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# THE COMING OF THE CORPORATE GIFT

## ABSTRACT

Corporate gifts - from philanthropic donations to individual reward schemes –attract considerable attention from scholars for the kinds of moral, economic and political logics that motivate them. This article considers the gifts that transnational corporations give to producers and draws from Marilyn Strathern’s writings on exchange and personhood in order to reverse dominant analyses. Focused on the gifting of gold coins to industrial workers at a global manufacturing unit in India it brings together field based observations with a diverse field of literature on the gift in anthropology. Against an analysis that sees the corporate gift harnessed directly to a corporate bottom line this article proposes an alternative accounting that uses Strathern’s notions of ‘elicitation’, ‘revelation’ and ‘detachment’ to explore the contours of knowledge, personhood and relationality in the transaction. If corporate gifts have powerful effects, the article argues, it is because they establish difference between the person of the giver and the person of the recipient and because they materialise actions, desires and capacities that accrue to and transform the recipients rather than simply because they are vessels for the interests of global capital. As social theory confronts the political economy of corporate giving, Strathern’s writings prompt provocative questions about agency and power that challenge the hegemonic status of the modern corporation.

## KEYWORDS

gift, corporate gift, capitalism, labour, India, Strathern

## AN ETHNOGRAPHIC MOMENT

In 2007 the director of an Anglo-Belgian diamond manufacturing company met with his management team to discuss ways of celebrating the ten-year anniversary of their flagship factory in South India. They decided to mark the occasion by introducing an award for employees who had completed ten years of continuous employment. All of the factory’s 1250 employees were to be eligible, from its small army of shop floor machine operatives – diamond sorters, brouters, blockers and finishers - to its auxiliary workforce of cleaners and mechanics.

That November the company arranged a presentation ceremony at a hotel in the coastal city of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. Approximately sixty people – all of them Telugu men and women in their late twenties who had entered waged employment in this factory a decade earlier - gathered inside a function hall usually used for wedding parties. One by one each employee was called onto the stage. A flash-photographer hovered in the background as they shook hands with the factory's general manager and its human resources manager, and a photograph was taken as they were presented with two objects. The first was a certificate 'of special recognition for outstanding and invaluable service' made out to each person by name. The second was a commemorative gold coin. The coin was stamped with the company's name, Worldwide Diamonds, and its corporate logo on one face and embossed with details of its weight and the purity of its gold (96.7 per cent) on the other. Each coin came in a small, square plastic envelope with a name card made out to the recipient and a 'certificate of verification' from the regional jewellery firm that had minted them.

Trying to get beneath the surface of the thing my early response to these gold coins was to see them through the lens of Marxist and Maussian social theory, as mystifying objects that concealed the relationships of their production and the self-interest of their giver. Hidden in the coin, as I saw it, was the value that had been extracted from labourers as surplus and the continued commitment to work that the company sought to elicit from them in return.

But, as became apparent to me during the course of my enquiries, the young Telugu men and women who were the recipients of these gold coins had their own answers to what was seen and not seen, revealed and concealed, what was apparent and what lay beneath the surface of this corporate gift. As I will explore, none of them shared my reservations or harboured my mistrust or suspicion about the objects themselves. On the contrary, people handled the gold coins and spoke about them as uniquely valuable things; things that revealed rather than concealed their own making; things that made visible their own past actions, intentions and desires; things, we might say, through which they came to know themselves.

The perspectives of these recipients focus attention on the kinds of persons and knowledge generated by the gift, questions that have been central to Marilyn Strathern's anthropology. In this article, then, I rethink my original analysis and ask

what a political economy of the corporate gift might look like ‘after Strathern’. What was the value of the corporate gift for its recipients? What was the corporate gift seen to contain? What kind of ideas made the transaction meaningful and valid? What kind of persons and knowledge does such an exchange create?

Marilyn Strathern opens her book *Property, Substance and Effect* (Strathern, 1999) with an exploration of what she calls ‘the ethnographic moment’. For her this is a moment that arises when the fieldwork of observing and understanding meets that other field of text and the work of writing, reading and analysis; a moment in which ‘what is analyzed at the moment of observation’ meets ‘what is observed at the moment of analysis’ (ibid: 6). The ethnographic moment, as she conceived it, is an engagement between the two fields: something more than contact but less than encompassment, a reordering of elements, in which each field offers a perspective upon the other. The effect of bringing the two fields together creates an artifact of knowing, an artifact that is the objectification of the work of observing and analysis. As an artifact of knowing, then, ‘the ethnographic moment’ contains similarities to – has indeed been shaped by – other kinds of expository moment and artifacts, particularly those of Melanesian exchange.

As Strathern explains in this essay, the ethnographic moment to which she has repeatedly been drawn is one in which indigenous Melanesian perspectives on exchange are brought into an engagement with social theory. In her writing and analysis she has repeatedly returned to the highly ceremonial exchange of pearlshells, pigs, money and women by men in the Mt. Hagen Highlands of Papua New Guinea that she first observed during fieldwork in the early 1960s. For Hageners, she argues, the highly valued wealth items that are exchanged on these occasions are also artifacts of knowing in that they objectify or make manifest the capacities of persons and relations. The objects of exchange reveal the capacity of the other to have elicited it and the origin of these capacities in other people. What donor and recipient exchange are not just things but perspectives on each other – and, as aspects of their person circulate as things, persons and relations are made and extended.

For Strathern the gestures and practices of these ceremonial exchanges were to become a ‘paradigm’, a ‘theoretical passage point’, even a ‘category of knowledge’ (ibid: 13) that had an ‘enduring effect’ on her anthropology even after their canonical form in Highland Papua New Guinea had begun to fade and certain kinds of objects

had ceased to be exchanged altogether (ibid: 229). Just as her ‘ethnographic moment’ was composed of many others (ibid: 12) so too it has become incorporated into other peoples’; shaping the analysis of exchanges far beyond the highly ritualized, combative or ceremonial contexts of Mt. Hagen; from the transactions between doctors and patients in Papua New Guinea’s modern biomedical institutions (Street, 2009; Street, 2012) to those between blood donors and recipients in contemporary South Asia (Copeman, 2005; Copeman, 2009) to banks, hedge funds and securities firms in international financial markets (Riles, 2011).

