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# A Home Away From Home: Empathy, Exchange, and Hindu Festivals on an American University Campus

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## Abstract

Every fall, the Syracuse University South Asian Student Society (SASA) hosts two major fall Hindu festival events: Navaratri and Diwali. SASA members understand their mission on campus to be providing a “home away from home” for South Asian students, particularly Indian international students. Through an ethnographic investigation of these events and the lives of SASA board members, this thesis explores the relationship between empathy, cycles of exchange, and transnational Indian identity. I investigate two types of exchange that occurred at SASA festival events: material exchange via food and charitable giving. Providing guests at events with food and working with non-profit groups were both social and emotional commitments for SASA members, because they both represented methods through which SASA members could provide a form of care for their social peers. Through an exploration of these two issues, I argue that the logic that connects empathy and non-reciprocal, supposedly disinterested giving is too narrow and misses the potential of empathetic giving within contexts that are closer to commodity exchange or that are evidently reciprocal. I also build upon and interrogate the work of anthropologists of South Asia who have explored the issue of the gift. Using the South Asian religious conception of *dana* as a comparative framework, I argue first, that relational empathy, or the imaginative capacity to find similarity and therefore enact care, for others can be found in forms of exchange that blur the line between commodity exchange, reciprocal exchange and non-reciprocal exchange; and second, that particularly in transnational settings, systems of exchange may be very vulnerable to the whims of authority.

**A Home Away from Home: Empathy, Exchange, and Hindu Festivals on an  
American University Campus**

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Thesis

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## Introduction

In late October 2016, Schine Auditorium, one of the largest public spaces at Syracuse University, was packed with hundreds of people, many of them decked out in their finest South Asian clothes. Although most of the crowd appeared to be young people of South Asian descent, ranging from teenagers through their twenties, there were also children with families and non-South Asian guests as well. The crowd was large enough that the event required the additional balcony space in the auditorium to fit everyone, although early on in the night, the crowd was nowhere as large as it would be later. Everyone in attendance was gathered for Diwali, the festival of lights, a major event in the Hindu calendar, during which time people frequently light small lamps known as *diyas* in Hindi and may exchange gifts.<sup>1</sup>

This Diwali event itself could be understood as a sort of a gift in itself. Members of the Syracuse University South Asian Students Association (SASA) had been working for weeks to ensure they could deliver a successful and welcoming event. In interviews, SASA members repeatedly echoed one another in saying that SASA's mission was to create "a home away from home" for Indian and South Asian students on campus, something they had been able to find through their own participation in the organization and which they in turn wanted to give to others. In their view, hosting their two large fall-semester Hindu festival events, to which hundreds of people bought tickets, was a way of establishing a place for Indian students on campus. Although attendees didn't exchange gifts with one another during the Diwali event, looking at SASA's work through the framework of "the gift" and exchange theory more broadly allows us to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58.

ways in which empathy, generosity, and an extended sense of quasi-familial ties can blur the lines between reciprocal and non-reciprocal exchange.

In arguing this, I am contributing to a debate that can be traced back to Marcel Mauss's seminal work *The Gift*. Mauss argues that gift exchange is essentially reciprocal because it does the work of constructing and maintaining social ties. In part, he comes to this conclusion because he understands gifts as "carrying" a part of the giver in some way, which in turn compels the recipient to give a return gift or to pass the gift on to another, creating a cycle of exchange and social relations. In contrast, French philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that a true gift would need to be non-reciprocal and unacknowledged or forgotten by both giver and recipient.<sup>2</sup> In philosopher Alan Schrift's reading, Derrida sees "the gift as coextensive with a radical forgetting by both the donor . . . and the donee."<sup>3</sup> I argue that the logic that connects empathy and non-reciprocal, supposedly disinterested giving is too narrow and misses the potential of empathetic giving within contexts that are closer to commodity exchange or that are evidently reciprocal. I also build upon and interrogate the work of anthropologists of South Asia who have explored the issue of the gift. Jonathan Parry challenges Mauss's understanding of the South Asian tradition of *dana*, a kind of religious giving that is practiced in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Whereas Mauss emphasizes the link between the embodied donor and the gift, Parry argues that *dana* is focused on alienating the gift from the giver, particularly in the case of Benares Brahmins, who receive the gifts of donors wishing to

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<sup>2</sup> Erica Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi* (Stanford, CA; Stanford University Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Schrift, "Should Philosophers Still Read Mauss? Thoughts on Contemporary American Politics," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 228.3 (2014), 391.



exculpate sins and inauspiciousness.<sup>4</sup> Gloria Goodwin Raheja's work on village prestation likewise emphasizes the ways in which gift-giving as a method of ridding oneself or one's family members of pollution or inauspiciousness often requires an understanding that the gift can be severed from the giver.

Like these previous scholars, I too see complications in forms of religious and quasi-religious giving that cannot be captured by Mauss's original argument. I also wish to consider the ways in which reciprocal giving that does do the work of establishing and maintaining social ties may still involve characteristics that are often tied to non-reciprocal giving: empathy and generosity. One of Parry's interventions into exchange theory was to demonstrate the alienability of *dana*. As Erica Bornstein explains in her own ethnographic work on humanitarianism in Delhi, although classically *dana* is a specific term for certain kinds of religiously meritorious giving, it is also invoked to discuss multiple kinds of philanthropic and empathetic forms of giving. Since SASA members were involved in multiple forms of giving within the context of and in relation to the religious festivals they hosted, I too will use *dana* as an admittedly imperfect comparative framework against which to consider SASA's forms of exchange. As I will argue in this thesis, even having the capacity to enact one's own familiar cycles of exchange, whether in the form of material goods like food, or in less tangible forms like time and social assistance, can be a challenge for student groups like SASA. They exist under the authority of the university administration. As I will demonstrate, the university administration frequently had very different priorities to SASA members and often interpreted their proposed forms of exchanges in unanticipated ways. The disruptions

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Parry, "The Gift, the Indian Gift and the 'Indian Gift,'" *Man* 21.3 (1986), 459-60.

caused by these (mis)interpretations demonstrate that in exchange, we cannot always assume that cycles are always tenable — either they require the approval of authority or the circumvention of authority.

### **Celebrating in Syracuse**

SASA's Diwali event consisted of a showcase of performances by various students doing musical and dance routines, followed by a catered meal. This represented a distinct departure from the generally domestic rituals that characterize Diwali in South Asia, but the motivations behind the event were indeed focused on notions of domesticity and family. The host organization, SASA, was an active undergraduate student group that was particularly known for hosting these large Hindu festival events. In the fall semester, they typically hold a Navaratri and a Diwali event, with Holi capping off the spring semester. During the 2016-2017 academic year, the executive board was largely made up of undergraduate international students, mostly from India but also from a number of other countries. SASA's committees were made up of a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, both international students and Americans, and I knew they had been working for several stress-filled weeks to prepare for this Diwali extravaganza, their largest and most significant event of the year.

Early in the evening, a young man and woman stepped out onto the stage, requesting that everyone come gather in the open floor space in front of the stage. It was time for the *aarti*. As I came down the stairs, I heard a young woman asking a friend to join her, saying that was when everyone would be praying to God. A crowd of people gathered before the stage, facing the table holding a small *murti*, or icon, of the elephant-headed god Ganesha, which sat in front of a larger, approximately postcard-sized print of

the goddess Durga. People took turns, either in small groups or by themselves. They came up to the front of the crowd to hold the round silver platter with small electric lights and rotate it in front of the deities, performing a traditional Hindu devotional practice. In the background, devotional music played and a series of images of Hindu gods and goddesses appeared on the large drop-down screen onstage.

As I came to join others on the floor for the *aarti*, I bumped into a young SASA member who I had previously met. The young woman, a South Asian American first-year undergraduate from New Jersey, was dressed in a beautiful turquoise *anarkali*, an ankle-length dress made of many yards of fabric, paired with leggings. She asked if I had gotten to the front of the line to do *puja* yet and when I said I hadn't, she invited me to join her. When we actually were handed the silver platter, we both hesitated. She pondered out loud how many times we were supposed to rotate the plate clockwise and whether there was supposed to be a counterclockwise rotation at the end. I confessed I had no idea and let her take the lead. The two of us, like perhaps many of SASA members, were comfortable with the food, the decorations, and the atmosphere, but were less familiar with (and possibly less invested in) the "actual" religion of it all.

The night's performances opened with jocular speeches and introductions from M.C.s from both SASA and Nanhi Kali, a graduate-student-run organization affiliated with an Indian non-profit of the same name, which advocates and fundraises for girls' education in India. After the planned performances, there would be food provided, a decided point of interest for many guests, including myself. The posters advertising the event on Facebook had included a menu for the night. Although I had initially become interested in doing ethnographic work with SASA because it hosted the major Hindu

festival events on campus, it had quickly become clear to me that SASA members were invested in the material, embodied experience of the events and the personal relationships they felt they fostered through such events.

In interviews and conversation, SASA members repeatedly emphasized to me that they wished to provide their audience with a sense of familiarity and ease. This was accomplished through food, aesthetics, language, and most of all, social care. SASA members could not recreate India (or any other homeland) on the Syracuse campus, but they could still offer the large population of Indian international students (and more broadly South Asian and South Asian American students) some reminders of the comforts of home. They could do their best to temporarily transform the explicitly public space of the university auditorium into a quasi-domestic space suited to the rituals of celebration. For all the many explicit ways that Diwali was a public and performative event, SASA members conceptualized its success as lying in its ability to adapt Syracuse into a familiar, welcoming space and to assure its audience that, even far from home, they were cared for at a time when they might feel the distance from their families particularly strongly. Centrally, SASA members saw the whole effort as a form of generosity and kindness. Members had put in hours of hidden effort. I knew that SASA members had been required to show up several hours before the beginning of the Diwali event to help set up the auditorium for the event — the place was decorated and ready for hundreds of guests, the long list of performances worked out, and tables had been provided for the non-profit groups SASA supported.

The long hours they put in, as well as the food provided and the funds from the tickets, which they later divided between SASA and the non-profit Nanhi Kali, all

represent forms of exchange. Although SASA members attend meetings, prepare for, and deliver activities and events throughout the academic year, their presence on campus is largely felt and seen through these sporadic events. For their public audience, SASA's significance lies not so much in the invisible work accomplished behind the scenes, but in the actual enactment of these forms of exchange. Through this thesis, I argue that SASA's festival events allow us to understand a relatively new form of immigration — temporary, education-focused, and oriented towards a potential return to the homeland, and how in response to this experience of distance, students have established modes of care and alternative domesticity through enacting multiple forms of exchange. These modes of exchange, however, as will become clear, are always tenuous and subject to forms of skeptical authority. Much anthropological work on exchange focuses on the potential disjunctures or discomforts that may emerge in cycle of exchange when donors and recipients potentially have different understandings and motivations. I suggest, based on the experiences of SASA students, that we must also consider from where the authority to legitimate a cycle of exchange comes. Within the context of the university, students must rely on the approval of the university, even though the university administration, lacking the cultural referents that Indian international utilize, may frequently be approaching such exchanges from a very different perspective.

### **Diasporic or Transnational?**

In certain ways, the mobile group of young people involved in SASA seem to embody broad trends in South Asian migration to the United States, but in other significant ways, they represent a new and important trend in human mobility. Asian Indians constitute the “third largest Asian group in the U.S. . . . [and] are among the

wealthiest and most well-educated foreign-born groups in this country.”<sup>5</sup> As students at an American university, SASA members and their audiences represent a relatively privileged and well-educated population. The most significant immigration from Asian countries to the United States occurred after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which eliminated previous quotas and allowed the entry of hundreds of thousands of new immigrants, particularly from areas such as Asia and Latin America.<sup>6</sup> SASA students represent the result of both these changed immigration policies and the demand for highly skilled labor.

In other ways, however, both SASA members and the population to which it caters reflect an ambiguous migrational status that does not fit with previous South Asian immigration to the United States. In addition to immigrants who have become American citizens, many are non-citizen residents issued H1-B visas for specialized workers. In contrast, Indian SASA members and the Indian international students who come to SASA events may or may not choose to remain in the United States after they receive their degrees. Varsha, for example, graduated at the end of the Fall 2016 semester and returned to India, where she hopes to potentially pursue graduate studies in psychology.<sup>7</sup> (It seems worth noting, however, that it is certainly possible that staying and working in the United States may indeed be the goal of at least some — when I mentioned to some members before the beginning of an executive board meeting that I was from southern New York, Kavita asked if I had been born in the United States. When I said yes, her friend Naina joked, “Man, that’s the dream!”)

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<sup>5</sup> Prema Kurien, “To Be South Asian or Not: Contemporary Indian American Politics,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.3 (2003): 266

<sup>6</sup> Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, preface to *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; New York: New York University Press, 2007), x.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to utilize pseudonyms for my interlocutors in SASA.

In this context, the term diaspora no longer seems the most appropriate. Historically, “diaspora” was originally used to describe the experience of forced migration. As Gurharpal Singh explains, “the classical definition of a diaspora, as longing for an imagined homeland following violent dispersal or some other cathartic event, as for example in the case of the Jews, seems largely inapplicable to most Indian emigrants” but if diaspora is considered more broadly in terms of “the experience of migration and the attendant anxieties of displacement, homelessness and a wish to return,” then the case of considering Indians or South Asian settled overseas is understandable.<sup>8</sup>

Taking a cue from Aihwa Ong’s study of mobile Chinese citizens of Hong Kong, I suggest that it is more appropriate to think about SASA members and their audience as a “transnational” population. Ong explains that the very word transnationality “denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something.”<sup>9</sup> The members of SASA differ from many in previous generations of post-1965 immigration waves from South Asia. Although like these older populations, students are frequently pursuing graduate work and have ambitions to be the kinds of professionals that might merit recruitment, they are not necessarily planning to settle in the United States. The kinds of skills needed and opportunities possible in South Asia and elsewhere have shifted the dynamics of international migration from a so-called “brain drain” from non-Western countries like India to a greater degree of return migration. Additionally, there has been an increase in Western workers posted in South Asia. SASA members, with their skills, represent an emerging transnational class of future workers. In

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<sup>8</sup> Gurharpal Singh, introduction to *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*, eds. Bhiku Parekh, Gurharpal Singh and Steven Vertovec (New York: Routledge, 2003): 3.

<sup>9</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.

interviews, SASA board members expressed gratitude for the opportunity they were getting to study in the United States and for the exposure they had to new contexts as a result, but also spoke about their initial sense of loneliness and isolation so far from home. These personal emotional experiences motivated them to become involved in SASA, in order to make the university a more welcoming place for others who might be going through similar experiences.

### **South Asian/Indian/Hindu?**

SASA is an undergraduate student organization but it focuses its efforts primarily on South Asian students, most of whom are graduate students. All the current members of the executive board, which must necessarily be made up of undergraduate students, are international students, some of whom come from India, and others from South Asian families residing in the Middle East. Although most SASA members seem to be Indian or of Indian descent, in conversation, members of the group slip between using the terms “Indian” and “South Asian.”

The politics around this word choice is fraught and implicated in broader political and religious movements in South Asia, particularly with the prominence of Hindu nationalism and the fact that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political party associated with Hindu nationalism, is currently in power on a national level in India. Broadly, Hindu nationalism conceives of India as an essentially Hindu nation. By using the term South Asian, SASA indicates an interest in a broader identity, one that encompasses not only multiple nationalities but also multiple religious communities. At the same time, however, their festival events are their most important undertakings and the events are explicitly Hindu in that they include *pujas*.



