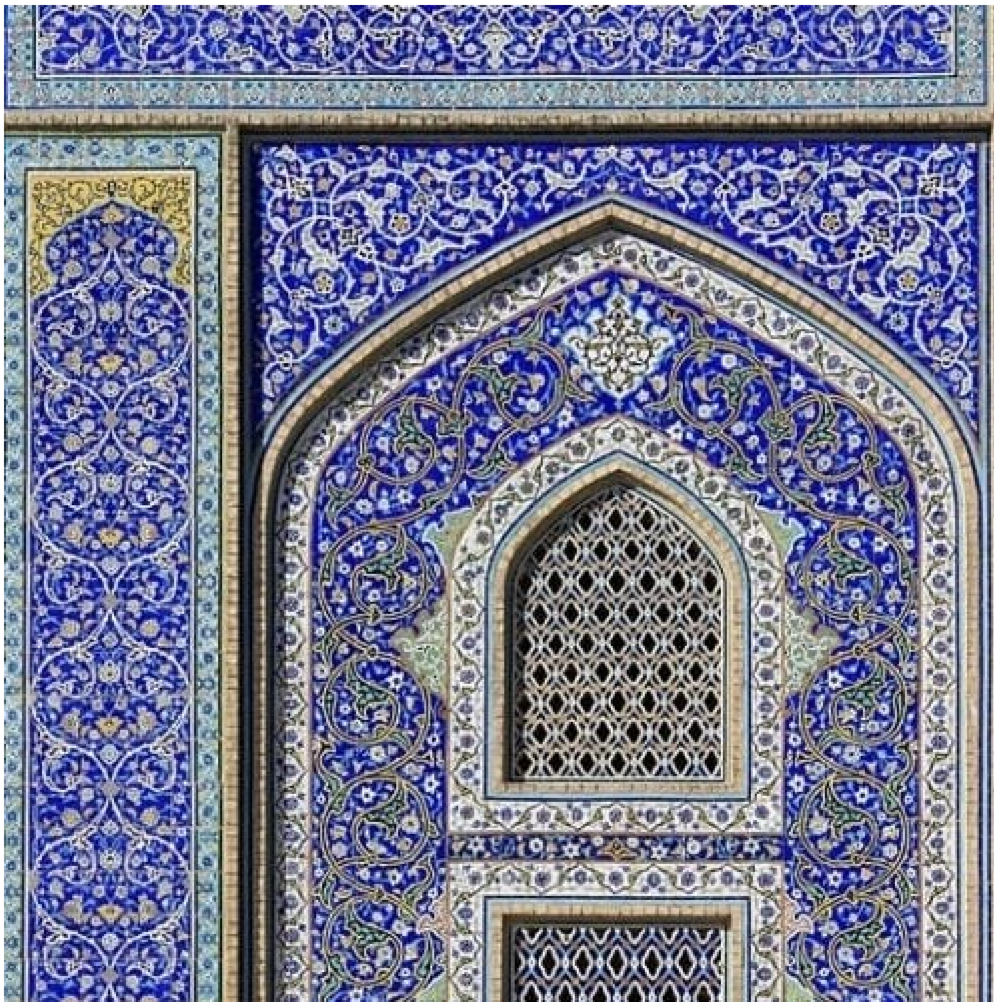
A Postcolonial Civic? Shi‘i Philanthropy and the Making and Marking of Urban Space in Mumbai

Radhika Gupta
July, 2019



Scholarly discussions of charity, philanthropy and humanitarianism in varied contexts tend to uphold the moral ideal of giving for the sake of humanity at large or the common good. However, in practice all forms of giving tend to belie the

ideal altruistic motive and are communitarian in nature, often characterized by what I call 'nested hierarchies'. Through ethnography of Muslim philanthropy in Mumbai, I suggest that communitarian philanthropy especially in violent neocolonial majoritarian democracies can be interpreted as a *political ethic* through a critical postcolonial discussion of minorities and difference.