In this article, then, I make Strathern’s ethnographic moment part of my own, appropriating some of its terms – ‘detachment’, ‘revelation’ ‘elicitation’ (Strathern, 1990; 1991; 1992) – and bringing them to bear on the analysis of a corporate gift to industrial workers in contemporary India. I ask what kinds of persons are the agents of this exchange and how the coming of the gift to the floor of a global factory involves the reimagining of donor and recipients, their capacities and assets, in a relational way (Konrad, 1998; Mollona; 2005; Riles, 2011). In doing so I show how corporate gifts in India refresh and extend other forms of the gift in India’s political and agrarian history. By contrast with the relationships at the heart of Strathern’s ethnographic moment those that I describe here are explicitly hierarchical and I reflect on the ways in which ‘modes of gift exchange’ (Graeber 2010) can affirm social asymmetries, difference and hierarchy just as they can the symmetry, equality or mutuality of donor and recipient.

To date, social and cultural theory has primarily apprehended the corporate gift as a political technology of rule. Framed by the writings of Marx and Mauss diverse kinds of corporate gift and acts of corporate giving have been brought into the same conceptual frame. Nowhere perhaps has a Marxist and Maussian accounting for the corporate gift been brought into more provocative synthesis than in Jean Baudrillard’s (1993) writings on symbolic exchange. Capitalist modernity, Baudrillard argued, is marked by a reversal in the cycles of reciprocity that characterized ‘primitive gift economies’. The ‘system’ derives its strength, he proposed, from the giving of gifts that can never be returned; and it is through the gift of work or employment that capitalists seize and retain their power. Today few theorists follow Baudrillard’s binary distinction between primitive and modern logics of exchange or pursue his nihilism by reading corporate gift giving as the death or end

of the social (c.f. Yang 2000). Instead the dominant terms of critical enquiry have approached corporate gifts as exchanges that reproduce capitalism; providing ideological justification to the pursuit of profit by re-embedding morality in the market or by creating binding relationships and obligations that compel the actions of recipients.

In Strathern's anthropology, I propose, we can find the vocabulary and tools with which to re-invigorate this political economy of corporate giving. At a time when – as Strathern herself once wrote (1999: 24) - corporations are paying increased attention to the way that knowledge is embedded in persons and relationships and are looking to articulate that knowledge as a capacity, resource or a commodity in new ways (Thrift, 2005; 2007; Foster 2007; 2008) social theorists may be prompted to think again about the kinds of knowledge and persons that are created by the corporate gift, and to reconsider the location of agency and action in the exchange. If exchange is an arena for the production and articulation of self and personhood, society and community, social and cosmological order then the coming of the corporate gift is never only or univocally about the agency and power of the capitalist.

### POWER, KNOWLEDGE, PERSONHOOD

In Europe and North America popular histories of corporate giving – from the philanthropic donations made by companies to charities, trusts and public institutions to the appreciation awards made to individuals – present the gift as the legacy of 18<sup>th</sup> century industrial paternalism, associated with the religious convictions of business leaders and the imperative that industrialists maintain a loyal workforce (Gond et al, 2011: 652). Recent histories of the corporate gift in India chart a similar trajectory, linking the pious medieval merchants who financed Hindu temple complexes to the 19<sup>th</sup> Indian industrialists who founded secular institutions, colleges, schools and hospitals, to the large 20<sup>th</sup> century family owned corporations who bankrolled India's anti-colonial nationalist movement and, following independence, took a reformist interest in welfare programmes and the country's rural development (Sundar, 2000; Sood, A. and Arora, A. 2006).

For political economists such acts of corporate giving are always initiated, primed and skewed in the interests of capital. In a critical tradition the 'corporate gift'

is a 'corporate oxymoron' (Benson, P. and Kirsch, S. 2009) deployed strategically by capitalists to invoke positive meanings while implicitly seeking to annul or foreclose alternative thoughts and implications. Here, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial philanthropy is what served to establish the authority and legitimacy of capitalists as social and political actors; while late 20<sup>th</sup> century investments in education and health under the guise of 'corporate social responsibility' is a mechanism through which modern corporations extend and authenticate their power. Acts of corporate giving are viewed either as a smokescreen for commercial interests and irresponsible behaviour or attempts to justify the deregulation of markets by 're-embedding' morality in market behaviour (Banerjee, 2008; Blowfield, 2004; Gond et al 2011; Shamir, 2004; 2008).

Amongst social anthropologists Marcel Mauss' essay on the gift (Mauss, 1970) has re-emerged as the basis for empirical critiques of corporate giving as a mechanism for creating binding social relationships that can be allied to a corporate bottom line (Dolan, C. and Rajak, D. 2011; De Neve et al, 2008). In her ethnography of the transnational mining giant Anglo American, for example, Dinah Rajak (Rajak, 2011) argues that corporate social responsibility programmes in South Africa enact the coercive elements of the Maussian gift, leaving recipients in positions of indebtedness and asymmetrical dependence' and reinventing historic relationships of power and control (ibid: 17). Anglo American's investments in the health, education and well being of its South African miners and their families, she argues, reproduce the moral bonds and coercive properties of the gift in ways that generate dependency rather than simply obligation (ibid: 178). Schools and HIV/AIDs programmes funded by Anglo-American demonstrate their corporate largess but also bind recipients to their givers, fostering relations of patronage and clientalism and giving rise to new forms of regulation and surveillance. Attempts to re-moralise contemporary economies through acts of corporate giving, she argues, are precisely what sustain the architecture of global capitalism and they work by 're-embedding morality in the market' (Shamir 2004; 2008). Such writings overlap with 'governmentality' approaches to corporate social responsibility that are framed by the writings of Michel Foucault (Gond et al, 2011; Blowfield, M. and Dolan, C. 2008) and reveal the corporate gift as a vehicle of control, discipline and power that remakes the person of the producer-recipient around ideal forms of market subjectivity (Rajak 2011: 17).