Referring back to my previous discussion of the terms “diaspora” and “transnational,” part of what has made diaspora such a fruitful framework to talk about migration is its focus on issues of cultural transmission and adaptation. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall suggests that in relation to diaspora, there are “at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’” and that the first suggests that cultural identity “[reflects] the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes” of diasporic populations. For Hall, this means the African diaspora in the Caribbean. In contrast to this first conception of identity, Hall posits a second perspective that “recognizes that, as well as the many different points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute . . . ‘what we have become’.”<sup>10</sup> Even as I suggest that “diaspora” may not best apply to SASA students, I want to retain Hall’s point that populations distant from the so-called homeland may develop differences from those residing in the homeland and from other overseas populations. In this case, I suggest that distance from the religio-political atmosphere of South Asia may lead to students seemingly de-politicizing Hinduism in their own understanding, relating Hindu festivals not so much to the current surge in Hindu nationalism but rather to a sensibility, set of aesthetics, and references recognizable to Indians and South Asians more broadly.

Although Ram described members of SASA’s executive board as having some connection to India or the Indian diaspora, the board includes students who are international students but who were not raised in India. Ram himself, for example, had grown up in the Middle East and had family from the South Indian state of Kerala. Vandana’s family had immigrated to Moscow, Russia, from the northwestern Indian state

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<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 223; 225.

of Gujarat. There also exceptions to this specifically Indian connection. Nasir, the Diwali MC, for example, is the son of Bangladeshi parents and was also raised in the Middle East. Still, the breakdown of SASA's student members is in keeping with Prema Kurien's observation that "both South Asian and Hindu, or Indic, groups tend to be comprised largely of Indians from a Hindu background." Kurien observes that "at the heart of the difference between South Asian and Hindu organizations lie two different conceptions of "Indianness" — a secular, multi-religious, and multicultural vision of India versus a Hindu-centric one."<sup>11</sup> SASA, however, presents an interesting and odd case, because they are an explicitly South Asian organization that puts on events for religious holidays as well as "secular" events like ice-skating nights and a formal dance in the spring.

SASA members were clearly aware that the main audience of their events was the sizable population of Indian international graduate students on campus, but they considered their organization's aims to include introducing others on the Syracuse campus to South Asian culture and to facilitate socialization among South Asians, defined broadly, in the university community. In interviews conducted before and after their Diwali event, however, SASA members also indicated that their ambitions in this direction generally have not been achieved and that ultimately they are also interested in catering to the comfort and interest of their main audience, particularly when it comes to festival events, which bring in the largest crowds.

Looking at SASA's schedule of events, the absence of non-Hindu festivals quickly becomes clear. Members offered ambivalent reflections upon this absence when asked about it in interviews. In an interview conducted in early February 2017, after her

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<sup>11</sup> Kurien, "To Be or Not to be South Asian," 263.

fall semester graduation, Varsha reflected that one thing she hoped SASA would do in the future that she had not been able to accomplish during her time on the board was more collaboration with other student groups. “I would love for them to collaborate with the Muslim student organization. I’m not sure if there’s a Buddhist organization,” she mused. Varsha also mentioned that there had been discussions of working with the Caribbean Student Association, specifically because “a lot of culture is also associated with ours.” In her answer, Varsha touches upon multiple levels of the issue of Hinduism and Indian (or South Asian) identity. At least in theory, SASA is open to including and highlighting the lives and shared histories and cultures of their diasporic brethren. They also express an interest in celebrating the festivals of multiple religious communities. At the same time, however, they consider Hinduism to have a more pervasive coloring of “culture,” something they are far more interested in than they are in religious belief.

Nasir, who told me in an interview that he saw himself as a not particularly observant Muslim (although he also said he tries to go to Friday *jummah* prayers either at the local masjid near campus or in Hendricks Chapel if he happens to be on campus near mid-day on Friday), explained to me that in his personal experience, the Muslim Students Association (MSA) did not have the same kind of interest in festival-type of events. In his opinion, this difference is partly due to the fact that the two Eid festivals fell during times when few students were on campus. In his understanding, however, perhaps the more important reason for this difference was that Islam did not officially condone the kind of large, vibrant, and elaborate festivities SASA hosted. Growing up in Saudi Arabia, he explained, he had learned about Islam through his school years. He admitted that within his own family, there might indeed be large celebrations for Muslim holidays, but he felt

that the MSA was interested in following a form of Islam that more in line with official teachings. Nasir saw participating in SASA as a different kind of opportunity, one that allowed him to connect with another aspect of his background.

At SASA's festivals, they perform *aartis*, or a section of *puja* in which people circle candles in front of a person or deity. At both the Navaratri and Diwali events, the *aarti* occurred at near the beginning of the night, after people had begun to arrive but well before crowd finished filling out. For both evenings, announcers called people down to the lower floor of the auditorium, saying it was time for the aarti. In keeping with how *aarti* might be performed at a temple, at both the Navaratri and Diwali events there was *prasad* sitting by the deities. *Prasad* is traditionally some kind of food or other material first offered to the deity and then distributed to devotees.

Unlike with Hindu Student Organizations, religion is not the basis of SASA's existence as a student organization nor is it seen in itself as particularly central to the group. Members of the executive board have told me in interviews that they do not consider themselves particularly religious and demurred from answering questions about the religious significance of festivals as a result. The festivals of Navaratri, Diwali and Holi function more as sites of collective cultural memory that can be remembered and reinvented for this new temporary home than as methods of defining or reinscribing religious identity in the diaspora. In many ways, this has the effect of reinforcing a sense that Indian identity and Hindu identity are synonymous. Many explicitly Hindu American groups, for example, are closely aligned with Hindu nationalism, whose proponents "view Indian culture and civilization as Hindu, whose true nature and glory were sullied by the invasions of Muslims and the British, and by the post-colonial domination of

“pseudo-secular” Indians.”<sup>12</sup> Although in many ways SASA’s decisions about which festivals to host seem to be pragmatically oriented toward to mass appeal, an issue I further consider in the context of exchange later, their pragmatic mathematics comes to a rather similar conclusion to that of explicitly Hindu groups: that Hinduism and its cultural associations are in some way recognizably Indian. As Gita put it, the people who come to SASA events are “predominantly Indian, and Indians predominantly celebrate these festivals.”

At the same time, in keeping their frequent personal self-descriptions as not especially religious, SASA members do not seem to equate Hindu festivals with Indian culture to quite the same end as the Hindu groups Kurien analyzes do. During an interview, for example, Gita discussed her memories of celebrating festivals in India, recalling how her family would celebrate Diwali with employees in her father’s business. Following the interview, Gita casually mentioned to me that she was, in fact, Jain and not Hindu, a fact she said she had never thought much about while living in India. Her Jain identity, she said, as she packed up, had become clearer to her since coming to the United States. Hindu nationalist politics certainly does have supporters among non-Hindus for a variety of reasons, but in this case, Gita’s observations seem less political than an observation about her previous experience of religious identity in India as being perhaps less rigidly bound or involving more overlap in practice between religious communities than self-identification might indicate. She also fondly recalled lighting firecrackers for Diwali during her childhood, and felt rather bad that it was another celebratory tradition

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<sup>12</sup> Kurien, “To Be or Not to be South Asian,” 267.

that SASA could not reenact for people, because it would certainly constitute a fire hazard.

Looking collectively at SASA members' reflections on Hinduism and its relationship with Indian or South Asian identity opens up a space for us to consider the ambiguous middle ground between the rhetoric of Hindu nationalism and Nehruvian secularism. The young, predominantly Indian, predominantly Hindu members of SASA's executive board do not identify as religious. They also frequently discuss religion in a manner that suggests they are conceptualizing "being religious" in terms of belief and regularized devotional behavior. Based on that set of "requirements," SASA members see themselves as non-religious. Despite this, they repeatedly shared stories indicating their continued practice of various religious duties or celebration of festivals. For example, Varsha, who explained to me that she considers herself an atheist, still regularly does *puja* with her mother. Generally, SASA students seem to accept a majoritarian- understanding of Hinduism as an overarching "cultural" influence in India (and to some degree, South Asia more broadly) but in interviews also explicitly rejected the idea that this means minority religious populations do not belong or are somehow extraneous to the Indian nation and to the cultural life of the South Asian subcontinent. They position elements of Hindu devotional practice as somehow necessary or appropriate to their events not so much because they necessarily believe in the theological conceptions of what *aarti* accomplishes or what *prasad* contains, but because they understand these as within a continuum of recognizable elements of homeland "culture." Culture and religion, then, seem to be on a kind of ambiguous spectrum, in which theological belief is on the overtly religious end and punctuated embodied practices like *aarti* within the

context of a festival, are cultural elements in a manner similar to dress and food.

Arguably, they maintain religious sensibilities outside of what they see as explicitly religious contexts.

### **Regional Identity in Diaspora**

In addressing their events to such a large audience, SASA loses a certain capacity for specificity, particularly when it comes to acknowledging regional differences within South Asia. Both Ram and Vidhya, whose families are from the South Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu respectively, pointed to the predominance of North Indian food and culture within SASA events. When I asked about how SASA selects which festivals to host, for example, they, as well as Gita and Varsha, who come from North Indian families currently living in Mumbai, said that Navaratri, Diwali and Holi simply had the broadest appeal. In their views, this was not something necessarily to be resented. It was just the pragmatic result of the relatively large proportion of North Indians on the Syracuse campus, and more broadly, the tendency in America to associate Indian culture at large with a broadly North Indian set of referents. In her analysis of South Asian grocery stores in the San Francisco Bay Area, Purnima Mankekar notes the way one store sorted the available music

“reinforced a system of categorization whereby the music and by extension, the diverse cultures of southern India were lumped together. This homogenization underscores the dominance of North Indian assumptions about a normative “Indian culture” and reflected some of the regional tensions seething in India.”<sup>13</sup>

Although both SASA members and the store owners Mankekar speak with candidly acknowledge the fact that there is great diversity within their South Asian audiences, they are also deliberately focused on providing material acceptably “Indian” to the majority of

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<sup>13</sup> Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 83.

their audience. Even anecdotally, it is easy to see why SASA members believe their audience is likely majority North Indian — riding the city and university bus from campus, I frequently overhear conversations in Hindi, but far more rarely do I recognize a South Indian language.

This does not mean, however, that students in SASA are not aware of the diversity within India (and South Asia more broadly). Varsha, for example, encouraged me to talk to several other SASA members who were not North Indian, who she believed might give me a different perspective on my questions about regional identity in the diaspora. Ram and Vidhya, with their familial connections to South India, both discussed a sense that their regional identities were less visible now that they were in the United States. Multiple interviewees brought up a variety of festivals that they themselves had celebrated but felt would not translate to the context of Syracuse. Gita, who is from Mumbai, mentioned Ganesh Chhaturti, a festival particularly popular in her hometown, saying that SASA simply did not have the right amount of time or funding to host their own, because it was an event that not everyone would know. Thus, despite the fact that many SASA board members and committee members introduced themselves at one of the first meetings of the academic year and listed Mumbai as their hometown, they chose not to cater to their own personal experiences of prominent local festivals. Instead, they relied on a combination of an established institutional tradition in scheduling and an assumption of what constituted a broadly appealing event.

### **Why Exchange Matters**

Having established the context of SASA and its festival events, I return to the issue of exchange. Many scholars in multiple fields have tackled the question of how



forms of exchange or gift giving may or may not foster social relations through the unspoken expectation of reciprocity. In the case of South Asia, scholars have focused on the concept of *dana*, the Sanskrit “to give,” and also the term used to express forms of giving such as giving alms to renunciants or members of monastic orders. A similar kind of exchange occurs at SASA’s events, including its festival events as well its smaller social events, such as the beginning-of-semester “Bollywood on Ice” night and their spring-semester Blacklight event, which emulates a casino night. In both the case of *dana* and the kinds of student group events that SASA holds, a donor provides sustenance for the recipients, who are understood as bodies in need. Looking specifically at the issue of food, SASA is hardly the only example of this kind of food exchange oriented towards students on American university campuses. Indeed, the concept of providing food for students who are understood as particularly (physically and emotionally) in need of it underlies any number of events sponsored by both student organizations and university offices. SASA’s interest in support non-profit organizations such as Nanhi Kali should also be contextualized within the context of student-group fundraising for worthy causes. Looking at these two different kinds of giving, which took place simultaneously at SASA’s Diwali event, allows me to demonstrate that issues of intent and reciprocity, and non-reciprocity are indeed vexed.

Central to discussions on exchange is the issue of the gift’s association with its giver and the expectation of reciprocity. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss argues that gift giving, although supposedly voluntary, requires reciprocity in order for the recipient to be able to maintain personal prestige. As such, gift-giving requires a willingness to both give and receive gifts, because refusal would indicate a refusal to be part of the system of

social connection fostered by exchange. Looking at exchange in Maori culture, Mauss declares, “To refuse to give, to neglect to invite, as to refuse to take, is equivalent to declaring war; it is to refuse alliance and communion. As a consequence, one gives because one is forced to do so, since the recipient has a kind of right of property over everything that belongs to the donor.”<sup>14</sup> In this interpretation of exchange, gift giving is necessarily neither disinterested nor entirely voluntary. To maintain social relations, participating in exchange is unspoken requirement.

Within the context of SASA, social relations are indeed being perpetuated, although they do not exactly reflect Mauss’s analysis. Rather than a situation of equals giving to equals in a cycle, SASA members position themselves in something akin to a patronage situation, or a situation similar to parental gifts to children, another topic of considerable anthropological interest (see for example, Sykes 2005). Although SASA as an organization derives both monetary gain and social prestige from well-attended events, members primarily discuss their commitment in ways that emphasize the unequal nature of the exchange, in that they are providing not only the food and space, but also an environment of alternate domesticity and quasi-familial care.

### **Material with Meaning**

One of the most debated portions of Mauss’s analysis revolves around the “spirit of the gift.” Mauss understands gift giving to involve “a mix of spiritual bonds between things that are in some way of the soul, and individuals, and groups who treat each other, to some degree, as things.”<sup>15</sup> The intimate relationship between gift and person blurs the

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<sup>14</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Expanded Edition*, trans. Jane Guyer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), 74-5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

distinction between the two. This spirit then, Mauss argues, is part of what drives the system of exchange, because those involved cannot hold onto such a gift.

The question of the “spirit of the gift” is one of spirited debate in anthropology and relevant to a discussion of exchange at SASA events because of the kind of deep emotionality that members invest in their events. The perceived success and reputation of their organization are intimately linked. There is, then, a direct link between their organizational identity and their “gift,” in the form of their events. Jonathan Parry, altering Mauss’s argument, suggests that in the case of the Brahmans in Benares he studied, it is in the case of non-reciprocal giving that we see this “spirit of the gift.” By looking at *dana* in the context of donors attempting to rid themselves of inauspiciousness and sin by giving it away via gifts of *dana*, Parry argues, “Where we have the ‘spirit’ reciprocity is denied; where there is reciprocity there is not much evidence of ‘spirit’.”<sup>16</sup> In this view, the relatively low social status of Benares Brahmans, who accept these unreciprocated and inauspicious gifts, demonstrates that non-reciprocal gift-giving involves the gift containing some essence of the giver, in this case their sin.