A long tradition of communitarian philanthropy dating back to the colonial period has shaped the city of Mumbai both materially and socially. While the contributions of the Parsi community to the civic form and life of the city are well known, the philanthropic role played by Muslim mercantile communities – Khojas, Bohras, Memons – have not received adequate attention in academic scholarship. Of Gujarati origin, these communities started migrating to Bombay from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and settled in distinct quarters in the old city that the British rendered opaque as the 'native town'. A hub of intense commercial activity linked with Indian Ocean networks to east Africa and beyond, the cosmopolitan character of the old city was steadily eviscerated in postcolonial India despite its continuing importance to commerce in Mumbai.

> *Dilapidation borne from the structural discrimination of Muslims, growing migration of relatively poorer Muslims from north India, property laws such as the Bombay Rents Act combined with infamous linkages with the underworld served as a backdrop to the stigmatized, colloquial designation of this part of Mumbai as 'mini-Pakistan' following the 1992-93 communal riots.*

Traditions of religious charity and philanthropy by Muslims in the making of the city have been lost in consequent political representations. Nor have they been included in analyses of the different ways in which citizenship has been reconstituted in the context of what Appadurai (2002, 24) terms "state redundancy" in his discussion of the role played by non-state groups and multinational agencies in civic governance in Mumbai.

Philanthropy in the Built Environment

The visual, built form of neighborhood quarters in the “native town” that have historically been home to various Shi‘a Muslim communities led me to explore and attempt an excavation of the contributions of Muslim philanthropy to the urban common good in Mumbai and attendant political economies. These range from everyday architectures such as the ubiquitous water taps installed through acts of individual charity to gain merit through sacred commemorations of thirst at the battle of Karbala to formalized institutions of care such as orphanages, hospitals, schools that primarily serve Shi‘i communities but are in principle open to all. Prominent examples of the latter include the Prince Aly Khan, Saifi and Habib hospitals, Habib School, Khoja Girls Orphanage, and the various Jamaatkhanas (gathering space of the community), which work for the welfare of their specific denominations, whilst simultaneously contributing to the larger common good in the city. The Ismaili Jamaatkhana, for instance, is a grand structure with a clock tower that stands out in the hustle and congestion of the surrounding alleys in Dongri. The clock tower is a replica of colonial architecture and a hallmark of similar towers in other cities in the subcontinent of colonial reformist efforts directed at the natives, to instill in them the value of punctuality. It also reflects the modernizing discourses of the Ismaili community in Bombay to over time discard overtly Islamic symbols in their quest to present and experience themselves as a modern community.

While philanthropic initiatives of the colonial era are concentrated in the ‘old town’, post-colonial segregation and ghettoization has prompted a diversification of the philanthropic portfolio of civic initiatives in suburbs to which Muslims migrated after 1992-93 or came to be settled by newer migrants from other parts of the country. Shi’i philanthropy now supports housing blocks, schools for modern education, tuition classes, youth camps and Islamist initiatives such as religious study circles and libraries that seek to project Shi’i Muslims as peaceful, responsible citizens within the wider city while simultaneously bolstering confidence in their own sense of identity. Thus, in an increasingly fractured context, philanthropy is also being directed at *marking* a place for various Muslim

communities in the city. This marking has taken place along denominational lines – Ismailis, Twelver Khojas, Bohras – that have historically been engaged in competitive discourses of modernization.