In these accounts we find an important and powerful critique that extends our analysis of the corporate gift as a technology of political rule. Yet in these analyses the exchange can also appear remarkably one-sided and remarkably stable. It is an accounting for the corporate gift in which – to paraphrase ‘Don Durito’ (Marcos 2006: 180) - the only happenings, meanings and consequences worth recording appear to be those that can be entered into a corporate balance sheet or that contain indices of profit. What counts as economic action in these Marxist and Maussian analysis is a structuring logic that assumes the relationship between giver and recipients. In this telling the coming of the corporate gift is an exchange initiated, directed and framed by capital. As a consequence it is also an account that looks very much like – perhaps even confirms and bolsters - managerial self-representations of corporate agency and power like those that can be found in company reports and websites.

To the extent that these transactions might be said to generate knowledge they do so only for the analyst, to whom falls the task of revealing the company’s hidden interests or of revealing a cycle of corporate gift and binding obligation. Yet such cycles can only exist, as Pierre Bourdieu (1990) put it in his famous critique of Mauss, in the omniscient gaze of the spectator. The subjective truth or lived experience of the exchange, as Bourdieu argued, lies in its very uncertainty or unpredictability; that is, in the possibility for all participants that the cycle of obligation and reciprocity can be interrupted at any stage. It is in the timing of the gift, Bourdieu argued, that we we can discern the logic of practice; with its interplay of habits and dispositions, provocations and challenges (ibid, p98-111).

We might go further. What kind of persons are being imagined and invoked in these analyses of corporate giving? In dominant Euro-American legal and ideological definitions the corporate person is an exclusive association of shareholders and their managerial agents that is carefully cut off from and distinguished from a network of other actors, including the state, producers and consumers (Foster, 2011; Riles, 2011). These definitions establish the boundaries of the corporation, delineating that which is internal to it and that which is external. Much corporate critique sets out, as Foster (Foster 2011: 12) has shown, to disrupt and disassemble these carefully delimited definitions of corporate personhood. In diverse traditions of Marxist theory, Left activism and even jurisprudence (Riles 2011) we find attempts to pry open the

corporate person, to make visible its composite nature and its component parts, and to assert the *indivisibility* of the corporate person from this much wider network. In trade union, anti-sweatshop and fair trade campaigns, for example, we find similar attempts to extend the boundaries of the corporate person so that groups of workers can make claims upon the value that it otherwise claims for itself (Foster 2011: 13).

Analysts also make implicit choices about where to, as Strathern (1996) might put it, 'cut the corporate network'. Yet where social and political theorists have attempted to account for the corporate gift they have taken a far from destabilising stance towards the corporate person. In political economic analyses of corporate giving, for example, the separation of the corporate person from a network of producers, of donor from recipients, is taken for granted and unproblematic (e.g. Shamir, 2004; Gond et al, 2011). So too in a Maussian anthropology, in which the corporate gift is a technology of attachment that creates relations of connection and connectedness, fostering social and moral ties between capital and labour (e.g. De Neve et al, 2008; Rajak, 2011). In these analyses the identity of the producer-recipient is anchored by a meta-narrative of alienation in which the wholeness or completeness of the person is constantly eroded by capitalist modernity (Bauman, Z. and Lyman, S. 1995; Englund, H. and Leach, J., 2000). Thus just as waged labour alienates producers from the knowledge and capacities that are naturally attached to them so too corporate gifts are shown to further alienate recipients from their true knowledge and capacities, making them subjects of capital in new ways.

Marilyn Strathern's ethnographic moment challenges us to reverse these analyses. Re-reading Mauss through her Melanesian material Strathern questioned the assumption that the gift created social relationships between otherwise distinct and separate individuals. Instead, she argued, gift giving is often a means of separating persons in ways that reveal their capacities and establish relationships between them. To think through gift exchange in this light is to see it as a form of practical or creative action through which people perform themselves and their relations to others (cf. Munn, 1992; cf. Graeber, 2002); to see personhood as an outcome, an achievement, or an artifact of exchange (Strathern, 1992a); and to see how gifts operate as technologies of detachment that separate or divide persons from one another (Strathern, 1991: 588; Cross 2011).

To approach the corporate person in these terms is to ask whether we can assume

that the corporate gift establishes relations between already distinct corporations and producers? It is to ask, as Foster (2011) and Riles (2011) have done, how the separation of shareholders and managers from governments, consumers and producers is achieved through acts of exchange, whether the transfer of collateralised debt obligations or the sale of a brand name cola. I propose that acts of corporate giving also work to cut the corporate network, separating donor from recipient in ways that make managers and shareholders internal to and producers external to the corporate person. As I show, just as the corporate gift can create forms of attachment and connection so too can it create relationship of separation and difference. In this sense, what is concealed in the corporate gift are the knowledge practices through which the corporate person and the person of the producer-recipient are made visible to each other as well as to themselves, and through which both giver and recipient accrue certain kinds of capacities and status.

Conceiving of the corporate gift in these terms brings a South Asian as much as a Melanesian perspective to our analysis. Notions of the person as inherently relational, 'dividual' and permeable that have been pivotal to Strathern's anthropology drew on those that anthropologists had elaborated in relation to debates about caste hierarchy, identity and exchange in South Asia (Busby, 1997; Carsten, 2004; Dumont, 1980; Marriott, 1976). In India, for example, we find multiple manifestations of the unreciprocated Hindu gift, *dana*, 'the gift that makes no friends' (Laidlaw 2000), that fosters detachment by transferring perilous substances away from the person and that reproduces difference in terms of social asymmetries and caste-based hierarchies as much as gender or personhood (Parry 1986). By juxtaposing such concepts and perspectives this article makes a further argument for a comparative anthropology, a project that has been central to Strathern's body of work. The point of her comparative method, however, as Street and Copeman describe (introduction, this volume p9) is less the production of similarity than the production of surprise; a sudden grasping of the different grounds upon which worlds are made. Thus, while notions of elicitation and revelation derived from moments of ceremonial exchange in highland Melanesia might prove helpful for thinking about the ways that corporate gift exchanges in contemporary South India are generative of knowledge and personhood this is not to say that the kinds of persons, relationships or capacities being revealed are the same..