Considering the case of my interlocutors, I do not mean to suggest that students in SASA are necessarily considering the ways in which they provide or produce forms of food and aid as fitting within the concept of *dana*. These discussions are useful insofar as they allow me to ask what new valences this sense of a kind of “en-souled” material and financial giving takes on in their American context, when considered in the context of the emotional experiences of homesickness, nostalgia, and a sense of responsibility towards the homeland and people from it. James Laidlaw, in his work on Jains in Jaipur, observes

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<sup>16</sup> Parry, “The Gift, the Indian Gift and the ‘Indian Gift,’” 463.

that “giving *dan* is the paradigmatic religious good deed” within South Asian religious traditions.<sup>17</sup> In the case of SASA, members of the executive board and committee members, a corresponding understanding of the exchanges occurring at their festivals can be seen in their stated commitment as a group to giving attendees a familiar experience of celebration, to ease their potential loneliness or isolation. At the same time, however, there are multiple other levels of exchange occurring, which SASA members also recognize — for example, they refer to a form of commodity exchange, when they discuss ticket prices and the expectations they imagine audiences have about their events as a result.

### **Exchange, Merit and Auspiciousness**

Within the ethnographic work on exchange in South Asia, scholars debate the relative significance of auspiciousness and social status in giving. Despite the emphasis on giving *dana* as a virtuous activity and scriptural passages pointing towards the merit acquired by disinterestedly giving *dana*, there also other perspectives on *dana*, particularly from ethnographic work, that focus on the transfer of inauspiciousness or sin from the donor to the recipient. Although SASA members did not speak to me about issues of auspiciousness or inauspiciousness, they did touch on issues of merit and disinterest in relation to their work and the concept of giving more broadly. They considered their events as both having hoped-for benefits for SASA, both in terms of measurable goals, like recouping their expenses, and more intangible ones, like solidifying a positive reputation on campus. In other instances, however, they spoke of the time, effort, and money they gave to SASA and to the charitable cause they supported

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<sup>17</sup> James Laidlaw, “A Free Gift Makes No Friends,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6.4 (2000): 619.

as ethically meritorious and disinterested, demonstrating a capacity to switch between multiple conceptions of exchange.

I argue that in the context of SASA and its festival events, the concept of *dana*, both as it has been interpreted in literature and in ethnographic analysis, cannot appropriately capture the forms of exchange occurring. In part, this is because students themselves maintain an ambivalent and often distant relationship to the religious or quasi-religious context in which they enacts forms of exchange. Furthermore, though, they primarily relate their choice to a kind of construction of alternate domesticity rather than to issues of personal spiritual merit. As will become clear, there are many ways in which merit, disinterest, and perceived worthiness (all elements in *dana*) come into play in SASA's forms of exchange, but ultimately, SASA members seem more focused on exchange as a form of personal care.

### **Relational Empathy and the Desire for Domestic Spaces**

In her ethnographic work on humanitarian work in New Delhi, Erica Bornstein argues that that “here are other forms of empathy that cannot be understood through the framework of liberal altruism” and suggests that in the case of various charitable endeavors she studied in New Delhi, it is important to consider the importance of what she calls “relational empathy” which seeks to “[turn] strangers into kin.”<sup>18</sup> She contrasts relational empathy with what she sees as the predominant rhetoric of “liberal empathy” that underlies many development-based frameworks. This form of empathy “seeks to assist abstract others in need.”<sup>19</sup> Adding to Bornstein, I suggest that this type of liberal empathy can be understood as related to human-rights-based arguments for development

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<sup>18</sup> Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

and charity — if all humans are entitled to rights, people should assist others based on this, regardless of a personal connection or a lack thereof.

Relational empathy as concept also applies well to the decidedly different circumstances of SASA's concerns. Repeatedly in interviews, many SASA members spoke of the desire to create a sense of community for South Asian and particularly Indian students on campus. Several people, including Varsha, the co-president of SASA in the Fall 2016 semester, said they wanted to create a sense of “a home away from home” for such international students, when describing what they saw as SASA's mission. This rhetoric of alternate forms of domesticity and relationality far away from familial domestic space functioned as a kind of motto for the organization. Nearly all of my interviewees even used the same phrasing to explain SASA's existence. Although it may be known for large, public events, SASA members clearly conceive of their job as filling people's desire for domestic comforts.

Through repeated references to their own personal struggles when they themselves first began college, SASA members come to imagine Indian international students as a group having certain recognizable emotional needs that can be addressed and fulfilled by SASA's events. Like the men and women in Bornstein's ethnography who are drawn to their philanthropic work because of personal, often familial or quasi-familial, relationships with the members of the communities assisted, SASA members draw emotional parallels between themselves and Indian international students as a whole. SASA sees itself as addressing the absence of people's families and a lack of public, shared celebration. Although various SASA members mentioned knowing other students who hosted *pujas* or celebrations at their off-campus living spaces, SASA events

offer something different: a large public space in which students can experience something meant to evoke both the comfort and the spectacle of home. Discussions with SASA members revealed that religious practice and gatherings were important elements in students' social lives, demonstrating that SASA's events offered a different, additional aspect through their sheer size and public nature. The public space and time of SASA's events did the work of not just supplementing students' sense of community but also their sense that the university as a space had the capacity to accommodate them.

### **Religion, Authority, and the Grounds for Exchange**

Reviewing the interviews I conducted and SASA's events themselves, the question repeatedly came to me: where is the religion in all of this? As previously mentioned, SASA members I interviewed largely consider themselves to be fairly nonreligious and often hedged their answers, saying things like they weren't sure they were telling me the correct answer, when I asked them about the meaning of specific religious practices or events. Furthermore, although explicitly religious *pujas* were conducted at the beginning of both Navaratri and Diwali, clearly marking them off from "secular" events such as their spring semester Blacklight party or end-of-year formal, the explicitly religious portions were, as mentioned earlier, conducted before much of the crowd had shown up.

The significance of religion, then, seems to lie not so much in what occurred at the events themselves as in the authority lent the proceedings. Religious events become the field on which exchange becomes possible. Just as the debates around *dana* and the ways in which the transfer of merit, auspiciousness, and inauspiciousness, are predicated on existing religious systems, so too were SASA's event. Even as SASA member

deemphasized the religious nature of events, they also implicitly utilized religious concepts and practices as reference points. At the same time, however, as I will lay out in the following chapters, all forms of exchange enacted by SASA at their festival events ultimately required the secular approval of the university. That approval was subject to sometimes-unpredictable caveats and could also be rescinded. For all that religious authority undergirds SASA's events, secular authority explicitly allowed for their existence.

### **Generosity in Exchange**

I bring together the topics of food and charitable giving together not only because they occurred side-by-side within SASA's work this semester, but also because they challenge and complicated any oversimplified reading of exchange theory that reduces exchange to a purely utilitarian action. Although a cursory reading of Mauss and exchange theory might lead casual readers to the conclusion that all gift-giving and exchange at large is ultimately about the pragmatic maintenance of necessary relationships, scholars from a variety of fields have pushed back against this simplification. Karen Sykes, for example, argues that part of the enduring interest in Mauss's work on the gift is

Mauss's basic insight, that any analysis of the obligation to give and receive things shows that human relationships cannot be contained wholly within usury forms of exchange. In particular, he argued that the gift contradicts the assumption that human relationships aim only towards only utilitarian ends.<sup>20</sup>

Like Sykes, I find potential in the possibility of empathy and generosity within exchange. The ambiguity of exchange cycles within SASA festivals demonstrates that even cycles of exchange that include a form of commodity exchange can still contain forms of care.

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<sup>20</sup> Karen Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology: An introduction to critical theories of the gift* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.



The food purchased by SASA is made possible in large part by the organization's funding from the university and is distributed in return for the ticket price of these events. The funds from Diwali that were passed on to Nanhi Kali and the social promotion SASA extended to their other non-profit partners, Thrive Project and Oxfam, depended on people buying tickets and expressing an interest in attending their events at all. Pragmatic business decisions clearly played a part in both these cycles of exchange. This does not mean that they were undertaken or performed in ways devoid of empathy for SASA's exchange partners, their audience — to the contrary, they undertaken especially because of such empathy. More broadly, these events were also doing the social work of making Syracuse University a more welcoming environment.

In the first chapter, I will investigate the significance of food as a marker of authenticity and carrier of religious and emotional meaning. Having Indian food at events was central but also difficult aspect for events, both because of administrative conflicts and because of issues of authenticity. Food exchange highlights the ways in which multiple conceptions of exchange — particularly commodity exchange and quasi-maternal non-reciprocal giving — operate within a single SASA event. In the second chapter, I turn to SASA's relationships with non-profit organizations to consider how modern engagement with charitable giving has brought together both religious and secular conceptions of what constitutes appropriate giving. I argue that SASA's events, not unlike the fundraising attempts of many American and international nonprofits today, brings together the power of religious conceptions of charity with causes and interest that may be rooted in a more rationalist, developmental model.

## Chapter One: Enough to Go Around? Food, Domestic Care, and Authority

Following the *aarti*, or portion of the regular Hindu devotional practice of *puja* in which devotees offer burning lamps to deities, that opened the Diwali festivities, the hosts for the evening's show stepped out on the stage. I recognized the young man dressed in a fancy *kurta*, Nasir, from a few of the SASA board meetings I had attended earlier in the semester. With him was Shreya, a slim, equally well-dressed woman. Shreya was a member of the evening's co-hosting organization, Nanhi Kali, a graduate student organization for an educational non-profit focused on girls' education in India.

“Wasn't that a phenomenal *aarti*?” asked Shreya.

“Yes it was,” agreed Nasir.

After the two offered some brief information about the festival of Diwali, Nasir asked his co-host, “What's your favorite part of Diwali?”

Shreya immediately and enthusiastically answered, “Food!” and followed up by listing her favorite sweets.

The performances, a mix of students singing, dancing and playing music, went on for more than an hour and a half. One of the early numbers was a musical trio of three young men in a classical South Indian Carnatic music/heavy metal fusion group performing their own original composition — the violinist played his stark black electric violin Carnatic-style, sitting cross legged on the floor, the sound reverberating through the auditorium speakers. As the evening's program proceeded, they were followed by a number of other singers performing a mix of Bollywood and Western pop songs, SU Orange Bhangra, done up in colorful Punjabi-style costumes, breaking out a high-energy medley of a dance, and a particularly popular hip-hop dancer who was an alumnus who

had returned to Syracuse just for Diwali. Throughout the performances, more and more people filtered into the auditorium. At the beginning of the night, I had been one of the only people seated in the balcony, apart from the young man in the tech booth at the back. As the evening wore, I found myself surrounded by men and women, almost all of South Asian descent and dressed up in their best *desi* outfits. As show went on they chatted, took group selfies and cheered on their friends performing onstage.

The main event, however, had yet to occur. About an hour and a half into the show, Nasir, one of the evening's several M.C.s, came on and apologized to the somewhat restless crowd — despite an earlier announcement that dinner would be served by the next pause between performances, the food wasn't quite ready yet. He assured us that it would be soon, but people were decidedly disappointed. Some of the more hopeful (or more canny) headed downstairs, where the food would be served, in anticipation.

As it turned out, that was the right strategy! Dinner was served, buffet-style, not too long after Nasir's announcement. The multiple lines, filled with people in their fanciest Indian party clothes, snaked out of the auditorium into the lobby area by the entrance stairs. The crowd should not have surprised me — when I entered the auditorium earlier in the evening I had seen several SASA members with whom I was acquainted standing by the stairs. Because I was curious about the event's size, I asked them how many tickets they had sold. They estimated it had been about five hundred, which members later confirmed was about what they usually expected for their biggest event of the year. Still, seeing the crowd in actuality underlined the size and vibrancy of the surprisingly large and robust community of Indian and South Asian international students on campus.

As I stood in line, Varsha, the current SASA president and an undergraduate student in her final semester, came up to chat with me. Dressed in an elegant cream sari, Varsha was pausing in her polite, invested hostess's circulation around the room to get my opinion on how things were going. We chatted for a few minutes, as Varsha continued to survey the scene. She seemed concerned about whether the crowd, and me, would all get our share of the food in a timely fashion. "Maybe one of the other lines is shorter," she offered, though they all looked quite lengthy to me.

When I finally got to the center of the raised area where the tables of food were set up, I discovered that the food (all vegetarian), was laid out in large catering-style silver containers. Members of Schine Catering were busily serving people and periodically replacing now-empty trays with new, full ones. There was *paneer*, a kind of cheese usually served in a savory vegetable based sauce, *channa masala* (chickpeas), rice, breads, and for dessert, *gulab jamun*, a small fried dough dessert soaked in a sweet sauce. And it was all going quickly.

When I walked out of Schine later that night, I encountered three South Asian men headed inside. "How was the food?" asked one man. He must have guessed from my outfit that I had been at the Diwali event.

"Good," I replied automatically. It was only as I walked away and the men entered the building that it occurred to me that I should have been more informative — when I left, it seemed as if the food was running low. Despite the plentitude of food, it was entirely possible there would be none for the men to have. By missing the food, they would, in essence, have missed the most significant act of care that SASA members felt they were able to give to fellow international students.

Understanding the difficulties of being far from domestic space and familial relations, particularly at a time when people might be thinking about home, SASA members felt that having events that included Indian food and Indian aesthetics, through decorations and clothing, they were able to mitigate a sense of loss or loneliness. Through their public events, SASA members created an alternate domesticity, enacted through forms of quasi-familial care. In exchange for the price of tickets and, hopefully, positive word-of-mouth recommendations on the part of their audience, SASA gave students an affirmation of their own place on campus.

### **Food Matters**

The importance of food to Hindu practice is indeed central, although its role has sometimes been sidelined. Religion scholar Vasudha Narayanan, for example, recounts a conversation she had with a fellow graduate student at Harvard. She surprised her classmate by critiquing the fact that many introductory textbooks on Hinduism left out many aspects of Hinduism that seemed very important to her, including food. She pointed to her personal memories of her grandmother's concerns about preparing and serving the correct auspicious types of food for various rituals.<sup>21</sup> Her classmate apparently considered this "anthropological" stuff rather than religious, but like Narayanan, I believe food must be taken seriously as a religious and cultural material. Looking at the case of SASA's festival only reinforces Narayanan's point, that although belief and philosophy certainly seem to play an important role in how SASA members conceive of what it means to be religious, they still prioritize a variety of enacted rituals of Hinduism, which they feel are required to appropriately host a festivals.

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<sup>21</sup> Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68.4 (2000), 761.

In discussions I observed and in interviews I conducted with them, SASA members frequently folded food into broader descriptions of festival times as deeply connected to experiences of communal joy. In their emphasis on communal joy as social bonding, SASA members often sounded like they were echoing Durkheim. Familial celebration is infused in the foods they recall eating “at home.” Although SASA members could not solve the problem of physical distance from loved ones, they could (always imperfectly) attempt to offer students other expected aspects of festival seasons in abbreviated and adapted form. Even though SASA members frequently did not identify as “religious,” they emphasized the importance of certain material and ritual aspects of festivals as markers of domesticity, cultural respect, and care for the campus community. Perhaps the most discussed of those markers was food. Their discussions about food noticeably stuck out to me, and when I initially suggested to SASA members that I might write one of my chapters specifically on food, they were immediately enthusiastic.