My ethnographic work has focused in particular on the Khojas, who control some of the major private Shiʻi charitable trusts, which have become the principle mechanism for routing religious charity. This reflects a general shift from waqf to individual donations to private charitable trusts. Starting with the Charitable Endowments Act, 1890, discussions of 'general public utility' dominated Indian jurisprudence on the meaning of charity through the twentieth century. Ritu Birla's (2018) work traces the oscillations in legal precedents on the question of charity and profit since then. From a strict separation in the late 19th century, the link between charity and profit is now enshrined in law through a distinction between the *purpose* of a Trust and the *means* used to fulfill that purpose. The gradual shift from waqf being the principal foundation of Muslim philanthropy to that of the charitable trust had already started during the colonial period. The early nineteenth century archive is rife with disputes over inheritance that partially underlined this shift. However, it was in the postcolonial period that diversification in the charitable portfolios of trusts became more explicit and evident. This shift charts the transition from the significant contributions of Shiʻi Muslim philanthropy in the making of colonial Bombay to postcolonial anxieties and imperatives of needing to mark their place in the city. Especially after the 1992-1993 communal riots, Muslims in Mumbai, not only have to navigate an intangible culture of suspicion but also real, material marginalization. Over time and especially after 1992-93 private charitable trusts have proliferated in Mumbai.

Shiʻi trusts are funded by the profits of business, individual donations and *khums*, an obligatory tithe in addition to zakat that is incumbent on all Shi'as. This embeds local charity and philanthropy in both transnational mercantile and religious networks. A wide range of institutions in Mumbai ranging from private charitable trusts to community organizations (Jamaats) to hospitals have gained

permission to collect khums in the name of the Imam, whose spiritual authority is represented in the figure of various senior ayatollahs in west Asia. The system of getting permission to collect khums has systematized, bureaucratized and enlarged the scope of Islamic philanthropy at local levels. Take for example, the initiatives of a prominent Twelver Khoja Trust called the Aliman Charitable Trust. It is an umbrella for a number of different trusts working for Twelver Shiʻi welfare in the city. Its chairman, a prominent Khoja Shiʻa businessman, is the 'financial wakil' of Ayatollah Sistani. The Trust is linked to a madrasa called Najafi House that has historically been patronized by the transnational networks of Ayatollah Khoi and his successor Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq as well as the Khoja Ithna Ashariya Jamaat. Today it is an important philanthropic entity that works in both religious and civic realms.

The 'Nested Hierarchy' of Urban Charity

Govandi is a massive slum in eastern Mumbai built on and adjacent to the Deonar landfill. Some of the poorest Shiʻi communities, most of whom are migrants from north India who barely eke out a survival in the smog enclosed rubbish dump that is their home. They therefore seek out charity dispensed by the Khoja community. The Jafari English High School and Junior College in Govandi is one such initiative of the Aliman Charitable Trust. It was started in 1985 to provide education to "underprivileged children" whose parents could not afford fees in the English medium convent schools.

One day I got chatting with a woman called Parveena from Govandi. Her husband was a rickshaw driver in the city. According to her Najafi House used to provide free education earlier but they had to now to pay half of the monthly fees (in 2013). She mentioned that Sunni and Hindu children also study in the school but full fees are charged from non-Shias. Another woman from Uttar Pradesh, living in Govandi, referred to Najafi House as "*garibon kee company*" (the company of the poor). She seemed less frustrated than Parveena and explained how they had

to fill in a form at Najafi House to apply for concessions for fees and books. Here we have a ubiquitous example of communitarian philanthropy wherein the School is open to all communities but children from the Shiʻi community are subsidized. Fees paid by non-Shiʼi and non-Muslim students thus subsidized the school while at the same time giving them a precious opportunity to study in English.

A nested hierarchy thus characterizes institutionalized communitarian philanthropy. The imperatives for giving to one's own community first are sharpened in the context of the steady marginalization of Muslims. Besides modern education, Shiʻi philanthropy in areas outside the old city also supports housing blocks. Many Muslims accused of violence in the 1992-93 riots migrated from the old city to a suburb called Mombra that falls under a different police jurisdiction. Though it is environmentally less on the edges of bare survival, Muslims living in Mombra also struggle with poverty and especially housing. Unlike the residents of Dongri who continue to pay very low, nominal rents due to the Bombay Rent Control Act, affordable housing is a huge problem in other areas. The lady who referred to Najafi House as the "company of the poor", also told me that Najafi House had helped many people with housing too.