In my ethnographic moment, then, I bring these materials to bear on a specific example of corporate gifting in contemporary India. I begin by showing how – in their invocation of kingship, caste and religion - acts of corporate giving in India today transform and reinvigorate inter-caste exchanges that have characterised its classical history and agrarian economy. In doing so I suggest other contexts of understanding, logics of power and forms of agency that animate the corporate gift in India and which a Marxist or Maussian political economy obscure. As I argue, if we do not begin from the premise that capitalist relations of production constitute the sole ontological basis for exchanges that take place on the factory floor then our accounting for the corporate gift begins to shift. We can begin to examine how recipients of the corporate gift come to make and know themselves through the exchange in ways that are not defined solely by the wage-labour relationship.

#### SWARNA MUDRA

The gifting of gold coins to industrial workers like those in the Worldwide Diamonds factory with which I began this paper is not an isolated phenomenon. Over the past decade gold coins - known in Hindi as *swarna mudra*, literally gold currency – have become one of the country’s most popular and widely used corporate gifts. India is one of the largest net importers of gold bullion in the world, accounting for over 20 per cent of global demand. As the international price of gold rose astronomically during the 2000s *swarna mudra* became one of the country’s fastest growing gold commodities. India’s banks, private equity companies, commodity brokers, and financial service groups all began to mint and market *swarna mudra* as a safe, secure and smart investment option for rich and poor consumers alike. Gold coins could be bought over the counter in jewellery stores, banks and even - following a partnership with one of the India’s largest industrial houses Reliance – in the nation’s post offices. Rising demand saw a proliferation in technologies of standardisation with new authorities emerging to certify the authenticity, quality, weight and purity of gold coins. In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis the price of gold hit record highs on the Mumbai commodity exchange and India was gripped by a ‘buying spree’ for *swarna mudra*, with demand rising by 698 per cent in the first quarter of 2010.

The popularity of *swarna mudra* in India has much to do with the particular

material and semiotic qualities of gold. On the one hand gold is a recognisable object of value that has a familiar role as a store, reserve or repository of wealth, and as a vehicle for transferring wealth between households. And, on the other hand, gold is a polysemous sign, a signifier of money and wealth, purity and auspiciousness (Bean, 1981: 18) that has a key symbolic role in Hindu ritual practices (Säävälä, 2003) (Yalman, 1963).

Rising demand for swarna mudra in India during the 2000s saw it gain currency as a corporate gift. Business scholars and management consultants began to describe swarna mudra as ‘a great way to do corporate gifting’ and gold coins were given away in a range of contexts. Industry associations encourage their clients to give away gold coins in advertising campaigns; wholesalers give away gold coins to their retailers as a sales incentive; fast moving consumer goods companies and retail outlets have started to give away gold coins directly to consumers on over the counter purchases over a certain value, in an example of what Nurit Bird-David and Asaf Darr (2009) call the ‘mass-gift’. In India’s publically and privately owned corporations alike swarna mudra has become an important part of industrial labour relations policy and human resources strategy. Management consultants see swarna mudra as a perfect ‘low-to-medium cost gift’ and encourage their clients to give gold coins away to employees in reward and incentive schemes. At least one international management consultancy firm in India, for example, encourages their clients to use swarna mudra as an ‘employee recognition solution’: a gift that can ‘re-enforce work habits’ by ‘recognising workers’, ‘celebrating achievement’, and ‘commemorating loyalty’.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007 when Indian executives at the European owned diamond factory in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh decided to give gold coins to their longest serving employees they saw the corporate gift in precisely these terms. The factory in question was built inside an export-manufacturing zone on the state’s north-eastern coast, from where it offers diamond cutting and polishing services to European and North American clients at very low cost. At its peak in 2007 before the global financial crisis and a crash in world markets for consumer diamonds, the factory processed approximately fourteen thousand carats of rough diamond every month, with an export value of around four million dollars. That year the factory employed some 1200 people, with the majority workforce composed of young Telugu men and women from ‘backwards’ and ‘scheduled castes’ overseen by around fifty ‘forward’

caste, middle class Indians with university degrees in engineering and management.

For several years the factory's Indian management team had complained about the 'work phobia' of these Telugu workers. 'By doing the same job continuously for several years,' an internal report concluded in 2005, 'some employees are unable to generate the same level of enthusiasm for their work. These work phobic employees are people who have reached their peak performance and have dropped their productivity levels. However demodulated [sic] employees can be brought back to productivity with rewards.' The gift of a five-gram gold coin on a worker's ten-year anniversary would, they imagined, achieve precisely this effect.

In interviews and conversations on the factory floor managers described the gold coins to me as *bahumati*, a word that literally means 'good regard' in Telugu but which has become more commonly used to mean an award or a prize that celebrates individual achievement. Unlike those gift objects that bring fame and reputation to the name of their givers (e.g. Munn, 1992) these were objects that were expected to bring fame and reputation to their recipients. *Bahumati* was the kind of gift, managers explained to me, that bestowed honour (*pratishta*) and prestige (*paruvu*) upon an individual. To receive a gold coin, one manager told me, brought fame to the recipient by 'filling their name with sunlight' (*aatani peru nindha prakaakshamuganunnadi*). The coins were signs of 'appreciation' and 'recognition', they said; things that would 'make people feel important,' 'make workers feel that we value them', 'let them know that we appreciate them; and 'show them that we respect their contribution to the company'. 'Our workers have been the pillars of the company,' the factory's general manager, a Telugu Brahmin in his early forties, told me. 'Without them it couldn't have reached its current status'.