Their enthusiasm and the prominence of food at their festival events is in keeping with many religious communities’ festivals. As Anna King explains, in many religious traditions broadly “food . . . symbolizes communion and community” and within Hinduism specifically, “for devotees eating is a very powerful aspect of the divine-human encounter.”<sup>22</sup> Although the “divine-human encounter” was certainly deemphasized at SASA’s festival events (despite the presence of borrowed *murtis* and depictions of deities for the *aarti* at the beginning of the night, the *aarti* was performed early on in the night, well before a significant portion of the crowd showed up), food (or a lack thereof) was

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<sup>22</sup> Anna S. King, “Krisna’s prasadam: eating our way back to godhead,” *Material Religion* 8.4 (2012), 442.

still presumed to a distinctive capacity to affect how individuals experience their surroundings.

The relationships SASA members imagine are built and maintained through food are primarily human-human ones, between SASA and its audience, but also among the friends who attend together. It is through proper observation of as “authentic” and “respectful” a festival experience as can be created, via a *puja* and the presence of deities and *prasad*, that personal human relations can be both remembered and reinforced. King suggests that among devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), food likewise allows for “the opportunity to develop loving relationships, guiding and encouraging each other in spiritual practices and spreading the message of Krishna.”<sup>23</sup> ISKCON devotees tend to have a much more hands-on involvement with the cooking and distribution of *prasad* than SASA members do, in part because ISKCON has a highly developed theological understanding of food. Both cases, however, indicate the ways in which material substances come to establish religious community. For ISKCON devotees, food is understood through and becomes part of devotion to Krishna, whereas for SASA members, theological belief is secondary to their understanding that having a *puja*, *prasad*, and a meal available are how to host a proper festival events, which will demonstrate their attitude of quasi-familial care towards their audience members.

### **Nostalgia, Aura, and Distant Mothers**

The relationship between food and nostalgia, a term which I use here to indicate a remembering of and desire for the absent or the past, is a viscerally emotional one. As Parama Roy observes, “Migrants preserve their ties to a homeland through their

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 443.

preservation of and participation in traditional customs and rituals of consumption.”<sup>24</sup> As in the cookbooks and fictional story Roy analyzes, SASA members discuss food not as physical sustenance, but as emotional sustenance. In an interview, Vidhya lamented the difficulty of making or finding Indian food in Syracuse, saying that as a result, she regularly had to spend her money going to a local Indian restaurant, just to get a taste of home — a taste that was, for the most part, not necessarily all that reminiscent of her hometown of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. As she informed me, most of the Indian restaurants in the Syracuse area specialize in North Indian cuisine. Vidhya’s culinary quest was hampered by commercial decisions, the relative lack of knowledge about Indian regional diversity, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the ever-present emotional gap between the remembered care found in home-cooked food and the relative uniformity of commercially produced restaurant food.

In his essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin says that the appeal of original pieces of art lies in their aura. He argues that this aura consists, at least in part, of a sense that pieces of art are irreproducible. As a result, copies are often seen to lack the history and uniqueness of the original. I therefore take “aura” to mean the emotional and psychological associations imbued in material, which make that specific material desirable and significant. I have introduced Benjamin’s concept here because it allows us to discuss the emotional importance of (perceived) originality. The importance a person might place on seeing the original Mona Lisa at the Louvre, for example, can be understood as a result of the painting’s aura. The same principle of aura that Benjamin discusses regarding art can be seen at work in the ways SASA members think and about

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<sup>24</sup> Parama Roy, “Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10.2 (2002): 472.



the food served at their events. In many ways, food is the central aspect of these events, but it is also the one that may lead to the greatest potential disappointment. Although SASA members may be able to evoke people's national or, more broadly, South Asian identity through food, they cannot produce the same emotionally-laden food that people would have received in the distant domestic spaces of their family homes.

Clearly, within their transnational context, food takes on a new emotional significance, primarily through its scarcity or absence. In interviews, SASA members also emphasized the ways in which food is particularly attached to celebratory and loving memories. SASA members consistently defined the organization as one that provides an alternate form of domesticity. Taking this further and more specifically, Varsha repeatedly grouped family, friends and food as intimately tied to her own memories of celebrations. She explained, for example, "Every family in India will cook special dishes — you just associate that with Diwali." Later she added, "In my family, from my state, there's a lot of local food, a lot of delicacies. I think every family probably has a similar dynamic." Although students in Syracuse can easily get American food, Varsha opined, "they associate Indian food with home." Through their events, SASA hoped to both invoke that sense of home and bring it to Syracuse, but the specificity of those personal memories could make their mission difficult. Still, Varsha's repeated association between familial relations, religious festivals, and particular types of food demonstrates the kinds of emotional entanglements that inform SASA's decision-making.

Just as with Benjamin's works of art, the "aura" of Indian food for SASA members is deeply connected to place and time. Benjamin suggests, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and

space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>25</sup> In the “age of mechanical reproduction,” however, Benjamin sees the breaking of this aura. Benjamin posited that with the increasing ability of humans to create and reproduce works would eventually bring about an end to people’s collective fascination with authenticity, because “making many reproductions . . . substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”<sup>26</sup> Benjamin foresaw the sheer capacity for reproduction overwhelming the previous cultic associations of art.

Looking at SASA’s event and their handling of food, it seems that in this case, the aura still matters. The food is literally produced (and reproduced) in mass quantities, just as Benjamin predicted, but this translation does not seem to free it from the specter of an aura. When I asked in interviews whether SASA’s festivals could be understood as “recreating” festivals as members might have celebrated at home, many of my interviewees answered by focusing on the ways in which celebrations at Syracuse differ from their childhood celebrations. The issue of food was a frequent example. Several members independently offered the opinion that the food at events, which is commercially produced in large quantities, does not, for a number of reasons, correspond with the “original” festival food they anticipate the event attendees expect. Varsha, for example, followed up her discussion of how she and others might associate particular family dishes with festivals by pointing out the ways in which those associations may actually complicate the expectations around SASA events. “No matter what the kind of food we have,” Varsha explained, there would be always been some kind of disappointed

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>. (As the source is online, I cannot provide associated page numbers.)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

feedback. “This wasn’t there and that wasn’t there. It’s about how you were brought up and what you ate.” In Varsha’s assessment, we can see how the failure of the food being served to contain the same aura — food as a sign of maternal care and familial celebration is now replaced with food as a commercial good — disrupts the capacity for domesticity.<sup>27</sup> Further adding to this ambivalence, the procurement of food requires mixing the charitable and caring actions of SASA’s quasi-familial care through festival hosting with the commercial economy of buying and selling.

SASA members attempt to counteract the potential discrepancies between the food attendees are imagining or reminiscing about and the food that is actually being served in part through ritualization. Benjamin also saw the link between the significance of art and ritualization. He claimed, “the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty”<sup>28</sup> Even with the reluctance of SASA members to identify as religious or their frequent concerns that they could not adequately answer my questions about religious practice, it was clearly very important to them to include familiar Hindu ritual and aesthetic elements into their festival events. Gita, for example, suggested that the *murtis* were present at festival events, because it would be “disrespectful” to celebrate without them. Having the proper environment for the meals around which events were based allowed them to be marked and set off in a way that made special and notable. The food itself may be mass-produced and catered, but the religious rituals surrounding the

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that we can take for granted that Indian Hindu families today necessarily actually prepare elaborate festival meals themselves. Issues of class and sheer busyness, among others, obviously come into play.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” n.p.

food remain as accurate as possible. SASA events demonstrate that there is indeed an interest in ritualization around food, even as students recognize the very different context of their events in comparison to the domestic rituals around food with which they might be familiar. Although Benjamin predicted the freeing of art from ritual in the modern age, as part of the end of the fascination with authenticity, the opposite seems to be true in the case of SASA.

The significance of the *aarti* and *murtis* demonstrates that the “art” of SASA’s events was not found only in food. This is what I have chosen to highlight because of the amount of time SASA members dedicated to discussing and making food arrangements for their fall festival events. It was evident, however, that the aesthetic contexts of the events were essential to SASA’s mission to make Indian international students and South Asian students more broadly feel that they have a home in Syracuse. As I have mentioned, SASA’s fall festival events were also times that gave students a reason to wear their fanciest *desi* outfits, a sartorial challenge which SASA hosts and audience members alike ably conquered. Additionally, SASA members spent hours prior to events preparing to create elaborate decorative pieces, like the large *rangoli* I helped fill in at their Navaratri event. The Creative team members had dyed the five or six different colored rices at one of their homes before coming to the auditorium. The process had taken longer than expected; some of the dyed rice left stains on people’s hands. SASA members were working, on a level of great sensory detail, to make the Syracuse campus a place welcoming and celebratory for their audience. In the absence of the “true” authenticity, they offered the possibility of a hybrid aesthetic experience.

### **Aura, Exchange, Art?**

In the context of the food exchange at SASA festivals, Benjamin's aura can be seen in another light, within the question of exchange. The aura, or lack thereof, attached to the food at SASA events matters not only because of issues of authenticity or nostalgia, but also because of its implications for the relationship between SASA members as hosts and attendees as guests. The question of authenticity is fraught here because SASA members expect that interest in their events is at least somewhat based on an expectation of "authentic" food. It is SASA members' attempts to deal with that gap, through ritualization, personal investment, and time, that result in a strong sense of attachment on their part to the idea of giving food, if not so much the literal food being served at any given event.

One obvious way in which food at SASA events and the kind of art Benjamin considers differ is that mass-produced food of the kind served at SASA's festivals seems an unlikely candidate to qualify as art as Benjamin understands it. Benjamin, however, considers the history of art in relation to religion and what he sees as a later a kind of cult around art itself. In Benjamin's historical reading, "the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind."<sup>29</sup> The same sweeping statement cannot be made of food, but I suggest that Benjamin's interest in the cultic aspect of art and art's relation with religions and religious patronage offers a parallel with food and its place within Hindu practice, and *prasad* in particular. When food becomes involved in religious ritual, it comes to contain and symbolize one form of exchange between humans and the divine.

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<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," n.p.

Furthermore, in the context of Syracuse, where Indian food with the appropriate aura, in this case the appropriate emotional and religious associations, is in such short supply, the issue of authenticity becomes all the more significant. In their transnational context, “authentic” aesthetic and sensory experiences that allow students the comfort and pleasure of eating familiar foods, dressing in beautiful South Asian clothing, and speaking in their own South Asian languages is valuable. The relative rarity or difficulty of arranging such experiences, particularly on the large scale of SASA’s festival events, means that we can understand SASA as addressing social and emotional desires of students, in exchange for the price of a ticket and hopefully a word-of-mouth boost to the organization’s reputation on campus. The potential of SASA events offering such an environment, whether or not the events ended up fulfilling the audience’s expectations, drove the crowds to attend and SASA members to put in long days of work to ensure the best “product” possible.

Keeping with Benjamin’s linking of art and cult, SASA members saw food as a required aspect of their religious events. As will become clear, in the fall 2016 semester, SASA members had to undertake a series of rather complicated negotiations to ensure they could even provide food at all at Navaratri, in no small part because the central role they felt food plays in their events. Even when they were not able to provide food at the event location itself, they still set up other aspects of their usual rituals around food, such as providing *prasad*.

### ***Prasad: Food with Meaning***

At the Navaratri event in October, the Gujarati-American singer announced that there was *prasad* available for people to take, mentioning both the sweets at the table

holding the *murtis*, and the *gulab jamun* at the back of the room. Later in the month, near the the beginning of the night at the Diwali event, the M.C.s calling people to the front of the auditorium for *aarti* also encouraged people to take from the boxes of *prasad* at the front table where the idols were also placed. *Prasad* is typically understood as the “leftovers” of the deity that are then consumed or received by devotees. As Arjun Appadurai explained, “when redistributed to worshipers, these transvalued leavings of the divine meal are perceived not simply as emblems of honor, but as constitutive features of the rights, roles, and ranks of donors, priests, temple servants, and worshipers-at-large.”<sup>30</sup> The presence of *prasad*, even in a minor role, demonstrates that deep integration of exchange to these events, as I will analyze in depth further on in the paper. The exchange of food within this ambiguously ritualized space recalls the space of the temple and the distribution of *prasad* by temple-goers to those in their familial and social circles. Despite the lack of ritual specialists, the secular surrounding of the university, and the discomfort SASA members had with trying to explain the theological concepts around *prasad*, they still felt that this particularly meaningful food was an important and require aspect of their festivals, similar to their inclusion of the *aarti*.

*Prasad* presents a particularly interesting case of exchange at SASA events, because it is so obviously laden with religious connotations and represents a form of exchange that necessarily involves supernatural actors. As Appadurai notes, the relationship between devotees and deities in Hinduism “are seen as veritable gourmands, who have special culinary likes and dislikes, which are catered to assiduously by their worshippers and servants.”<sup>31</sup> Appadurai’s observation points the potential diversity in

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<sup>30</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Gastro-Politics in Hindu South India,” *American Ethnologist* 8.3 (1981): 507.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

what types of food can be *prasad*. Although most of the SASA members I interviewed defined *prasad* for me as typically a kind of sweet, at its most basic, *prasad* should be understood as “blessed food” of any kind, which is typically distributed from temples.<sup>32</sup>

Considering the importance of *prasad* also reveals in miniature the many ways the giving and receiving of food is entangled with memory and emotion for SASA members. When I asked her about *prasad*, Vidhya exclaimed, “I love *prasad*!” She followed up by explaining, “*Prasad* is generally sweet. Yeah, in my experience, it’s usually sweet. It’s in the same family as *payasam*, that’s what we call it in South India . . . . It’s a sweet dessert. But the difference is - what makes it different is that it’s been blessed by god . . . . It’s food that’s been given the okay by God.” She paused for a second and then ended, “It rocks.” Vidhya’s commentary touches on multiple issues within SASA’s events at once: a love of food, a negotiation between regional and national identity, and a ritualized system of exchange that invokes and involves religious concepts.

### **The Soul of Food**

The giving and taking of *prasad*, which does not traditionally fall with the category of *dana*, presents an interesting complication to discussions about the nature of the material gift itself. Mauss’s understanding of the *hau* of the gift suggests that it is this spirit that in some way drives people to reciprocate the gift. Mauss argues that gift-giving involves “a bond . . . between things . . . one of souls . . . . From which it follows that to present something to someone is to present something of oneself.”<sup>33</sup> The capacity of material to be “en-souled” drives the chain of reciprocity in gift exchange. Gifts matter and passing them on also matters. This is because those gifts contain some essence of the

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<sup>32</sup> King, “Krisna’s prasadam,” 442.

<sup>33</sup> Mauss, 72.



donor. In a twist on this observation, Gloria Goodwin Raheja observes in her seminal study of *dana* in rural India that villagers often understand *dana* as degrading because it involves the “transferral of inauspiciousness (*nasubh*) to the recipients.”<sup>34</sup> Raheja here reminds us that although Mauss focused on the establishment and reinforcement of positive social relations, exchange can also reinforce hierarchical relations between donors and recipients. Exchange need not be solely about the positive reinforcement of mutually agreeable relations — it can also solidify other kinds of relationships. Returning to SASA, this attention to hierarchy underlines SASA’s relative organizational authority. When SASA’s events succeed, this reinforces their status as a prominent South Asian organization on campus.