Rethinking Philanthropy in Post-Colonial Spaces

Much of the scholarship on humanitarianism focuses on relief during emergencies and reconstruction in the aftermath. This does not speak to contexts not defined as 'emergency' in international human rights and other protocols. How do we conceptualize 'humanitarianism' (if that is an appropriate umbrella term at all) in cases of the steady deterioration of living conditions resulting from the discrimination of minorities by the state? I suggest that the work of religious charitable trusts is another example of "philanthropic governmentality" for it fulfills some of the civic responsibilities abdicated by the state. Much like corporate social responsibility initiatives, trusts that dispense charity to religious communities also "return to an ethos of customary social welfare practices

directed not at the abstract public of citizens, but rather in cultivating local communities" (Birla 2018, 157). They dispense charity for the general common good in theory but are communitarian in practice.

> *I argue that such communitarianism could be seen not only as an obligation and duty but a political ethic in a divisive postcolonial context. How can we think of philanthropy and the urban common good in post-colonies marked by violent forms of neocolonial majoritarian democracies?*

I draw upon Leela Gandhi's (2011) discussion of the "pauper's gift" to rethink the ethical values associated with humanitarianism from a postcolonial perspective. She argues that post-colonialism has been denied the possibility to "think" the commons on account of the multitude of groups and subgroups "each insisting on the right to assert its specific way of life and/or culture" in much of western liberal thought. Gandhi asserts that even some radical Euro-American theorists are critical of postcolonial studies through their thrust on concepts such as universalism. However, universalism has a long colonial history. Leela Gandhi suggests turning to the anti-colonial archive for it is here that the "common is engaged not only as the scene of resource sharing and the redistribution of sovereignty but also as the labour of inhabiting the hard ground of one's communization or unexceptionality" (ibid., 32). Therefore, we need to turn to a different notion of the commons that can be found in the work of anti-colonial thinkers such as Gandhi, who recognized the fundamental diversity of communal and social life and argued for the radical co-existence of different groups.

Recognition of difference, I suggest, both acknowledges and necessitates attending to the "needs of the oppressed", who are the minorities in post-colonial India. From this perspective, giving to one's own seems to be more *ethically* transparent for it makes explicit the structural conditions that continue to exacerbate widespread poverty and marginalization of certain minorities. It also makes explicit the wider geopolitics within which communities get implicated fostering a competition to project the becoming of modern, non-threatening

subjects of the nation-state within minorities. While this is a continuation of inter-community dynamics of competitive modernization with origins in the colonial period, this dynamic is inflected by postcolonial marginalization and stigmatization. This deepens the nested hierarchies within communitarian giving.

Recognition of difference also legitimizes the desire of minorities to remain as such where difference (communitarian identity) becomes the very ground for citizenship. From this perspective of post-colonial ethics, discussions of Muslim humanitarianism need not be trapped in the secular vs. religious dichotomy that even critics of western universalist assumptions underlying humanitarianism tend to lapse into. This happens when Muslim philanthropy is exceptionalized through an (over) emphasis on its soteriological aspects or subsumed under "secular humanitarianism" in discussions of accountability, servicing "this-wordly" needs, or specifying worthy recipients (e.g. Redfield and Bornstein 2010).

References

Appadurai, Arjun. 2002. "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics". *Public Culture* 14:1, pp. 21-47.

Birla, Ritu. 2018. "C=f (P): The trust, 'general public utility' and charity as a function of profit in India". Modern Asian Studies 52:1, pp. 132-162.

Gandhi Leela. 2011. "The Pauper's Gift: Postcolonial Theory and the New Democratic Dispensation". *Public Culture* 23:1, pp. 27-38.

Redfield and Bornstein, Erica. 2010. "An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism" in *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics,* eds. Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

Featured image by مانفی (Wikimedia commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)