From the perspective of these managers the corporate gift was oriented both backwards and forwards in time. While the gift was given to commemorate past service they also ascribed it an active role in creating and renewing future relationships between workers and the company. The company gave gifts, they explained, with the expectation that workers would reciprocate with their loyalty and commitment, labour and productivity. 'The company is giving gifts for production' they told me. Or, 'by giving gifts the company is trying to encourage people to work.' Ratindra, the factory's general manager put it most bluntly, 'By giving gifts we want people to work not just today but tomorrow, and the day after and the day after.'

In a typology of corporate gifts a five gram gold coin may appear to be of a different order or magnitude than the health and education programmes that multinational mining companies like Anglo American fund in mining communities. But within a Maussian political economy these diverse acts of corporate giving all deploy the medium of the gift in a way that is calculated to create cycles of reciprocal obligation. Within this accounting all corporate gifts to producers are credited with a capacity to shape the behaviour of recipients and bring a return that registers on the bottom line. In many respects this is an analysis shared by corporations, with human resource strategists and company managers apprehending the corporate gift as materialising the intentions, values and designs of the giver. Here, then, we encounter one of the points of convergence between social theory and modern managerial discourse (Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E., 2007).

In India gifts that appear to reinforce the position of powerful actors at the centre of a redistributive network or at the top of a ranked hierarchy carry connotations and associations to other kinds of classical and agrarian exchanges. These include the gifts given by kings and sovereigns to their subjects in pre-colonial India and the inter-caste exchange of goods and services that have been a much remarked upon feature of India's 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural economy. To the extent that the gifting of gold coins to industrial labourers in India invokes relationships of interdependency and mutual obligation like those between sovereigns and subjects, kings and priests, occupational castes and rural landowners these other exchanges warrant brief discussion. But, as I show, however, such parallels also shift our attention away from an analysis of the corporate gift as a technology of rule.

From around the sixth century onwards the giving of great or lavish gifts was a basic part of statecraft in the old kingdoms of what is now South India, a tool for 'articulating political communities and expanding political influence' (Mines, 2008: 142; Dirks, 1993). In public acts of kingship rulers bestowed rights to land, endowments, honours, emblems, titles and special privileges to recipients that ranged from those directly in their service including soldiers and to priests, leaders of agrarian communities, artisans and craftspeople. While these royal gifts did not specify service in any contractual sense they were often given for services rendered or in the expectation of services in the future (Dirks, 1993: 136). In Nicholas Dirks influential analysis the royal gift was a 'principal medium of rule', 'never given

without reason, intention and interest', which had a unique symbolic provenance in the political process (ibid: 129), serving to incorporate people into a moral-political economy with the king at its centre. These gifts gained significance not simply because they were given but because they were deemed to be indivisible from the person of the giver. The substance of the gift was the partial sovereign substance of the King and those who accepted gifts became parts of the King. 'In making a gift the King shared with his subjects the very substances that rendered him powerful' and the gifts were the means by which recipients became 'not just subjects of but subjects to'.

As vessels for bio-moral substances as well as vested interests the royal gift also articulated a different category of exchange, one that was not just concerned with the extension of political influence but also with moral and spiritual renewal. Gifts from warrior Kings to priestly Brahmins were manifestations of the unreciprocated gift, *dana*, and were not solely about securing control or dependence but also about disposing of evil, sin and inauspiciousness in such a way that ensured the continued preservation of social and cosmological order (Parry, 1986).

Against accounts that saw the royal gift replicated by aspirant local rulers and dominant castes, historians argued that acts of Kingly giving were themselves derived from the ritualised 'jajmani' relations of inter-caste obligation, service and patronage that lay at the heart of agrarian economy and village politics (Bayly, 1988). Dubbed the 'jajmani system' by an early 20<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer (Wiser, 1936) after a Sanskrit term meaning those to whom service is given, jajmani exchange became a central category in the analysis of caste in India (Dumont, 1980; Hocart, 1950). The term is broadly used to describe the giving of labour and service by caste based communities and occupational specialists (like potters, carpenters, weavers and leather workers) to other caste communities, particularly landowning farmers, in return for an allocation or share in the produce of the harvest or reciprocal service.<sup>2</sup> As Bayly put it, emerging classes, dominions, and rulers in India have repeatedly proven themselves to be deeply responsive to locally prevalent economic and political conditions and frequently found themselves most secure when they adjusted themselves to jajmani-type systems for sharing and redistribution (Bayly, 1983: 51). Whole kingdoms, Bayly argued, could be seen as extended sets of jajmani relations (ibid: 50).

Until the 1970s functionalist and structuralist accounts (Wiser 1936; Dumont



1980) presented these ritualised exchanges as part of a bounded, totalising system that either balanced caste conflict and maintained social cohesion over time or - in a Marxist interpretation - provided 'mystificatory legitimation' for class exploitation (Miller, 1986: p537). The giving of labour and the distribution of harvest produce or gifts of cash to those have given service was seen, within a cosmology of caste, as a kind of moral duty appropriate to a person's birth or position within the social order. During the 1970s and 1980s these interpretations of a constant and unifying system of exchange were reworked by revisionist accounts that highlighted the range of jajmani-type exchanges across India and the diversity between different regional contexts (Pocock, 1978; Fuller, 1989). Against accounts that presented inter-caste Jajmani-type exchanges primarily as a mode of economic redistribution Raheja (1988) argued that they demanded to be understood as transactional strategies through which dominant castes could redistribute bio-moral peril; with the jajmani gift from patron to service provider a mechanism for disposing of biomoral peril and preserving cosmological order that replicated gifts of dana from Kings to Brahmins.