*Prasad*, though a form of exchange between human and divine actors, also involves the transferral of material as a method of enacting, demonstrating and strengthening a relationship. Receiving *prasad* is auspicious because of its close association with the divine, as the above discussion of *prasad* demonstrates. Indeed, *prasad* matters exactly because it is understood in some way to have been accepted or consumed by the deity before it is shared with the devotee-recipients. Traditionally, Hindu rules regarding purity make interdining between different castes fraught with the possibility of pollution. Furthermore, in ordinary human-human interactions, the sharing of food, particularly left-overs, is an expression of intimacy. Margaret Trawick, in her ethnographic work on expressions of love in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu explains, “in [the Tamil household Trawick lived in] the sharing of *eccil*” or bodily effluvia “conveyed a message of love and was a way of teaching children and onlookers

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<sup>34</sup> Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 20.

where love was.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the sharing of food, which involves the mixing of bodily substances, indicates an intimate relationship. Following this logic, *prasad* demonstrates the intimacy and equality that can be achieved between devotee and deity.

In the absence of the ritual specialists or priests who typically distribute *prasad* at temples, the *prasad* available at SASA events demonstrates a different kind of egalitarianism. SASA members, whether they identify as religious or not, are the only authorizing figures involved in the *prasad*'s distribution. As such, SASA's events also bring up the question of what counts as *prasad*. At the Navaratri event, the live band's singer encouraged attendees to eat the desserts available at the back of the auditorium, preferring to it as *prasad*. I had noted that boxes of sweets were placed by small *murtis* at a table set up at the front of the auditorium and had assumed this was the *prasad*. Later, during an interview, I asked Varsha what of the food that had been available was *prasad*. “Those sweets definitely were, that was the intention for them,” she explained. Everything else though, she thought probably could not count. Even as Varsha herself felt herself too non-religious to be capable of properly answering my questions about *aarti* or *prasad*, she maintained a fairly clear delineation on what was “really” done correctly. It would seem that although including *prasad* in the event was part of the religio-cultural environment SASA wanted to deliver. When it came to traditional religious definitions and distinctions, however, Varsha did continue to see distinctions between “real” *prasad* and what might have been appealing to call *prasad*. In this particular example, we can see the extension of the aestheticization of religious ritual that I earlier connected to Benjamin's aura. In keeping with SASA members' discussions of religion and culture as

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<sup>35</sup> Margaret Trawick, “The Ideology of Love in a Tamil Family,” in *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotions in India*, ed. Owen M. Lynch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), eBook, 52.

fluid terms that connoted different but overlapping aspects, Varsha pointed first to the “real” *prasad* to that SASA had done things appropriately.

### **Sacrifice and (Possibly) Non-Reciprocal Giving**

The evening of SASA’s Navaratri event, in early October, I arrived at Schine Auditorium at around 5:30 pm, an hour and a half before the event was supposed to start. The SASA members bustling around the space had been required to come an hour and half before I even arrived, and were busy with a multiplicity of activities. I sat with members of the Creative Team — four young women and later a man who came by to help a friend — assembling a dyed-rice *rangoli* decoration I mentioned earlier. They stood, stooped over around the table at the front of the auditorium, which would also hold the *murtis* later in the evening. Most of the Creative Team members were still in street clothes, not yet changed into their South Asian formalwear, which people were being sent off to do in batches as the initial furor of getting the auditorium prepared slowly died down. As the five or so of us filled in the design’s outline with rice dyed earlier in the day by SASA members, Veena, an executive board member who I recognized by her trendily bleached hair, came by with a box of pizza and paper plates. She encouraged everyone, including me, to take a slice. It was roughly 6pm, and the SASA members would likely not have another chance to eat until their planned after party, which would take place after they finished cleaning up after the event.

In an interview conducted almost two months later, Vidhya pointed to the fact that SASA members themselves do not eat the food they provide as evidence of their commitment to their events’ attendees. Like the idealized Indian mother whose home-cooked meals are longed for and who is prepared to sacrifice her personal comfort for the

family, SASA members prioritize the needs of the event attendees over their own.

Although their events, of course, cannot replicate domestic, familial celebrations, they can enact forms of care reminiscent of those situations, even knowing that they cannot ever fulfill all the possible demands or expect some level of following disappointment.

In anthropological writing, non-reciprocity and the alienability of a gift are what distinguish reciprocal gifts, which implicitly require a return gift, and non-reciprocal gifts, which are not given with that expectation. As Gareth Fisher explains, we can see this distinction clearly in the context of Buddhist religious giving, where non-reciprocal gifts are often gifts given by the lay community to the *sangha*, or monastic community. What differentiates this form of exchange is that “this exchange is not created with the expectation of a return material gift from the monk recipient to the layperson donor as would be the case in the exchange of nonreligious gifts . . . . Instead, the return comes through the merit that the donor accrues through her donation to the sangha.”<sup>36</sup> In a similar but not identical situation, SASA members do not expect a material return from their giving. Their audience members have already paid for their tickets in advance and insofar as reciprocity exists in this instance of exchange, it is in this commodity exchange — money in exchange for a welcoming environment, the chance to get dressed up in fancy South Asian outfits, to be surrounded by others who speak the audience members’ native languages, and surrounded by sense of familiarity and friendship.

Unlike the Buddhist *sangha* or the Jain monastic community, who are not meant to comment on the tastiness or satisfactoriness of a donated meal, in the case of SASA’s festival events, SASA members are quite aware of the investment of their audience in

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<sup>36</sup> Gareth Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 122-3.

what kinds of food are available. During a SASA meeting after Navaratri, during which board and committee members discussed plans for Diwali, a new committee member and grad student, Vivek, asked about when the arrangements for food for Diwali would be finalized, saying, “When will we finalize on the food because the first question people will ask is *khana hai kya?*”<sup>37</sup> Using the characteristic mix of English and Hindi SASA members often spoke to one another in, Vivek predicted that potential event attendees’ primary question would be about what kind of food there would be. At the same meeting, another grad student mentioned that although his friends had enjoyed the event, they had been disappointed by the lack of vegetable *biriyani*, which they had thought would be there. Both Varsha and Gita, the highest-ranking executive officers seemed annoyed by this comment. They pointed out that SASA could not provide all the kinds of food that everyone was expecting — they had no control over the rumors around what food would or would not be at events.

Indeed, this apparent lack of awareness on the part of festival goers reinforces a sense of nonreciprocal relations between SASA members and their audience. SASA members understood that there was always that possibility of not receiving gratitude commensurate with the amount of work they undertook. At the same time, they also acknowledged that the audience was entitled to their opinions because they had paid to attend the event. The conversation demonstrates the confused situation in which both reciprocal and non-reciprocal relations exist between SASA members and those at their events. On one hand, SASA members spoke about the availability of food as a fair expectation on the part of those who have paid for tickets. On the other hand, however, as

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<sup>37</sup> Literally: “What is the food?”

the ones who handled the actual logistical difficulties to providing food and who are the ones blamed if anything goes wrong, SASA members knew that their own work would not always be clear to those who attend their events. Arguably, SASA members felt their effort ultimately exceeds the price of the ticket.

This sense on the part of SASA members that they go above and beyond in order to serve people food comes from real experience. At the Navaratri event, for example, SASA was unable to serve anything but *gulab jamun* at Schine Auditorium itself, due to issues, it seems, with catering rules. Knowing the importance of having food, SASA had tried to negotiate. They made a special arrangement with the Indian restaurant Samrat, their usual caterer, to make food that did not require cooking, settling on *chaat*, a general name for savory snack foods often served at roadside cafes in South Asia. *Chaat* often consists of multiple parts mixed together, such as pieces of potato, onion, coriander, crunchy dried noodle-like snacks, and spices. As the administrative debacle unfolded, Varsha mentioned to me that SASA had a plan for how to deal with the food issues should they not be able to serve any food at all. She also told me that she didn't want to let me in on it just yet, as she was not sure whether their plan was really in keeping with university regulations. Varsha, as she would mention to me again later, after Navaratri, was dissatisfied with SASA's need to work around administrative rules because she wanted to polish SASA's reputation and remain on good terms with people working in the various university offices they need to consult to hold their events and serve food at them.

Ultimately, the university administration rejected SASA's proposal of serving *chaat* at the Navaratri event, and SASA had to implement their back-up plan to get

around the roadblock to fulfilling their hosting obligations. In order to still serve the food that they had by now already ordered and had specially arranged, SASA got creative. SASA members prepared to-go boxes at Samrat and handed them out to attendees. As announcers in Schine Auditorium reminded people periodically throughout the night, SASA was providing rides to Samrat, if people wanted them. I was informed later, that the drivers were SASA members, using their personal cars. Samrat is located just off-campus, about two blocks from Schine Auditorium. When I got to the building in which Samrat is located, I immediately noticed a group of three women sitting on the stairs, eating out of styrofoam containers. I headed upstairs to restaurant, where I found about a dozen SASA members busily assembling and setting out food containers.

The combination of SASA members deliberately putting their personal comfort second and the care they put into the distribution of material to their recipients can be read as somewhat (but not entirely) in line with historical forms of *dana*. Maria Heim, looking at Buddhist, Jain and Hindu texts, suggests that generally in these traditions, several conditions must be met: “The donor must be properly disposed to make a gift, a suitable recipient must be at hand, the ritual etiquette of the gift must be observed, and the donor must possess a desirable and appropriate substance to give.”<sup>38</sup> SASA members certainly think about their involvement in exchange as a form of social generosity, consider their recipients as in some in need, and are concerned about the quality of the gift. In other ways, however, as I will argue, the multiple levels of interaction involved in the food exchange introduce other factors into their system of exchange.

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<sup>38</sup> Maria Heim, *Theories of the Gift in South Asia: Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Reflections on Dana* (Routledge: New York, 2004), xvii-xviii.

SASA members felt that they were compelled to host these festival events as forms of generosity. Various SASA members described the many ways in which they shared in the experiences of those who come to their events and they expressed the opinion that SASA and its social events could address a desire for community. In effect, the forms of exchange they enacted are predicated on not only what they anticipate to be the emotional needs of their audience, but also on their own. In interviews, Varsha, Gita, Ram, and Vidhya all discussed how SASA had given them a community and a set of close friends when they first moved to the United States. They felt SASA's mission was to facilitate a similar transition for others. Because they knew what felt like to be lonely and distant from familiar and comforting cultural surroundings, they felt it was their organization's job to fill in that gap for others. Their individual choices to dedicate hours of their time to organizing events while also balancing academics and personal commitments was predicated on an assumption that they had a special understanding of the particular difficulties of being an Indian international student at Syracuse University. Their own sense that their physical distance from their families and familiar surroundings was particularly evident during festival periods caused them to emphasize their own festival events as an answer.

### **Commodity Exchange, Gift-Giving, or Non-Reciprocity?**

On an individual level, any given member of SASA might or might not know any individual event attendee, since hundreds of people come to these events. As such, the gift of food can be read as alienable and thus non-reciprocal. This, then, could define SASA's events as the kind of "religious gift" that Fisher discusses, although SASA events are conducted in a manner that SASA members themselves are not comfortable



defining as religious. As a whole, however, SASA as an organization does profit from event ticket sales and from the boost to their organizational reputation when an event is well attended and deemed enjoyable. A successful event in the fall semester is an investment in the group's reputation and the possibility of attracting a larger crowd going forward. James Laidlaw explains that *dana* is “expected, by an entirely impersonal process over which no one has any influence, to bring its own reward.”<sup>39</sup> In this understanding, those giving cannot typically know when their good deed will be rewarded, particularly because it happens in a future life. SASA members, however, explicitly spoke about the success of Navaratri, for example, as the precursor to a better-attended Diwali event.

The potential of acquiring greater prestige through giving is more in line with the classic anthropological understanding of gift-giving than it is with Parry (1986) and Laidlaw's (2000) additions regarding India *dana*, which both explore forms of non-reciprocal giving in an Indian context as well as the contradictions within those exchange systems. The classic understanding of gift giving, as Parry interprets it, supposes that “society is created by, and its cohesion results from, an endless sequence of exchanges in which all pursues their own advantage (however conceived).”<sup>40</sup> This emphasis on self-interest seems overstated in the case of SASA — they would not exist as a student group without some kind of perceived community around which to organize — but it does speak to the business aspects involved in running such a student group.

Despite the rhetoric and the specific complex and labor-intensive methods required to foster exchange at Navaratri, SASA members also recognize that there is a

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<sup>39</sup> Laidlaw, “A Free Gift,” 624.

<sup>40</sup> Parry, “The Gift, the Indian Gift and the ‘Indian Gift,’” 445.

certain element of commodity exchange occurring. Anthropologist Anna Tsing defines a commodity as “the material good of capitalist production and the object of consumer’s desire.” In Tsing’s explanation, a commodity chain involves “every step of production and distribution . . . until [the commodities] arrive at the consumer,” a process she argues is far more complex and uncomfortable than many consumers acknowledge.<sup>41</sup> Using Tsing’s framework, it becomes clear the ways in which SASA’s events also involve complications to what initially appears to be a relatively simple process of commodity exchange. SASA sells tickets to events. For Navaratri and Diwali, the tickets were seven dollars each. Having high attendance at events not only improves SASA’s reputation but also means that they can recoup their funds through ticket sales. Cyclically, their relatively large monetary spending on food, space, entertainment and decorations, drives a need to sell tickets. Commodity exchange, however, is not functioning in the traditional model here. Rather than an exchange between producer and consumer in which the commodity is directly exchanged for money, the university allocates funding to SASA, which uses it to host their events. SASA attempts to recoup that money and also derive a profit by providing their audience with desired materials and experiences at their events.

The issue of how and when to spend their funding was a topic of frequent discussion. In an interview, Varsha repeatedly mused about other events that the group might be able to put on that would speak to regional Indian identities, but that she felt they could not afford. Without the guaranteed broad appeal of either pan-Indian festivals and perceived higher costs than smaller social events like their Blacklight night, regional festivals were deemed financially unfeasible. The circulation of money between SASA

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<sup>41</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 51.

and the university also warranted self-aware commentary — when discussing how they selected spaces for their events, multiple executive board members mentioned that SASA typically tried to rent Schine Auditorium. They did so knowing the space was a fairly expensive one that came with a variety of rules around usage of the space. Despite these potential drawbacks, they still felt the space was the most appropriate because it could fit a very large number of people and was recognizable and easily accessible to students. The larger space meant they could sell more tickets and set up the expectation of a crowd. SASA members clearly hoped to use the financial means they have to reach the greatest number of people possible. The presence of monetary exchange, both between festival attendees and SASA, and between SASA and the university, clearly complicates an analysis of exchange at SASA events. Although SASA members frequently discuss food exchange at their events as non-reciprocal, they are also have clear monetary concerns. Selling tickets and fundraising is a matter of organizational reputation and prestige, as well as a financial issue.

### **What Makes Exchange Possible?**

Repeatedly throughout interviews and meetings, SASA members expressed both exasperation and hopefulness about the organization's relationship with the university administration, particularly Schine Catering, whose food regulations have been the source of confusion and tension. SASA's events, and the forms of exchange that make those events socially productive, are first predicated on the approval of university authority. These tensions are multi-fold and were in large part the reason that there had to be so many discussions about food during the Fall 2016 semester. In order to serve food not prepared by university catering services in Schine Auditorium, SASA needed to have

Samrat Restaurant, the restaurant from which they have typically catered their food, approved by the university. This had been done several years earlier by an earlier iteration of the executive board to make sure that Indian food could be served at events. Varsha, who as a senior and a member who had been involved in SASA throughout college, knew more about SASA's history than most members. She explained to me that the process of getting approval to bring in food from an outside vendor had been something of a hassle.

