be known only through a person's actions (*karma*).

Mass political signification is, of course, similarly unreadable and the subject of intense suspicion. The politician's statement that s/he cares for, and will serve, his or her constituents is generally disbelieved – the disjunction between external signs and mortal interiors is reproduced. In such a context extracted blood comes into its own as promissory matter as the visibilised integration of exterior signs and moral interiority. Recall Hussaini's blood portraits 'from the heart': the particular mechanics of Hussaini's portraits *do* lay claim to display internal moral character as an exemplary externalisation of the enunciator's 'inside'. Inserted into a context in which there is little or no faith in the readability of exterior signs is a new political rhetoric formed of interior (affective) substance – the moral interior *can* now seemingly be read from the physical exterior (or at the least a relation between them is revealed), in a newly unsymbolised sanguinary politics.

Consider, for instance, the case of the high-profile Maharashtra Committee for the Eradication of Superstitious Practices (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti; MANS), which campaigns across the state to expose the spuriousness of what it sees as irrational and dangerous religious practices that exploit the credulous and vulnerable. The major aim of the organisation is to pass legislation in the state parliament that will make illegal precisely these forms of religious practice. In 2005 the Committee succeeded in persuading the Maharashtra State Legislature to approve the 'Eradication of Black Magic and Evil Aghori Practices Bill'. However, due to a concerted and sometimes violent campaign on the part of right-wing Hindu organisations who claim the Bill is specifically targeted at Hindu forms of religious worship, which it would

effectively criminalise, the Bill has not yet – to the Committee's dismay - been signed into law.

The Committee, like Hussaini, sought an appointment with the Chief Minister to press its case. It first resorted to the somewhat passé technique of the political fast. Having no success the Committee adopted a number of less typical measures, such as a public self-slapping campaign as 'atonement' for electing the government who had now shelved the Bill. Finally, a letter writing campaign was initiated using activists' own blood. The movement's leader, Dr Dabholkar, recalled to me this campaign: 'We decided to write letters to the Chief Minister [CM], [Congress leader] Sonia Gandhi, and [local 'Big Man' politician and central government minister] Sharad Pawar with our own blood, from MANS workers. We took out just 3ml of blood from the vein in a special syringe – enough for 3-4 sentences only. Then, using small brushes, we wrote letters to the CM. More than 1,000 letters were sent to the CM. Nobody objected or ridiculed the idea, but everyone was now sure of the integrity of the organisation, so ultimately the result was that the CM was compelled to discuss with us'. Which is to say that, finally, they had found the right elicitory form and obtained the appointment. As with Hussaini's numerous portraits, the multiplicity of the effort was remarked upon (yet also de-emphasised by the movement's leader). To cite one report: 'Dr. Dabholkar informed that about 300 such letters would be written to the Government, where the "number" is not an issue but the issue is about the "pain"'. Physical self-subjection thus also formed a component of the correct manifestation. However, number and endurance were insufficient in themselves. (After all hundreds engaged in the self-slapping campaign to little effect). Rather, it seemed that activists' use of their own blood was critical for demonstrating an 'integrity' – a 'congruence between avowal and actual feeling' (Trilling 1971, 2) made tangible and discernible via externalisation of moral interiors ('actual feeling') as bloody text ('avowal') - that 'compelled' the Chief Minister to pay attention. MANS had finally located the correct performative supplement to the constative.

One can thus gain a sense of extracted blood as promissory political matter. From letters and petitions to donation and portraiture, blood extractions are political intensifiers that promise the removal of deceptive signification or any signification at all. Such procedures lay force or emphasis at a variety of mass political occasions. Extracted blood, exteriorised interior substance that productively problematises the disjunction between external signs and moral interior and whose flow or display performatively 'builds in' a verifiability found lacking in other political modes of communication, thus provided the promise of uncompromised (or less compromised) political enunciation. But in certain key respects the sanguinary politics did not live up to its promise.

**Parasitical intensifiers**

I have described political blood extractions as an intensifier in the linguistic sense – a modifier or supplement that lends force to a given political enunciation. In berating over-use of such modifiers Smith (2001) defines the *parasitical intensifier*: 'Formerly strong words are being reduced to lightweights that need to be bulked up with intensifiers to regain their punch. To *offer insight* or to *oppose a position* now sound tepid unless the insight is *valuable* and the opposition *diametrical*. The intensifier drains the vigour from its host' (ibid: 98). Thus far I have shown how the performative blood extraction might *add* vigour to the constative element of a given political occasion. However, I note now the ways in which political blood extractions might be considered parasitical in the sense discussed by Smith, the sanguinary politics in some respects coming to comprise less an array of techniques of verification than of what might be termed political ellipsis (compromised enunciation). How did the sanguinary politics degenerate into the modes of deception it was thought it might transcend?