For Daniel Miller (Miller 1986; 2002) – exploring these debates through the writings of Marilyn Strathern as well as Michel Callon – jajmani-type exchanges made sense as an ideal form; a shared 'frame' that describes 'normal' religiously ordained contractual relationships between households and caste communities, and of which the ceremonial exchange of cooked food, cloth and money between patrons, labourers and service providers during harvest festivals is a symbolic performance. Where they exist, Miller argued, jajmani exchanges describe economic transactions in which participants feel that they are also expressing 'their larger sense of being' (Miller, 2002: p5). To the extent that the giving of service and the giving of patronage articulate and perform the separation of castes, producing difference and hierarchy, these exchanges are a 'kind of praxis' or form of practical action that constructs and resolves philosophical questions of identity, personhood and alienation.

Within the anthropology and sociology of India scholars have repeatedly shown how sites of modern industry are spaces of continuity rather than rupture with the temporal rhythms (Parry, 1999), communal solidarities (Chakrabarty, 1996; Chari, 2004), religious practices (Fernandes, 1997) and (for many caste communities) the experience of exploitation and marginality that once characterised village life. Similarly, industrial modernity has created new opportunities and arenas for archaic

forms of gift giving and exchange in India. Just as the unreciprocated Indian gift *dan* is ‘refreshed and revitalised’ by contemporary modes of giving like organ and blood donation (Copeman 2006), so too *jajmani* type exchanges can be found revived and renewed on the floor of its contemporary factories. The symbiotic relationships and interdependencies that are articulated in classical or agrarian exchanges between sovereign and subject, King and Brahmin, landlords, labourers and artisans have their echo in the relationship between capitalist and industrial worker that are played out on the floor of India’s multinational manufacturing units. In both cases we encounter exchanges that produce social asymmetry and affirm hierarchical relations by separating out donor from recipient.

A corporate gift to industrial producers in India, then, can be interpreted less as a top down political technology of rule and more as the transformation and revival of the *jajmani* relations as an ideal frame, within which all economic transactions are embedded or entangled in expressions of morality, sociality and personhood. To the extent that these exchanges find communities of labourers acting according to a representation of society that appears to derive from their own interests but which over time reproduces the interests of dominant castes or that of capital then we might describe them as ideological (cf. Miller 2002). But ideology is also an analytical artefact of the exchange and, if we allow producer-recipients to create the context for their own understanding, we might begin to see how the corporate gift materialises other kinds of knowledge about persons and their capacities.

## LABOUR AND THE GIFT

For twelve months in 2005 I worked alongside 240 men and women in Worldwide Diamonds’ Preparation Department as an unpaid apprentice machine operator, learning to cut and polish rough stones into a basic diamond shape, with eight basic facets, a smooth, flat table and a sharp pointed culet (Cross, 2011). In common with the terms and conditions of labour across the Indian economy, waged work here was low paid, informal and deeply precarious. Like labourers at sites of hyper intensive industrial manufacturing the world over, workers here carried the toll of repetitive and intensive work regimes on their body. Eight hour shifts and six-day working weeks spent sitting in cramped, ill ventilated work sections left diamond cutters and

polishers suffering from a range of muscular-skeletal disorders, including chronic back-aches and muscle pains, eye-strains, respiratory infections, and a range of mental health issues, including stress, anxiety and depression (Cross, 2010a). People here described work as toil or exertion (*kastapadu*) and referred to themselves collectively as those who push themselves (*kastapadivallu*).

Sites of mass production like this in India and China are frequently depicted as spaces in which the commodification and alienation of labour has reached its contemporary apotheosis (Ngai, 2005; Ong, 2007). Yet the Telugu men and women machine operators employed in the Preparation Department were deeply committed to the idea that their labour was being 'given' to the company - personified in the figure of its CEO, general manager, and department managers - rather than being sold. No one in the Preparation Department described their own work using the formal Telugu words for daily waged labour (*koolipani*) or full employment (*udyogamu, gujurani*). Instead the terms with which people described their relationship to the company constantly played down or denied its economic aspect and emphasised the idea that their physical and mental exertions were being given rather than sold.

The stock expression used to describe their labour relationship used the Telugu verb, to give (*ivvu*). As in, 'we're giving our hard work and they are giving money' (*manam kastapadu istunavu vallu dubulu istunadu*) or 'we're giving production' (*manam productionistunannu*). But in with these expressions workers also spoke of giving away something more than just time or effort. People spoke of giving their sweat (*chematha*), their blood (*raktamistunannu*) and their life (*jivitamistunannu*) to the company. Some spoke of their labour as a constant stream or continuous flow (*dharamu*) being poured into the company; a notion that connoted other acts of giving in everyday Hindu ritual practice, such as when a ceremonial gift is preceded by the pouring of water into the hand of a recipient. Many also spoke of their labour as a demonstration of devotion (*asangam*) to the company or of affection for specific management executives.

The prevailing idea of labour that emerged on this factory floor, then, was of something uniquely inalienable and indivisible from the person of the labourer. People seemed to feel that by giving their labour they were giving something of the totality of themselves; something mingled with their body and yet capable of being transmitted between bodies and persons. Something, we might say, not really like a

thing at all, the giving of which expressed an aspiration for or perhaps even a commitment to, jajmani exchange.

Just as jajmani-type exchanges in India have always overlapped and co-existed with cash based market exchanges so too the idea of labour as a gift co-existed with and was reinforced by a much more instrumental and utilitarian understanding of labour as a means to an end. Jajmani-exchanges and market exchanges have always enjoyed something of a symbiotic relationship in the history of India's agrarian economy – with long term exchange relationships between persons of caste an ideal, normative frame that is reproduced and strengthened by its contradistinction to the impersonal cash based market transactions necessitated by people's everyday needs for goods and money (Miller, 1986; 2002) So too the idea of labour as a gift was produced and reinforced by the everyday realities of the local labour market, in which an oversupply of unemployed young men and women and the State's incentives for export manufacturers allowed companies like Worldwide Diamonds to keep wages low.

In their wage-labour relationships the Preparation Department's workers consistently judged the balance of their exchange with Worldwide Diamonds to be unequal. Twice during its first ten years of operations they had joined factory wide struggles for equivalence and parity. In 2002 and again in 2005, supported by a trade union affiliated to the Communist Party of India, workers here had taken strike action with the aim of forcing the company to match their labour with increased salaries, formalised contracts and improved working conditions. By laying claim to a share of the surplus value that was extracted from their labour by the company these struggles were also – as Foster (2011) put it - struggles for recognition that aimed to pry open the corporate person and ensure a place for producers within it. They were, we might say, struggles for inclusion within the network of the corporate person.