Still, despite this previously established arrangement, SASA had difficulties working with the university administration, as I mentioned earlier. This was primarily because of their different concerns regarding food. Schine Catering requires that cooked food be served at a particular temperature, due to concerns about food safety. SASA also typically has to re-submit paperwork to have Samrat approved as a food provider for their events. Unfortunately, this summer, with the transition to a new executive board, SASA did not have all of its paperwork together in advance of the deadline. Because of this, SASA members tried to negotiate so that they could provide food that did not include anything that would need to be kept at a particular temperature.

This came to a head over samosas. SASA members assumed that Schine Catering would agree to let SASA serve samosa in lieu of cooked food at their Navaratri event. Schine Catering, however, to their surprise, replied that it would not be safe to serve samosas because they contained eggs. During interviews, multiple people told this story about samosas to me, as it had evidently become their go-to example of the disjuncture between Schine Catering's conceptions of food and proper food management, and the specifically "Indian" and culturally-specific knowledge of food with which SASA

members approached the problem. Samosas, SASA members reminded me, do not contain eggs and they know this quite well. Because members of Schine Catering had found a recipe for samosas that contained eggs, however, they would not allow samosas to be served. In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas explores the concept of pollution, arguing, “There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>42</sup> In the case of the samosas, we could say the potential food poisoning was also in the eye of the beholder. The university administration’s inability to translate between cultural idioms regarding food, cleanliness, and health resulted in SASA having to accept and then circumvent the decision.

Returning to the issue of exchange, this story demonstrates that not all forms of exchange are equally legible to all parties, depending on the cultural assumptions different entities are utilizing. For SASA members, their personal cultural knowledge about food made Schine Catering’s objections both laughable and frustrating. In their understanding, the exchange they intended was one of generosity. Schine Catering’s emphasis on food safety, however, meant they read the exchange as fraught with potential bodily harm. The result was the complicated food provision measures implemented for Navaratri.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the ways in which SASA members think about, discuss, and offer food through their fall festival events brings into focus the multiple ways in which material, particular material intended for consumption, can become a repository for emotion. The vexed problem of authenticity not only revolves around the issue of the incapability of

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<sup>42</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo* (1st ed 1966; New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

SASA members to reproduce the kinds of foods they envision that attendees desire, but also becomes part of the question of exchange. In their attempts to mediate and modify the gap between remembered, “authentic” food, as imagined and remembered, and the food they are able to serve, SASA members set up a form of exchange that is simultaneously reciprocal and non-reciprocal. At the same time that they discuss food as being expected in exchange for the ticket price, they also framed it in other terms well. Significantly, they considered it in terms of personal sacrifice — they went to great trouble to ensure that even when they faced logistical roadblocks to their anticipated exchange, food would still be available, and they themselves did not eat the food they worked so long to be able to offer.

The immediate and direct actions and rhetoric around each individual event and individual contributions to making individual festival events run smoothly could be best understood in terms of non-reciprocal, sacrificial giving. Through this conception, each individual’s choice to be present and useful at events rather than working, studying or taking leisure time, or attending as a guest, becomes an act of generosity and camaraderie. Facilitating this form of exchange, and its surrounding environment, which was deliberately intended to invoke familiarity, was a method of anticipating and filling a need they themselves had experienced.

On an institutional level, however, the aspects of commodity exchange and reputation haunt the exchange of food at SASA’s festival events. As previously mentioned, the university both provides funding for student organizations, including SASA, and is also paid by these organizations for space and assistance of various kinds, such as the presence of tech help and servers from Schine Catering. Thus, in order to

create the system of food exchange at their events, SASA must also engage with commodity exchange with the university administration, an authority that both serves as the enabler and roadblock to SASA's capacity to enact their system of exchange.

Although the giving and receiving of food at student-run events at an American university would might initially seem to present a less complicated example of exchange than that explored by Parry, with Benares Brahmins, or by Laidlaw's analysis of Jains in Jaipur, clearly multiple elements are at work. Parsing through these multiple elements demonstrates that even securing the possibility or likelihood of exchange can be complicated. In both Parry and Laidlaw's case studies, the capacity for exchange is not in question, as it has been for SASA. Without the security of this assumption, SASA had to first build up to situations of exchange. In the case of Navaratri, this meant circumventing the university, usually the authorizing source for exchange.

The frequent need for this kind of creative negotiation with university administration suggests that the multiple complicated forms of exchange that make SASA events possible and popular are deeply contingent. Looking at the moral constructions of lay Buddhists in contemporary Beijing, Gareth Fisher argues that this case differs from that of Buddhists practicing outside of China, whose "a system of religious gift exchange functions because it is embedded into the culture within which members of its communities are socialized from a very young age."<sup>43</sup> For Buddhists in Beijing, however, their adopted understanding of karmic reciprocity and equanimous exchange between all individuals is surrounded by a more-established system of reciprocal exchange, which emphasizes close familial and social relationships. In the case

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<sup>43</sup> Fisher, 125.

of SASA's festivals, there is a similar disconnect between assumptions underlying systems of exchange between SASA members and their surroundings. Because SASA members and members of the university administration have different conceptions of appropriate forms of exchange and what must first be accomplished in order for exchange to be possible, a seemingly ordinary and frequent form of exchange, the giving and receiving of food, becomes a site of cultural disconnection. Ultimately, in the examples of Mauss, Parry, and Laidlaw, both those giving and receiving anticipate the functions of the system of exchange and despite the ways in which actors may or may not follow expectations about appropriate behavior, both givers and recipients are operating within the same framework. In the case of SASA, however, although givers and recipients both certainly desire a form of exchange, it is not always easily enacted, because their cultural surroundings do not utilize the same assumptions about systems of exchange.



## **Chapter Two: Holiday Giving Charitable Giving, Religion, and Relationality**

To transition between performances numbers at their grand Diwali events, rotating members of SASA and Nanhi Kali would emerge at the front of the stage to tell jokes and share trivia with the audience with the same kind of slightly awkward but utterly enthusiastic delivery I recognized from similar events I'd attended as a college student. During one of these transitions, Nasir and Jaya, yet another of the whirl of elegantly dressed young women involved with the event, stepped out onto the stage. This time, they offered the audience some tidbits of information about Diwali.

“Diwali is a major shopping holiday,” offered Jaya.

Nasir responded that it sounded like Christmas.

“More like Christmas is the American Diwali,” Jaya shot back.

The comparison was apt in more ways than one. SASA and Nanhi Kali, who have co-hosted a Diwali event for several years, utilized the holiday as a fundraiser to support girls' education in India, bringing together charitable giving and holiday celebration in a manner reminiscent of post-Thanksgiving and Christmas-time donation campaigns by many American and global non-profits. The night was filled with student performances, from dance and music groups, with sometimes unexpected combinations, like the fusion Carnatic classic/death metal trio that performed early in the evening, and with clear crowd-pleasers, like the university's bhangra team, Orange Bhangra, who helped closed out the night's performances by running down into the open area below the stage and encouraging people to come dance with them and other performers.

The combination of a Hindu festival and philanthropic giving were the backdrop and explicit reason for the event, but those aspects were most noticeable the beginning of

the night. As previously mentioned, the evening began with an the *aarti*. This an emotional video message created by Nanhi Kali to emphasize the gender inequality in Indian education. In the video a young girl with large brown eyes cut off her two short braids of hair and put on a button-down shirt. When her friend asked her what she was doing, the first girl explained that if she looked like a boy, then maybe her parents would allow her to continue to go to school. The video was in Hindi with English subtitles, and closed on a plea for people to help Nanhi Kali in its mission to ensure young Indian girls' access to education.

From this initial explicit performance of Hindu devotional practice and an emotional appeal to participate in the modern, progressive development of Indian society, the night went on to be a celebration of the South Asian (and more specifically Indian) community on campus. Groups of friends chatted waiting in line for food and gathered in clumps at tables and on the auditorium stairs to eat. Although it clearly had a Hindu and South Asian twist, the atmosphere of people dressed in their holiday best echoed other kinds of charity fundraisers. It was part good cause and part social event that gave everyone a chance to take a break from the everyday and dance in outfits that might not otherwise make it out of their Syracuse closets very often. The fact that it was oriented around the celebration of a religious holiday only underlined its similarity to the kinds of fundraising campaigns common among current-day American and international non-profits. "Holiday giving" and charitable social events based around holidays are a common fundraising tactic, especially as many non-profits only hold a handful of major fundraising events per year.

Opinions (and statistics) contradict one another regarding how large of an impact the “holiday season” has on charitable giving in the United States. A December 2013 article in *Slate* claims that

Some 40 percent of all individual charitable donations are made in December. For many charities — such as Teach for America, which received 80.5% of all individual donations for 2012 in December, and Save the Children, which raked in 68.6% of donations in the same month — end-of-year fundraising is the difference between a successful year and financial hard times.<sup>44</sup>

According to *Slate*, even major, well-known non-profit groups with name recognition such as Save the Children may end up gathering much of their funds for the year in a relatively short period of time — around the “holiday season.” Although other studies contest the kinds of numbers that *Slate* reported, looking at advertisements and fundraising pitches around November and December in the United States suggests that there is at least a standing perception that the time between American Thanksgiving and Christmas is a period in which people may be more likely or inclined to give or volunteer. Importantly, charitable donations are tax-deductible in the United States for the year they were made, meaning that the end of December is the cut-off for such deductions.<sup>45</sup> Non-profits, as I will discuss later, have also attempted to establish a regularized place for themselves within the holiday calendar through efforts like Giving Tuesday, which marks off the Tuesday following American Thanksgiving as a time for charitable donations.

SASA and Nanhi Kali, although they may not themselves see their fundraising efforts in quite this comparative light, offer a fusion of Hindu, Indian aesthetics and devotionality with the pragmatism of a quasi-religious appeal to charitable giving. Like

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<sup>44</sup> Ken Stern, “The Cynic’s Guide to Holiday Donations,” *Slate*, December 12, 2013. [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/holidays/2013/12/year\\_end\\_charitable\\_giving\\_most\\_people\\_are\\_terrible\\_at\\_it\\_don\\_t\\_be\\_one\\_of.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/holidays/2013/12/year_end_charitable_giving_most_people_are_terrible_at_it_don_t_be_one_of.html)

<sup>45</sup> Internal Revenue Service, “Tips from IRS For Year-End Gifts to Charity,” accessed March 9, 2017, <https://www.irs.gov/uac/newsroom/tips-from-irs-for-year-end-gifts-to-charity>.

their counterparts at American and international non-profits, SASA and Nanhi Kali focus their efforts on a point in time when their target audience may more receptive to their overtures. In keeping with SASA's emphasis on domesticity and providing a sense of familiar culture, Nanhi Kali serves a specifically Indian population. In this case, remembering the distant home includes an opportunity to remember and work to alleviate an ongoing social inequality within that national domestic space. Although for students far from home, initial thoughts of the distant homeland may center on its positives, they may also recall widespread problems. Their new distant and relatively empowered position may give them an opportunity to address those issues. When discussing her associations with campus life, Vidhya explained, "Everyday I'm reminded I'm lucky to be here," and later following that up by saying, "I think of it as a gift. Not a lot of my friends back home will be able to see the things I've been able to see." In an October 2016 interview, Varsha connected a similar sense of good fortune and privilege to her reasoning for why SASA members wanted to be involved in charitable giving, saying, "We're in a university. If our resources are letting us do better for our country, why the hell not?"

### **SASA and Non-Profits**

Over the Fall 2016 semester, SASA attempted to collaborate with multiple non-profit organizations with student groups on campus, although the only major event they ended up co-hosting with another group was Diwali. SASA had previously collaborated with Nanhi Kali to hold this Diwali event for several years. On the Syracuse campus, Nanhi Kali is a student group associated with the Indian education non-profit of the same name. The NGO was founded in 1996 and focuses on "providing primary education to

underprivileged girl children in India.”<sup>46</sup> As a graduate-student-run organization headed largely by Indian international students, Nanhi Kali represents a group whose audience overlaps with SASA’s. As a result, the organizations’ Diwali collaboration was also a pragmatic decision regarding numbers. As Gita explained, “[Nanhi Kali] brings in a lot of the grad student audience.” SASA, however, had the benefit of greater access to financial resources as an undergraduate student group, meaning that each organization brought different strengths to the table. If either group attempted to hold a Diwali event on their own, both groups might end up with smaller audience, because people would likely choose between one or the other event. Furthermore, by combining forces, they could also pool financial resources.

Still, SASA members also portrayed the decision to make Diwali a charity-oriented event as appropriate to the general atmosphere of the festival. In discussing the importance of Diwali, several students pointed to it being the festival of lights and a celebration that signified the triumph of good over evil. For Varsha, this made Diwali seem like a particularly fitting time for charitable giving. She answered a question I posed about the relationship between festivals and giving by saying, “Diwali is about giving . . . . All festivals are about giving in my opinion. Diwali is a festival of light, you want to see light.” Varsha interpreted supporting non-profits and their endeavors of a way of keeping with the symbolism of Diwali. Additionally, Diwali is traditionally a time when gifts are exchanged, including between employers and employees, such as household servants. (In an example that points towards this aspect of Diwali, Gita, who is

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<sup>46</sup> “About Project Nanhi Kali,” Nanhi Kali, accessed February 10, 2017, <http://www.nanhikali.org/who-we-are/index.aspx>.

Jain, fondly recalled Diwali festivities her family traditionally shared with the employees of her father's small business.)

SASA's relationships with two other non-profit groups on campus were decidedly less established but also more personal. Relations with Nanhi Kali had been established because of a commonality of interest, but with other two non-profit groups I saw at SASA meetings and events, the connection was one of friendship. The two groups, Thrive Projects and Oxfam, did not end up having a major impact on SASA's major events, but SASA members demonstrated a greater personal enthusiasm for extending their institutional advantages to their friends' endeavors. Although it seemed that only a handful of SASA members knew or were friends with members of Thrive or Oxfam, that connection was enough to make the investment more personal than the relatively pragmatic mathematics and ethical support that went into SASA's partnership with Nanhi Kali.

At both Navaratri and Diwali, the student-run non-profit venture Thrive Projects had a booth set up at the back of the auditorium, with members sitting by an explanatory poster. Three Syracuse undergraduate students founded Thrive Projects, which focuses on providing "alternative energy education and vocational training to communities in need."<sup>47</sup> The group was founded in the wake of the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal and the organization currently runs several solar-energy-focused projects in Nepal. Nasir, the Diwali MC, works as part of the organization's financial team. When I spoke with the founding members in October 2016, they explained that their post-graduation plans are to continue running Thrive, with plans to expand their outreach efforts to countries beyond

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<sup>47</sup> "About," Thrive Projects, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://thriveproject.org/>.

Nepal. Unlike Nanhi Kali and Oxfam, which are both associated with larger organizations, Thrive is a Syracuse-based non-profit and is still in its early days, both as a student group and as a non-profit organization.

