

# Sacred Dirt of Calcutta: on Value and Abjection in Humanitarian Volunteering

*Content warning:* in this talk I mention varieties of filth encountered in humanitarian work including bodily fluids, corpses, infected wounds, etc., as well as cases of consumption of filth and various forms of social stigmatization.

- The subject of this talk is humanitarian field work, which is notorious for ambivalence and contradictions in both ethical issues and practical management. The discourses of human rights and development as well as the increasingly popular utilitarian calculations of effective altruism do not bring about clarity into humanitarian field, as the actual encounters taking place in humanitarian work are not governed by the abstract values and calculations. Instead, these encounters are inseparable from the individual experiences, affects and biases of the participants.

In this talk I approach the question of affects and values of humanitarian work phenomenologically, starting from the ground level, which is the participants' experience. The distribution of roles and agency in humanitarian encounters is obviously unequal, they tend to divide the participants into victims and saviors, or givers and recipients, and their experiences differ accordingly. For the sake of brevity in this talk I will focus on the generalized humanitarians'/volunteers' side to argue that the presumably meaningless and undesirable phenomena, which can be brought together under such terms as *filth* and *dirt* paradoxically play a constructive role in subjective value of humanitarian work.

- My case study: humanitarian encounters in Calcutta, West Bengal, India mostly taking place in the context of non-professional aid and international volunteering:
  - Studied altogether for about a year in 3 visits in the course of seven years between 2013 and 2020.
  - Conducted participant observation in shelters for the dying and the disabled, in the slums, street clinics, charitable hospitals as well as the places of the volunteers' residence, leisure, and religious worship. Conducted varieties of interviews, studied diaries, online sources.
  - Kolkata hosts prolific culture of volunteering, hundreds of tiny to average NGOs. The backbone of charitable activity in the city is probably still the order Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa. This extensive volunteering world has been put on halt with the pandemic and it is still not clear to which extent and in which forms it will revive in the following months and years.
- The volunteers I encountered in Calcutta were people of diverse walks of life and backgrounds, from the proverbial gap-year travelers to professional doctors and retired catholic couples. A rather common feature uniting them is a liminal period in life. As it has already been noticed in volunteering studies, when asked about their own particular motives to be here, the volunteers often end up talking about the valuable experiences. To me they talked about personal transformation, about 'finding the meaning', and 'changing the perspective', about 'touching the real life' and also about 'giving back' for what they have received in life, which somehow makes them feel alive and empowered. As Liisa Malkki noticed in the book 'The Need to Help' (2015), they respond to their own *need* to break out

from their routine at the first place, to connect with others and to do things not dictated by the necessity or pragmatic reason.

- Importantly, they describe their experience as disturbing and satisfying at the same time. As one volunteer wrote in her online diary a decade ago:

I arrive back to one of the filthiest, polluted, humid, overpopulated, impoverished cities in the world. So why, if you may help me to understand, why is it that I have this [...] completely unexpected sensation that is happiness?<sup>1</sup>

In the volunteers' narratives their experience is not described solely as a work of improving or fixing the world. Instead, the humanitarian encounters are always ambiguous, emotional and to an extent transgressive, to which point I will come soon.

- Leaving out the obviously crucial 'gift-giving' aspect of aid and other facets of these experiences, in this talk I will focus on a factor of value, which has been so far underappreciated in humanitarianism and charity studies. Namely, on how these subjectively valuable experiences are influenced by interaction with filth and disorder. In the shelters the volunteers carry around and wash the destitute locals afflicted with various diseases, clean their bodily fluids; on various occasions they clean wounds, often infected with maggots, sometimes they prepare and deliver dead bodies, etc. In general, even outside such moments, dirt is a permanent background of the volunteers' experience in Calcutta: even a regular city street appears to them chaotic and dirty, not to mention the slums and shelters where they spend a lot of their working time. During their work in the field they see, smell, and touch dirt of various sorts, which they would avoid in their regular setting back at home.
- What dirt am I talking about? To assemble a conceptual tool to understand the experience of dirt, let me briefly pick up two influential approaches: Mary Douglas's dirt as analyzed in *Purity and Danger* (1966) and Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection from her essay *Powers of Horror*. From Mary Douglas we know that dirt is cognitive: it aggregates everything that falls out from cognitive and social orders, everything ambivalent, irreparably particular and misplaced. Thus, when we talk about the dirt encountered by the humanitarians in Calcutta or anywhere else, we are talking about the perspective of these people, roughly speaking, the dirt exists only in their perception, there is no such thing as *objective* dirtiness.
- Kristeva further developed Douglasian approach in the key of Lacanian psychoanalysis. She developed the concept of abjection (from lat. 'to cast away'), which she saw as the affect lying in foundation of the sense of self. According to her, as a child in early infancy starts to feel disgust, it at the same time develops a sense of self, separating herself from the maternal unity. Consequently, through life one feels disgust and horror towards the ambiguous phenomena which seem to threaten the boundaries of self, presupposing a transgression, a mixing, a permeation. Kristeva's abject is thus a psychoanalytic analogue of Douglasian dirt: it includes slime and filth, corpses and excreta, ambivalence and betrayal—everything that denies borders and structure. The abject filth becomes the Other, against which self is constructed, just as for Douglas dirt is the excluded Other necessary for any order to exist.