The ceremony to mark Worldwide Diamonds' ten-year anniversary directly evoked the post harvest ceremonies that perform jajmani relationships. Across rural India annual harvest festivals continue to be marked by inter-caste exchange rituals that symbolise and perform personhood within the hierarchical social order and moral economy of caste (Osella and Osella, 1996; Lerche, 1995). In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the year's second harvest is marked by the festival of *Sankranti*, the largest event in the Telugu festival calendar, which usually occurs in mid-January. On the

first day of the festival (known as *Bhogi*) agricultural labourers and artisanal service providers living in caste segregated villages across the state pay a visit to the homes of hereditary landowners and farming families where they are presented with gifts of harvest produce, food, clothes and money. This quasi-ritual redistribution of surplus is premised upon and re-produces the social and moral separation of persons within the Hindu caste system. Like these *jajmani* rituals corporate gift giving ceremonies articulate relationships of interdependence and hierarchy between distinct and separate persons. As such they also contain moments of revelation and knowledge as recipients come to know themselves and their capacities anew.

For ten years Worldwide Diamonds had articulated its relationship to employees almost entirely as one of market exchange, identifying workers only as units of labour power. This relationship had been most clearly defined on ‘pay-day’. On this day at the end of each month workers lined up at the end of their departments or work sections and waited to be called out by their three or four-digit employee identification number to collect a white envelope with a computerised wage slip.

Against this background the company’s ten-year anniversary ceremony was a liminal event. As they were called up onto the stage by name rather than number and thanked personally by executives and managers for their ‘service’ to the company each producer-recipient was revealed to himself or herself as a particular kind of person, the giver of service. And, as they reached out to accept their gift packets, the five-gram gold coins appeared to its recipients as nothing if not artefacts of their own making.

Those people who received their gold coins during the first ceremony in 2007 remembered it as a particularly moving experience. Prakash, the factory’s longest serving employee, who had been amongst the first batch of recruits in 1997, described the moment he accepted his gold coin. ‘You really felt proud,’ he said. ‘You were standing up in the Dolphin Hotel, in front of all those people, accepting this coin for ten years service and somehow you feel good that everyone is watching you.’ Like many recipients his sense of occasion had been heightened by the venue itself, a socially exclusive, upper-middle class hotel. Worldwide Diamonds’ workforce were drawn from a local demographic that were more likely to be found working in hotels like this as kitchen assistants, waiters or laundry staff rather than guests and for most people this was the first time they had entered the city’s plush hotels. Afterwards the

coin itself became a mnemonic, infused with this lived experience. 'When you see the gold coin and look at it,' Prakash told me, 'all the feelings and memories of that occasion come back.'

With the coming of corporate gift each recipient came to know themselves as the producers or makers of it. From their perspective, the gift appeared as an action in a field of exchange that was partially of their own making and the coin appeared as an object of exchange that crystallised the past actions, interests and desires of its producer-recipients rather than its corporate givers. Prakash and other recipients described their gold coins as something that commemorated past actions and bestowed honour and prestige. Like the factory's managers they used the Sanskritised Telugu term *bahumati* to explained it variously as 'a gift for service', 'something like a reward' and 'something that brings renown'. While the company's management, however, had seen the gold coins as gifts with the potential to shape future behaviour, engendering commitment and productivity recipients dismissed the idea that they were given in an instrumental and calculated way. Like popular distinctions between the gift and the commission or bribe in contemporary India (Parry 2000) people rejected the idea that the gold coins had been given for any narrowly defined instrumental purpose. '*Bahumati* is something that you give when you are very happy,' they said. 'It's something that doesn't come with anything.' 'The coin is given for us,' people told me. 'It is given for the satisfaction of employees. '*Bahumati* is something', I was even once told, 'that has no expectations.'

For recipients these corporate gift object made visible, represented and materialised the value of labour to themselves. In this, the particular ability of the gold coin to be both money and not money was particularly important. As a standardised commodity *swarna mudra* had a quantifiable exchange value that made it equivalent to money. As money the gold coins embodied those past actions and intentions that had been called into being by people's desire for money and their participation in the waged-labour economy. As money the gold coins represented the very object of waged labour and it was as money that they could represent the significance and value of that labour to labourers themselves (David Graeber 2001: 251). But as gifts the gold coins became 'more than mere coins' (Mauss, 1970: p22) things with names, personalities, pasts, objects capable of manifesting labour as an inalienable possession that had been given to the company as a gift.

Showing me their gold coins in the privacy of their own homes, people often began to reflect on their physical and mental exertions over the past decade. Sitting on a bare mattress in his village home one Sunday afternoon, twenty nine year old Srinu who had spent ten years as a machine operator in the Preparation Department's cornering section, turned the coin around in his palms and considered what he had given to the company over the past decade.

'How many people joined the company with me in 1999? Lots. More than a hundred. And how many people left, got disconnected from the company? Many! But not me. People outside don't understand but working in this factory is a very tough job, so finishing ten years there is a great achievement. You need to have a tough mental grip to keep working there everyday, to keep going. It creates all kinds of feelings. When we joined up we were bachelors. But now we're married, we've got children and we've been working for ten years. In other kinds of factory the work might be more physical and you might need more muscle but in our factory you need mental strength (*opika*), you need to have a strong mental grip (*manesika*) to keep going.