Oxfam, like Thrive, is a relatively new as an organization on the Syracuse campus, also benefited from the personal overlap between Oxfam's membership and SASA's. Syracuse University's Oxfam group is a university affiliate of the international non-profit of the same name, much like Nanhi Kali. As an organization, Oxfam focuses on a variety of poverty reduction initiatives and on addressing world hunger. Vidhya was also a member of Oxfam and this personal connection facilitated a desire for the organizations to collaborate. The president of Oxfam attended a SASA executive board meeting relatively early in the Fall 2016 semester and explained the goals of her organization. Although I do not recall seeing her again at any of the meetings I attended, Oxfam, like Thrive, had an informational booth at Navaratri.

Throughout the semester, SASA discussed various potential events it might host as a way of fundraising for both these non-profit groups while also boosting SASA's visibility on campus. Over the course of several board meetings, SASA members threw out a variety of options, conveying possibilities proposed Thrive and Oxfam members. One option that came up, which Jenny, an Oxfam member and friend of Vidhya's, later also recalled in her interview, was of having some kind of charity auction, similar to a bachelor or bachelorette auction. Ultimately, none of the schemes ever got off the ground, although both Jenny and incoming SASA co-president Vandana mentioned potential plans for the spring semester. I interviewed Vandana in January 2017, not long after she had taken up her new position following Varsha's graduation. She explained, "Right now

we're trying to work on an event for this semester. We're not sure it'll happen this semester. We're planning to do a fundraiser event." As the events of the fall semester and Vandana's own uncertainty demonstrate, despite the organizations' best intentions, it could be fairly difficult to pull together collaborative events within one semester. SASA and Nanhi Kali's ability to coordinate their Diwali event seemed to work in part because it had become an established event that SASA knew to prepare for well in advance. The relative difficulty of actually hosting events of the scale that SASA envisioned for these collaborative events underlines the frequently complicated administrative issues involved.

In addition to SASA's interest in assisting these non-profit groups with their fundraising, these relationships also had more reciprocal organizational benefits. As relatively new organizations that did not yet have recognition as official undergraduate organizations through the Student Association, both Oxfam and Thrive lacked SASA's institutional capabilities. As Jenny explained, not being a recognized student organization meant that Oxfam had very limited funds, which in turn truncated their ability to hold events and establish themselves on campus. SASA's invitation for them to join their more established events, even as relatively minor players, gave them access to events on a scale neither non-profit could have managed on their own. On the other end, SASA board members saw collaboration as an opportunity to expand SASA's reach, mission, and recognition on campus. In interviews, board members often spoke of SASA's inclusivity and their desire to reach people beyond their traditional audience, even when they at other points acknowledged that their events often lacked the diversity they envisioned.



Despite the seemingly obviously secular nature of the non-profit SASA works with and of SASA's interest in these particular groups, religious events still continued to provide the opportunity to support these groups. In this way, SASA's events can be seen as a kind of microcosm of the "secularization" of concepts of religious charity. Like Giving Tuesday, which will be discussed in the following section, SASA's Diwali event brings together commercial, popular, and emotional aspects of a prominent holiday with a charitable purpose. As with Giving Tuesday, which falls during the post-Thanksgiving build-up to Christmas, SASA's charity fundraising is ambiguously tied to religion. At the same time that SASA members like Varsha considered generosity and compassion to be fitting of Diwali as a religious holiday, they also explicitly discussed the event in terms of popularity and capacity. Diwali is SASA's largest event by far and its success as a fundraiser is largely a byproduct of Diwali's Christmas-like popular appeal. Although I myself found myself looking for clearer "religious" reasoning for the relationship between charity and Diwali, I found myself repeatedly getting similar answers from SASA members: Diwali brought in the biggest crowds— and if people wanted to raise money in any capacity, Diwali offered the greatest potential earning power.

### **Religious Charitable Giving in Comparative Historical Perspective**

The case of the Diwali fundraiser event and the organizers' self-reflective, if jocular, comparison with Christmas is fruitful to consider because it speaks to a pragmatic method of bringing together different traditions of charitable giving. The frameworks of religious giving that are arguably in effect borrow from Hindu and Christian traditions, broadly speaking. The success of the Diwali event speaks to the

ways in which those established traditions have been altered to fit a setting that explicitly involves religion but also invokes more rationalized concepts of philanthropy.

*Dana*, although in some ways equivalent to charitable giving because of the textual emphasis on giving with disinterests and the need for a well-intentioned donor and worthy recipient, is formulated in a very different way than the kind of alms-giving found in both Christianity and Islam. I use Christianity and Islam as comparative measures in large part because of the comparison SASA members themselves made between Diwali and Christmas and because during an interview, Nasir, who was the only Muslim SASA board member I knew, contextualized his personal history with charitable giving within his familial and religious background. Considering abbreviated histories of obligations of giving and charity within these three traditions contextualizes the significance of SASA's Diwali event being a charitable event.

Although many different strands of Hinduism certainly emphasize compassion towards the suffering, this does not feature as a significant aspect of *dana*, either textually or in the forms of *dana* documented in ethnographic works on South Asia. Maria Heim argues that within the logic of *dana*, giving to the impoverished or less fortunate is not the most meritorious action. Instead, “*dana* . . . establishes certain moral relations . . . not premised on love and intimacy, and its sentiments are esteem and regard rather than care. Moreover, *dana* is not given out of altruism; gifts of esteem to religious elites are explicitly not based on altruism and compassion.”<sup>48</sup> Because *dana* is typically understood as going to the religious elite, the “neediest” are typically not understood as appropriate recipients. Looking at Parry and Raheja's ethnographic examples, however, this aspect of

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<sup>48</sup> Heim, 54.

*dana* appears to be reversed. This is largely because in both cases, *dana* was primarily utilized to transfer sin and inauspiciousness. When attempting to rid oneself of inauspiciousness, the recipient is often in some way lower in status or otherwise “obligated” to receive the gifts. In both cases, however, the neediness of the recipient is not of concern to the giver. Parry explains that for the Benares Brahmans who were his interlocutors, dependence on such gifts was of concerns. When they received their donor’s gifts, they also received their inauspiciousness. Among Parry’s Brahman’s, the *dana* gifts they receive are “held to embody and transmit the sins of the donor to the priestly recipient, who is likened to a sewer through which the moral filth of his patrons is passed.”<sup>49</sup> In the context of *dana*, then, giving is typically (but not exclusively) aimed “upward” in caste status, but receiving gifts is fraught with potential negative consequences. There are certainly other established forms of charity enacted by devout Hindus and other forms of charity encouraged or mandated by sacred Hindu texts. As Heim herself notes, Hindu, Jain and Buddhist “traditions praise and encourage the virtue of compassion” in many contexts outside of *dana*.<sup>50</sup>

Expanding our understanding of what can be considered “giving,” I turn to the Hindu concept of *seva*, or service, as another Hindu form of charitable behavior. I make this link because SASA members spoke about their own embodied involvement and the time they gave to their work with SASA on the same continuum as other forms of charitable giving. Following their interpretations, I suggest that service and giving can be understood as on a continuum of behavior that is social constituting or reinforcing. As Juergensmeyer and McMahon prove, there are many established forms of philanthropic

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<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Parry, “On the moral perils of exchange,” in *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, eds. Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>50</sup> Heim, 75.

or service-oriented behaviors within Hindu traditions. They point, for example, to the importance of the concept of *seva*, or service, especially in guru movements, and trace its religious significance to the medieval *bhakti* devotional movement.<sup>51</sup> Jacob Copeman's ethnographic work on blood donation and guru movements in New Delhi reveals that *seva* today can function simultaneously as both *guru-seva*, or service to the guru, and *manav-seva*, or service to humanity. Copeman demonstrates that although gurus often explain mass blood donation camps in relation to a more abstract giving to humanity, devotees tend to focus on their relationship with the guru in their donations.<sup>52</sup> As these examples show, notions of religiously meritorious giving extend well beyond *dana* and include giving not just of material goods but also time and activity.

In comparison, both Christianity and Islam have established alms-giving as an important aspect of proper religious behavior. Mauss himself included a section in *The Gift* specifically considering alms. In his reading, "alms are the fruit of a moral notion of the gift . . . and of fortune, on the one hand, and a notion of sacrifice, on the other. Generosity is obligatory."<sup>53</sup> Unlike other forms of giving, then, alms giving is explicitly a moral issue, rather than primarily a matter of social relations. Whereas Mauss elsewhere concentrates on why reciprocity is such a significant part of cycles of exchange, in his relatively brief consideration of alms, this does not play a significant role. Alms giving, then, like *dana*, is notable exactly because of its apparent one-way flow.

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer and Darrin McMahon, "Hindu Philosophy and Civil Society," in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions*, eds. Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz, and Edward Queen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 267.

<sup>52</sup> Jacob Copeman, *Veins of Devotion: Blood Donation and Religious Experience in North India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>53</sup> Mauss, 82.

Christian conceptions around alms-giving, although obviously as diverse as the varieties of Christianity themselves, often revolve around a concept of “Christian charity.” As Foltz and Foltz point out, in the early history of the Christian church, “charity defined as almsgiving was an essential of the new faith,” and eventually grew beyond personal almsgiving towards more organized efforts. They trace this history to a turn in early modern Christian history when “Church charity moved from spontaneous hospitality to institutionalized efficiency.”<sup>54</sup> Like *waqfs*, or endowments, in Islam, institutionalized charity in the Christian church can be seen as a step towards modern, rationalized public service-oriented institutions.

Within Islam, religious duties are understood to include giving *zakat*, or alms. Explaining the concept of *zakat*, Josep-Antoni Ybarra says, “zaqat was, and still is, a payment of moral character compulsory for all members of the group — Islam.”<sup>55</sup> As Bornstein explains, in the current-day context, “transnationally, *zakat* is given to Muslims in need through international charity and humanitarian aid.”<sup>56</sup> Some Islamic charities, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) even include the option of designating online donations as *zakat*. CAIR’s website explains that “numerous Muslim scholars have confirmed that *Zakat* is payable to organizations that exist to serve the Muslim community by protecting their rights.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, donations to CAIR can be considered *zakat*, something that CAIR evidently wants to make sure its donors know.

Although *zakat* was often instituted as a kind of “poor tax” in medieval Islamic countries,

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<sup>54</sup> Franz Foltz and Frederick Foltz, “Charity in a Technological Age: From Alms to Corporation,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology, & Society* 30.2 (2010), 97.

<sup>55</sup> Josep-Antoni Ybarra, “The Zaqat in Muslim society: an analysis of Islamic economic policy,” *Social Science Information* 35.4 (1996), 644.

<sup>56</sup> Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> “Why CAIR qualifies for *Zakat*,” Council on American-Islamic Relations, accessed February 7, 2017, <https://www.cair.com/zakat.html>.

clearly *zakat* as a concept as evolved in relation to modern philanthropic developments like online donations. Scholars often also link Islamic philanthropic to the non-Quaranic institution of the waqf. Waqfs are endowments that were traditionally established as ““family” and “public” endowments” that, starting in tenth-century Persia became a method of building and maintaining public institutions such as *madrasas* and hospitals.<sup>58</sup> In this way, waqfs function similarly to modern philanthropic foundations and also offer a perhaps clearer parallel with public-minded philanthropy than *zakat*.

Although this historical overview elides much of the variation and historical development of these concepts of charitable giving in what are internally diverse religious traditions, it helps lay out the multiplicity of understandings of charitable giving. As is clear, not all forms of religious charitable giving prioritize the same types of populations as recipients. *Dana* operates on a logic of “esteem,” as Heim terms it, whereas *zakat* and alms-giving are directed towards the unfortunate. Looking at SASA’s choice to collaborate with Nanhi Kali, it becomes clear that although Diwali is an explicitly Hindu event, the framework of *dana* does not entirely mesh. As I have said earlier, *dana* is an imperfect point of comparison from the outset, since SASA members do not use the term themselves and frequently disavow authoritative knowledge of organized religion and established religious traditions of this sort. In the specific case of SASA and Nanhi Kali’s Diwali event, however, it is imperfect because there are two recipients of two different kinds of giving. On one hand, Diwali is an event in which SASA members “give” their time and effort in order to construct a caring and comforting

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<sup>58</sup> Said Amir Armojand, “Philanthropy, the Law, and Public Policy in the Islamic World before the Modern Era,” in *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions*, eds. Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz, and Edward Queen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 114-5.

environment for attendees, but on the other hand, it is a straightforward fundraising event for Nanhi Kali, which uses their funds to support their education initiatives.

The logic behind the kind of philanthropic giving that Nanhi Kali as a non-profit organization expects is different than the logic of *dana*. It is not based on giving as a sign of “esteem” or giving as a method of exculpating sin or inauspiciousness. Instead, the logic of modern philanthropic fundraising rests on modern development-based logics of public good. This kind of intermingling between religious charity and more “rationalized” forms of giving based upon public good and notions of human rights is common. Although many secular non-profits and development-focused agencies exist, religious charities still receive a significant portion of American charitable giving. Regardless of whether this can be considered “religious” giving, the place of religion within charitable, philanthropic and development organizations remains significant. According to a 2016 report prepared by Giving USA, which tracks American charitable giving, “the giving to religion slice of Giving USA’s recipient pie chart . . . has steadily shrunk for decades. Paradoxically, it has never tumbled from its first-place standing in terms of total donations received. In 2015, the category held firm at 32 percent of the total received.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, many large non-profits that engage in ostensibly “secular” types of work, like emergency response and hunger relief also have religious missions. The international child-sponsorship-based charity World Vision, for example, describes itself as a “global Christian humanitarian organization.”<sup>60</sup> Religious non-profits like World Vision often operate alongside similar non-religious institutions, implementing similar programs.

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<sup>59</sup> “Giving USA: 2015 Was America’s Most-Generous Year Ever,” Giving USA, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2016/>.

<sup>60</sup> “About Us,” World Vision, accessed February 14, 2016, <https://www.worldvision.org/about-us>.

This fusion of religious associations and conceptions of charity with at least ostensibly secular ideas of development can also be seen in fundraising campaigns. The recent phenomenon of “Giving Tuesday” represents an attempt by American and international non-profits to capture the attention of potential donors on the Tuesday following American Thanksgiving, at the start of the “holiday season.” The Giving Tuesday website explains that “#GivingTuesday” was “created by the team at the Belfar Center for Innovation & Social Impact at the 92nd Street Y — a cultural center in New York City” and that the campaign seeks to “connect diverse groups of individuals, communities and organizations around the world for one common purpose: to celebrate and encourage giving.”<sup>61</sup> A 2014 NPR report explains that “at least \$32.3 million was donated on Giving Tuesday 2013, according to a survey by the trade publication NonProfit Times.”<sup>62</sup> The financial significance of Giving Tuesday is clearly evident. As a concept, Giving Tuesday emphasizes not only the donation of funds but also time. The event functions as a way to create a time and a space for non-profits to be noticed and (hopefully) remembered amidst the commercial rush after Thanksgiving. If Black Friday and now Cyber Monday are established and recognizable commercial events, then Giving Tuesday is the non-profit world’s attempt to stake a claim on American holiday spending.

Giving Tuesday, like the capacity to designate online donations as *zakat*, demonstrates a modern development in the potential relationship between religion and charitable giving. Although American Thanksgiving is arguably now a non-religious

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<sup>61</sup> “What is #Giving Tuesday,” Giving Tuesday, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.givingtuesday.org/about>.