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<sup>1</sup> ,Kolkatakat' blog by Emma Lo (2010): <https://kolkatakat.blogspot.com/>

- Coming back from theory to the practice, the role of the abject has been given some attention in nursing studies. For example Holmes, Perron, and O'Byrne in their article "Understanding Disgust in Nursing: Abjection, Self, and the Other" (2006) observe how nurses in US hospitals resort to abjection to protect their sense of self. Especially explicitly the abjection arises towards the patients regarded as particularly contaminated, whom the nurses unconsciously perceive as a threat to their self-integrity and the surrounding social order, the authors mention as examples homeless people and homosexuals practicing unprotected sex. The medical institutions' employees tend to protect their selves and their position in the social order through dehumanization of the presumably contaminated patients as well as by resorting to the formal instructions, which allow them to avoid emotional involvement with the dirt.
- Humanitarianism, meanwhile, and especially the voluntary humanitarian work, does not provide much space for such protective borders. Instead, it promotes a compassionate touch, a direct and semi-formal or even informal engagement with the sick or stigmatized recipients of aid and their environment. Thus, the non-professional and semi-professional humanitarian work in the field implies facing one's repulsion and acting in spite or through it.
- The volunteers told me how at first they were dazed by the filth and suffering, and with the time they learned to overcome the dread, developing various techniques to this end. Those can be religious techniques, e.g. seeing the body of Christ in a sick body of a destitute patient. In this case the transgression can take shape of a nearly mystical experience, as one volunteer said that as she managed to overcome the repulsion 'everything lit up' as she realized that 'the whole world was the body of Christ'. A very common technique of dealing with the reflective repulsion consists in shifting the emotional focus from disgust to empathy with an effort of will, other multiple practical techniques of emotional control also appear, like one young nurse would overcome the disgust towards maggots she had to clean from infected wounds by concentrating on the task in front of her and cutting off the context. In any case, the humanitarians consequently value these transgressive experiences of taming the anxiety and crossing the borders of the clean order. Furthermore, the transgression brings them social capital: those taking over the dirtiest jobs, or 'not afraid to get their hands dirty' are respected and given more responsibility by fellow workers, as they develop their border-crossing image.
- So how does the presence of the abject make the humanitarians' experiences valuable? The encounters with the abject rupture the habitual, automatized way of acting and problematize the situation. In the light of the theory of abjection, the willful interaction with the abject matters means a transgression of the secure limits of self, guarded by disgust, fear, and anxiety, which is easy to picture for oneself, if one imagines grabbing with a bare hand bodily fluids of a stranger.  
As the volunteers' reflections demonstrate, in the aftermath this experience of transgression brings about a satisfaction, a feeling of having touched something 'real', an existential experience of vulnerable intense presence, cherished as a still disturbing but also empowering part of their identities.
- But as mentioned before, the humanitarians at the same perceive the encounters with the abject as a threat to their identities and institutions. The informal, intimate encounters with dirt, sickness, disorder challenge all cognitive certainties and structures. Thus, it is not surprising that the humanitarians and volunteers occasionally also protect themselves with

abjection, as the nurses from the above cited research do. For example, the volunteers mingle with the poorest locals in the slums but then retire to their residences and leisure locations, typically inaccessible for the poor locals. While at work, they can spend time without restraint on carefully handling the sick and consoling the afflicted recipients of aid, combing their hair or spoon-feeding them, but when heeded they easily distance themselves from the victimized locals by denying them agency, by paternalistically scolding and disciplining them through hygienic requirements and effectivity-oriented, depersonalized organization of aid.

- Eventually, as I could see in Kolkata, the humanitarians' attitudes oscillate between abjection and the movement towards a selfless empathetic direct touch. The abjection allows them to protect their identities, their institutions and their socially privileged position, while the transgressive engagement allows them to feel present and involved, to mine valuable, transformative experiences by overcoming the limits of the regular. This is, essentially, what they mean by 'getting a perspective' and touching the reality. This oscillation between transgression and structure results in permanent ambivalence of humanitarian work and lack of a firm clear structure therein, which is often regarded by aid managers and analysts as a bug, an error, which can and should be fixed through a methodologically thorough, effective and transparent administration. I argue that in fact this ambivalence is not a bug, but a feature, because that is where a large part of the subjective value of humanitarianism dwells.

Where do we go from here?

- Firstly, this aspect of international humanitarian work allows us to understand it beyond modern humanism and relate it to its non-modern roots and relatives. For example, monastic charity is obviously a genealogical predecessor of modern humanitarianism. The practice of religious care developed as a technique for self-cultivation and communication with the transcendental through the 'dirty' work and contact with the rejected individuals. Roots of the practice go back to the late-antique ascetic practice of living together and taking intimate care of the most stigmatized individuals – lepers. The saintly people and persons of power would wash the lepers' sores, hug and kiss them. The most explicit expression of this technique of self-cultivation is the consumption of filth used as a way to unite with God and obtain mystical experience, practiced by various mystics, among which the most known, probably, is the mentioned in the Mary Douglas's book *St Catherine of Siena*, who reached the stage of highest purity and received a mystical revelation after she drank a bowl of water mixed with pus while washing cancerous wounds of a poor woman. And to move beyond the western context, similar practices can be found, for example among the saiva and tantric renouncers in India. The most known among them today are the Aghori ascetics spending their time around the funerary burning ghats and traditionally transgressing limits of purity in various ways, including consuming filth to dissolve their ego and unite with the transcendental powers.
- Finally, this transgressive aspect of humanitarianism also potentially explains the increasingly large importance of religious charity in international humanitarianism in general and, according to my observations, in Kolkata in particular. Religious charity gives more resources to accommodate the transgressive value of volunteering, as the religious context, for example the abovementioned technique of seeing the body of Christ in the abject body

of a homeless dying stranger, give meaning to dirt and suffering. Thus, religious aid provides discursive tools and rituals which help its agents to accommodate and manage the transgressive experience. Meanwhile, secular humanitarianism with its focus on effectivity and utilitarian ethos tends to treat all sorts of ambiguity and dirt in humanitarian work as undesirable distortions which should be avoided or eliminated.

References:

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