At home people kept their gold coins safely stored away inside the home. They were not put on display like gold rings, bracelets and marriage chains. Nor were they kept in view like ostentatious consumer goods and ornaments to which the attention of guests is invariably drawn. Instead people like Srinu kept them hidden, secreted out of sight, often in a cardboard envelope or plastic folder, beneath a pile of clothes or underneath a bed. In these discrete places the coins often rubbed up against other kinds of objects, documents of recognition and identity, like birth certificates or bank account cards. In this household ordering the corporate gift appeared to share some kind of elective affinity with other kinds of objects and artefacts that grant the bearer forms of political and economic recognition. Kept alongside them, the corporate gift appears most clearly as an artefact of knowledge: a thing that revealed recipients as particular kinds of people; a thing that revealed rather than concealed their gifts of labour to the company; and a thing that revealed labour as a capacity, a form of practical or creative action that could elicit the recognition and reciprocity of a patron.

From the perspective of its recipients, then, we might say, the coming of the corporate gift appeared to involve an extraordinary exchange of perspectives. It was as if the company had finally seen its workers as workers had wanted themselves to be seen; acknowledging them as the givers of labour and acknowledging their labour as something inalienable that flowed from, contained and expressed their person. And it was as if, in the act of giving, the company had finally seen itself as workers had imagined it: as a *jajman* or patron, a person to whom service is given and with whom economic transactions are entangled or embedded in expressions of morality, sociality and personhood.

### RE-ACCOUNTING FOR THE CORPORATE GIFT

Corporate gifts to producers offer an important reminder that transactions between capital and labour are always about personalising relations as much as commodifying them, and in this respect ‘the gift’ has continued substance and significance in the organisation of the global economy (cf. Cross 2012). Diverse examples of corporate giving at global sites of mineral extraction or export processing remind us that the competitiveness of multinational corporations and their subcontractors can come to depend upon the long-term transactions associated with gift exchange as much as the short-term exchanges associated with labour markets (Parry and Bloch, 1989). To understand where and how the corporate gift succeeds in reproducing power relationships between labour and capital, however, we need to do more than fold it into the conventions of reciprocal sociality. Instead we must account for the kinds of persons and knowledge practices that acts of corporate giving generate.

Problematically, however, the corporate gift is never one but many. In all acts of corporate giving we encounter ‘rival cognitions’ of the gift (Gregory, 1997: 8) and the ‘multiple strategic possibilities’ of gift exchange (Copeman 2011: 5). This ‘multivocality’ is impoverished if we take for granted the terms and categories of exchange as they appear from the perspective of the most powerful agents and actors. What happens, then, if we see corporate gifts as industrial workers in South India do: that is as the counter-gift, the gift returned, a gift elicited by and responding to the gift of labour?



In Baudrillard's classic re-reading of Marx and Mauss the reversal of exchanges between capital and labour was a revolutionary possibility. If the giving of gifts that can never be returned is the principal of by which capitalists retain their power, he argued, then the ultimate defiance of the system is to present it with gifts that can never be reciprocated. In this sense the gifts of labour that workers give to corporations is a sacrificial act, a move in a symbolic field of exchange that challenges employers to respond, and in doing so seeks to keep them hostage.

In Strathern's anthropology, by contrast, we find a very different conceptual vocabulary for thinking about the political economy of corporate gift. By inviting us to reconsider the terms with which we apprehend agency and power her work reveals the limits to a political imaginary in which the capacities, knowledge and relationships of all parties to the exchange are assumed *a priori*.

In both a Marxist and Maussian political economy of corporate giving the corporate gift begins and ends with capital. In such a framing the observations, insights and analysis of laboring recipients remain subordinate or 'redundant' (Englund and Leach 2000: p233). In this accounting for the corporate gift their alienation is an objective category – not a subjective one – and regardless of what they might think and whether or not they see themselves as actively eliciting the gift, the exchange is primarily analysed and accounted for in terms of its ability to extend corporate power and generate value. To the extent that the exchange might generate knowledge of relationships or capacities for its participants this always remains a 'false' consciousness; subordinate to the agency of structures and histories and to the objective knowledge of the analytical observer.

Out of my ethnographic moment, then, has come a reversal or revision of dominant analytical perspectives on the corporate gift. Rather than seeing the corporate gift as managers, companies and business analysts do - as strategic, calculated deployments that harness the affective power of the gift to bottom line economics – this is to see the coming of the corporate gift as a moment at which both parties to the transaction come to make themselves and know themselves afresh. If we recognise labour as a form of creative action then we can begin to see how people cultivate a sense of themselves as active agents in a wage labour relationship and strive to constitute a field of exchange with those who employ them. Moreover, if these acts of giving create asymmetrical and hierarchical relationships between giver

and receiver it is because the gift acts as a mechanism of detachment as much as connection.

To account for the corporate gift from the perspective of those who receive it, then, is to alter the political economy of the exchange. It is to see this as a transaction that is partially shaped, made, created and elicited by labour rather than capital; to suggest that companies might give gifts because producers compel them to; even more, that power and agency might lie precisely in the capacity to elicit a response from capital. Such a decentred political economy of corporate giving is not without precedent in recent social theory. In that strand of post-Marxist theory rooted in the Italian tradition of workerism or *operaismo*, for example, capitalism is constituted by labour. Here, the gift of labour is that which constitutes life in capitalist society and the refusal to give that marks the beginning of a liberatory politics (Hardt and Negri 2000, 204).

Responding to criticisms by feminist scholars that her account of personhood, kinship and exchange in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) failed to account for patriarchy and gender oppression in Papua New Guinea, Marilyn Strathern described how she had sought to avoid the symbolic contrast between passive objects and active subjects that was inherent in the dominant conceptual language used to imagine the respective power of men and women. Her book was, she wrote, ‘a feminist attempt to simultaneously recognise the conditions of oppression *and* not invest that oppression with more significance than it has’ and did so by taking a Hagen-women-centric perspective that would ‘diminish claims to hegemony’ and ‘dissipate the focus of challenge’ (Strathern, 1992b: 157). In Strathern’s political concerns and conceptual vocabulary interested social theorists might find a new language to grapple with ideas about agency and personhood in the political economy of the corporate gift. And, by thinking through these exchanges from the perspective of producer-recipients rather than corporate givers might find new ways of diminishing the hegemonic claims of modern corporations.

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