This is the irony of India's sanguinary politics - it is precisely because it had developed into such a consummate sign of transparent political asceticism and promise that it became ripe for appropriation for purposes of obscuration. For example, in 2002 a controversy arose when Bollywood film icon Amitabh Bachhan inaugurated a series of blood donation camps for the Uttar Pradesh-based political outfit the Samajwadi Party (SP). They were staged during a state assembly election campaign, a time when the Election Commission's model code comes into force, which is meant to prohibit 'vote buying' by candidates eager to hand out 'electoral freebies' (frequently saris, cooking vessels, alcohol and cash [see Roberts 2010]). The SP's rival, the Congress Party, lodged a complaint with the commission, alleging that 'Mr. Bachhan and the SP leaders were using the blood donation camps to gain political mileage. "These camps are being synchronised with the election campaign and they amount to an offer of allurement to the voters"'.[10]

The complaint was that blood donation was being deployed in order to legitimate otherwise forbidden political bribes. One implication was that since the event was associated with the SP the blood collected might be viewed as a 'gift' to the public from whom it seeks votes. Probably more pertinent, however, is the way in which the 'token of regard' which is by law quite acceptable for blood donation event organisers to offer to blood donors on completion of their donation can be used to set up an exchange that otherwise would be obstructed. This is where blood donation as a technique of political ellipsis comes into its own. At a time when gifts to voters are expressly forbidden, and this indeed being the only time that political functionaries would want to make them, the exchange is performed obliquely in the guise of another exchange (that which legitimately inheres in the setup of blood donation events). That is, taking the donor-voter's blood allows the party in turn to offer back that which they would not be allowed to give if there wasn't a blood donation event acting as cover whilst also making visible an electorally useful association between the party and social service.

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[10] *The Hindu*, 2 Feb. 2002.

Further, a news article headlined 'After the bloodletting, the blood donation', reports on a blood donation camp organised by the notorious Mumbai 'don of Dagdi Chawl', Arun Gawli.[11] It speculates dryly that his own blood donation may have been an attempt to 'atone for his sins'. In fact, the blood donation camp formed part of a publicity drive for his newly constituted political party, the Akhil Bharatiya Sena, through which Gawli seems to have been trying to demonstrate his 'reformed' character. Just as the SP is likely to have convinced few people that it was not engaged in 'vote buying' by other means, the tone of the news article documenting Arun Gawli's blood donation evinces scepticism about the party leader's supposed reform. Nevertheless, the very attempt to employ blood extraction as a means to attain easy political virtue brings the sanguinary politics as a mode of political enunciation into disrepute. It is precisely because blood extraction is such a readily available (and deployable) political intensifier that its enactment now gives rise to high levels of distrust and scepticism in respect of the mass political events it supplements. A practice that performs the commitment and transparency it enunciates, it is also used to 'legitimate' bribes and engage in political spectacles of excess in which parties vie to collect the most blood precisely because of the virtues it enunciates; which is to say that, rather than a productive supplement, the performative extraction now drains the constative political enunciation of its vigour – a victim, so to speak, of its own success. Thus has the political blood extraction become a parasitical intensifier, as clichéd, nearly, as the political fast.

## Conclusion

It would be inaccurate to assert that the sanguinary politics has been recast wholesale as a dissembling political form – its continued enactment in a large variety of mass political settings suggests it continues to possess some degree of communicative efficacy. The latter sections of the essay have simply sought to show (1) how and why promise was invested in it, and (2) the considerable extent to which this promise has remained unfulfilled. The trajectory of the sanguinary politics is thus very much in tune with Spencer's (2008: 626) observation that one aspect of the opposition between 'dirty politics' and imaginary anti-politics 'is its constant productivity—new leaders constantly seek new ways to take the politics out of politics, yet each attempt ends in a different kind of failure as the amoral world of the political inexorably tarnishes the shiny new possibilities'. The fast, too, has been written off on multiple occasions as an efficacious mode of political expression. Yet it has recently made a high-profile comeback (if it ever really went away) in the hands of Gandhian social activist Anna Hazare and his anti-corruption movement. A key difference, perhaps, is that it now matters just *who* is enacting the fast or the blood extraction. For at the height of the sanguinary politics – roughly in the late-1990s/early 2000s - part of its attraction to morally dubious characters lay precisely in its not really mattering who enacted it because the action formed its own proof of veracity and moral worthiness. Over time, however, the good character of the bleeding

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[11] *The Indian Express*, 22 May 1997.

sign-maker seemed to come to matter more. Yet, as with the fast, a comeback is possible if the correct presentational and affective configuration is achieved.

Fasting and blood extraction are interesting analogues. Both enact a kind of corporeal emptying that would, in excess, result in death. Both couple physical self-subjection with the infliction of the image of this on others. Political blood extraction thus conceptually connects with the political fast. But it also departs from it. If fasting instantiates a kind of active passivity that moreover is subject to accusations of sleight of hand, blood extraction is a physical action the veracity of which (in terms of its visible demonstrability) is less contestable. Moreover, it can take many forms (petitions, letter writing, medical donations etc). One such form is the affectively efficacious imaged relation, and Hussaini's portraits of politician Jayalalitha form an interesting case study in this respect. Hussaini uses the relation as a tool. The use of his blood to image the relation he sought instanciated that relation and moved the Chief Minister to action. Hussaini's portraits not only made him visible to power - reminding us that this might well be on occasion a desired state of affairs - but envisioned himself in relation to the powerful in a manner that persuaded the powerful to do his bidding.

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