<sup>62</sup> Linda Poon and Maanvi Singh, “For Giving Tuesday: A Guide to Gifts That Give Back,” Goats and Soda: Stories of Life in a Changing World, NPR, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2014/12/02/367837081/for-giving-tuesday-a-guide-to-gifts-that-give-back>.



holiday insofar as it is not part of the Christian calendar, it did not originally start out this way. As Anne Blue Wills explains, early Puritan settlers in North America had a tradition “of observing days of public thanksgiving or fast . . . in response to specific instances of God’s “favor and mercy,” such as a good harvest.”<sup>63</sup> This version of Thanksgiving would be largely unrecognizable to current-day Americans. Food, decorations, and “secular” traditions like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade have come to play an increasingly vital part, while the specifically Christian religious elements have been deemphasized, at least commercially. Wills argues that “where the Pilgrim soul sought God, the nineteenth-century Pilgrim heirs” to whom she attributes modern Thanksgiving conventions, “sought a certain kind of Americanness” which revolved around the family and the nation.<sup>64</sup> Giving Tuesday and the way it is predicated on an ambiguous mixture of Thanksgiving’s Christian past and current day status as an American civic holiday helps show the ways in which the non-profit world continues to engage with and update religious notions of charitable giving beyond their original context. It also serves as a good comparative model for SASA’s Diwali event, as both rely on a religiously significant point in the calendar to motivate giving.

### **Secular Festivals, Secular Giving?**

In late January 2017, I spoke with Jenny, a friend of Vidhya’s, who had attended several of SASA’s events in the Fall 2016 semester and who was also an active member of Syracuse University’s Oxfam division. Responding to a question about whether she felt that the events she’d been to were religious or not, Jenny answered, “Not especially. I know they have some part at the beginning.” She recalled the *aarti* and said, “I didn’t

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<sup>63</sup> Anne Blue Will, “Pilgrims and Progress: How Magazines Made Thanksgiving,” *Church History* 72.1 (2003): 140.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

really participate.” Jenny, who explained she considered herself not to have a religious background, apart from a few short years in a Catholic school as a child, felt that beyond this portion of the early evening, she would not characterize the events as religious. In this, Jenny’s perspective was not so different than that of many SASA members.

Reflecting on the potential relationship between religion and charitable giving, Vidhya joked, “If I knew more about religion, I could wax poetic.” As I will discuss later, Vidhya did go on to discuss the ways in which she felt Hinduism and generosity were linked, but her initial demurral was representative of SASA members’ general reluctance to connect their actions with religion, despite the explicitly religious elements of their festival events. Generally speaking, for SASA members, religion could be a motivating factor for charitable giving of multiple kinds, but SASA’s involvement in charitable giving was more grounded in their personal relationships with members of other organizations.

### **Humility, Duty, and Citizenship**

During interviews, different students offered multiple frameworks through which they understood motivations for charitable giving of multiple kinds. In many cases, they presented their own personal conceptions of and interest in charitable giving within the context of familial history and example. Referencing their own personal religious backgrounds (or what they considered a lack thereof), the students I interviewed offered multiple explanations for the impulse towards non-reciprocal giving. As I had wanted them to consider giving as a broad concept, I asked them not only why people might donate money or material goods, but also their time and effort. Students interpreted and answered my question in different ways, discussing their volunteer experiences and

family members' involvement in religious and community-oriented activities. In doing so, students demonstrated how they conceived of generosity not only in terms of larger-scale fundraising activities, but also on a far more personalized and embodied basis.

In an interview, when I asked him about his experiences with religion growing up, Nasir offered a personal story that he related to Muslim rules around charitable giving. In other interviews, I had generally specifically asked interviewees about whether they felt there was a relationship between religion and giving, but Nasir offered this reflection in response to a more general question, demonstrating the degree to which Nasir personally associated charitable giving with his own experiences of Muslim identity. He began by explaining

It's required in our religion to give to charity. If you don't, you'll probably go to hell. It's a must to give. I think it's supposed to be fifteen percent of your savings. There's a certain amount if you go below it, you're not required to give, but if you go beyond it, then you're supposed to give fifteen percent of those savings, even if it's two fistfuls of rice. That's very humbling.

Then, to illustrate his point, Nasir turned to a story about his father. Growing up, when Nasir and his parents would visit Bangladesh, where his parents both grew up, his father would bring gifts of cloth, among other goods. "He used to give out — for the women he used to give out saris." Nasir went on to say that one year, to gauge how many people were in the crowd, "I counted, I went to the top of the building — it had to be like six hundred people. Every year. And this is usually at the end of Ramadan." Nasir's story highlighted the ways in which he considered his childhood experience of being Muslim with charitable giving and communal support. Earlier in the interview, he also tied his interest in being part of Thrive Projects to his own personal relationship with Bangladesh and his interest in development there. Because the earthquakes that created such damage

in Nepal also affected Bangladesh, Nasir had been aware of and particularly interested in work centered around relief and development efforts. Although his position working with Thrive Project clearly takes a different form than the sort of giving he recounted in his story about his father, his interests still remain invested in a broad understanding of assisting a community with whom he identified.

Vidhya, in contrast, did her own musing on the relationship between Hinduism and different kinds of charitable giving at the end of our second interview, answering a question specifically about religion and giving. She prefaced her answer by saying wryly, “If I knew more about my religion, I would be able to wax poetically.” Then she continued by saying, “So definitely being generous is a big part [of Hinduism], because so many of the devout Hindus I know volunteer their time at temples . . . . My cousin in Boston, she prepares something for the temple in her town,” referring to food. Vidhya’s story about her cousin volunteering at her local temple and Nasir’s story of his father’s charitable giving share certain aspects. Both point to a sense of religious duty being fulfilled. Vidhya’s cousin’s work at the temple fits within Hindu devotional notions of *seva* that have played an important role in diasporic Hindu contexts and in modern urban-based Indian guru movements. Nasir explicitly related his father’s charitable giving with his own understanding of *zakat* as an integral part of being Muslim. Whereas Nasir’s story focused on the distribution of material assistance, Vidhya’s story highlighted personal labor as a method of religious giving. In keeping with Juergensmeyer and McMahon’s inclusion of *seva* in their understanding of philanthropy in Hinduism, Vidhya focused on the ways that devotee can offer generosity or a form of communal through their own embodied actions rather than a material exchange.

Varsha, a self-proclaimed atheist, focused on the socio-economic disparities in India as tool for explaining why she specifically engaged in charitable giving and why she thought others in SASA were similarly interested in participating. Speaking about what she saw as the relationship between festivals and charitable giving, Varsha said,

Even if you're religious or not, you find yourself on the day of celebration just being grateful for everything you have. I don't know — like when you're surrounded by family, friends, and food and you're having such a great time, I think you look around and you introspect and you feel so grateful. And then you also think about the, you know, the less fortunate who don't have these things. I think that is kind of, you know, something that makes people want to give . . . . All these days, these festival days, we are happy when we're celebrating — they're all about happiness. And when you're celebrating these festivals in India, a lot of the time — I'm sure you know about poverty. You see poor people outside. It just doesn't feel right when you're celebrating life when some aren't even able to live another day. So I guess that makes you want to, you know, do better for the world, for your country, for your people. And it doesn't have to be religious; it doesn't have to be a teaching. I think for me, it's unselfish. I don't expect something good to happen to me. I just feel good for them feeling good.

In her statement, Varsha indicated that she at least expects her own charitable giving to be relatively disinterested, in keeping with notions found in *dana*, but carries this aspect outside an explicitly religious context. The socio-economic inequality Varsha witnessed in India became a significant factor in her own understanding of why charitable giving is important. Her own awareness of her relative position became particularly keen during festivals because they highlighted a disparity that Varsha realized she might not be able to entirely mitigate, but which she felt obligated to address. Like the concept of *manav seva*, or service to humanity, that Copeman explains modern guru movements often invoke, Varsha's reflections indicate that she, as a human being (and an Indian) who has resources and privilege, owes assistance of some kind to those who do not. Varsha's answer did not utilize personal familial narratives as explanation in the same way Nasir and Vidhya's did — although she also told me that her parents regularly support Nanhi

Kali and she felt this made her secondary involvement in college appropriate — but her answer still touches on family as a source of motivation. In this case, the simple fact of having family and friends with whom she could celebrate became a compelling reason to give.

Jenny, Vidhya's friend who is on the executive board of the charitable group Oxfam, offered a decidedly different, civic-focused explanation for her own interest in and involvement with the non-profit world. Jenny explained to me that she had gotten involved in Oxfam after attending a "Hunger Banquet," an event that many Oxfam affiliates hold as a method of demonstrating how economic disparities affect people. Jenny also related her interest to her education and more specifically to a volunteer opportunity she had undertaken one summer, as a camp counselor and boating instructor. She explained that most of the students involved were from low-income families and were receiving assistance to be part of the program and one student in particular struck her as bright and promising. The realization that her student's future might contain uncertainty because of his socio-economic background inspired Jenny to get involved with education initiatives. Near the end of her explanation, she too reached for a family story, telling me her father was a police officer when her family lived in Hong Kong. "I know part of the reason he joined the police was to give people that sense of security," she explained. She moved on to frame giving in relation to citizenship. "Being a citizen is about giving back to the community," she said, adding that people could think of citizenship in a broad way, "not belonging to a certain nation but a global citizen in general." Jenny's emphasis on the context of citizenship contrasted with relatively

personal lenses through which other interviewees explained their understanding of why people give.

Each case offers a somewhat different perspective on people's motivations in giving, demonstrating the ways in which both religious and secular frameworks may provide different reasoning for similar decisions. Taken together, they demonstrate that both rationalized philanthropic logic and relational empathy have contributed to students' motivations for their personal involvement in charitable giving. The example of family members became a method through which to first comprehend and explain charitable giving, and then a method of contextualizing their own approaches to charitable giving of multiple kinds, whether it took the form of fundraising, volunteering, or other kinds of contributions. Frequently in this story, giving is predicated on the students' ability to recognize those "in need" as similar to themselves, in a way that goes beyond simple recognition of the recipients of recipients of charitable giving or those assisted by development schemes as fellow rights-bearing human beings.

### **From Empathy to Altruism?**

Throughout this thesis, I have identified students' imaginative capacity for empathy as a motivating force for their work. The "empathy-altruism hypothesis" claims "sympathy or empathy for the needy is the motive for altruistic activities. An extension of the hypothesis is that people feel more sympathy towards relatives and friends than towards strangers or enemies."<sup>65</sup> SASA students and their desire to put on large social events that will address the social, emotional, and psychological needs of the students they serve and with whom they share characteristics seem to reinforce this assertion.

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<sup>65</sup> Ruben Habito and Keishin Inaba, introduction to *The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in Global Perspective*, eds. Ruben Habito and Keishin Inaba (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 3.

Many fields and disciplines, using different lenses, have studied the issue of what empathy is and why (or if) it motivates humans towards unselfish behavior and assistance of others. Psychologist Brendan Gaesser offers a three-part definition of empathy, saying “empathy is a multifaceted construct that has included vicariously experiencing another person’s emotions (affect-sharing), deliberately considering another person’s perspective in order to understand their thoughts and feelings (mentalizing), and a desire to improve another person’s welfare (prosocial concern . . .).”<sup>66</sup> For students of SASA, it is these two latter elements of empathy that are most relevant.

I have repeatedly emphasized the significance of imagination to the process of empathetic identification that SASA members engage in because the kind of “deliberate consideration” of other people’s thoughts and experiences that Gaesser describes requires imaginative labor. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum explicitly defines empathy in relation to imagination, describing empathy as “an imaginative reconstruction of another’s experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience.”<sup>67</sup> Nussbaum assesses empathy as inadequate to foster compassion, but the work of SASA students suggests that this is not always true. Empathic imagination of others’ difficulties, which resemble their own difficult emotional transitions, became the basis of their efforts. They wanted to extend the community they themselves found through their participation in SASA to others.

I posit that for SASA members, it is commonality (or at least, perceived or imagined commonality) in conjunction with finding a community of other students

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<sup>66</sup> Brendan Gaesser, “Constructing memory, imagination, and empathy: A cognitive neuroscience perspective,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2013), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 302.



already oriented towards these goals that inspires students to dedicate their time. Keishin Inaba explains that his work with Buddhist movements in the United Kingdom, he found that “altruism is developed not so much by reading about teachings or by listening to sermons that motivate members to carry out altruistic acts as it is by the relationships with other members who have the same faith and try to help each other.”<sup>68</sup> In the case of SASA, it seems the collective reinforcement of other SASA members and the social community they formed likewise created a shared ethos of support. That sense of mutual support was strongest between SASA members, but was also what SASA members wanted to extend other international students of South Asian descent and to their friends involved in smaller non-profit oriented student organizations.

### **The Place of Relationality**

In their edited volume, Ilchman, Katz and Queen define philanthropy as “activities of voluntary giving and serving to others beyond one’s family.”<sup>69</sup> In their definition, it is the very fact that the people one assists are not related that makes it notable and worthy of study. The instinct or desire primarily to assist family members, direct and extended, can sometimes in fact be seen as something of an impediment to the kinds of giving to strangers that non-profit and development groups seek to encourage. In her earlier ethnographic work on Christian NGOs in 1990s Zimbabwe, Erica Bornstein notes, “in contrast to the willingness of donors in other countries to embrace unrelated Zimbabwean children through sponsorship, beliefs about ancestral lineage also made it

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<sup>68</sup> Keishin Inaba, “Altruism in New Religions in Japan,” in *The Practice of Altruism: Caring and Religion in Global Perspective*, eds. Ruben Habito and Keishin Inaba (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>69</sup> Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz and Edward Queen, eds, introduction to *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions*, eds. Warren Ilchman, Stanley Katz and Edward Queen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), x.

difficult for Zimbabweans to accept a non-consanguine child into their family.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, although World Vision, the NGO Bornstein was describing, focused much of their assets and attention towards child sponsorship and also emphasized local decision-making as best practice, child sponsorship by Zimbabweans for Zimbabwean children was not popular. The emphasis on familial relations within Zimbabwean society stood at odds with the notions of a global Christian family that dominated World Vision’s programming. Bornstein notes a similar phenomenon in New Delhi, where she contrasts what she sees as the recent understanding of “philanthropy . . . as a form of instrumentally rational action” with very personalized and family-motivated or quasi-familial forms of giving. I would add that the logic of *dana* also has the potential to prohibit the kind of rationalized giving to strangers that many non-profits are seeking.

Moving beyond the somewhat obvious observation that personal relationships are required for partnerships, I want to propose that the kind of perspective that Ilchman, Katz and Queen have on philanthropic work unnecessarily rules out the potential in Bornstein’s “relational empathy.” Members of SASA are moved to work with non-profits not so much because of an abstract feeling of care for another rights-bearing human, but rather through their capacity to imagine not just similarity but relationality with they seek to assist. Their empathy, fostered by their imaginative capacity to extend their own personal difficulties in adjusting to a new country and living far from the security of their families (something, multiple people emphasized to me, that was a new and often difficult experience) to the hundreds of students who attend their events. This is not to say that this concept of a quasi-extended family is unique to SASA as it clearly is not. An

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<sup>70</sup> Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development*, 90.

obvious example of a similar rhetoric is that of the Christian brotherhood, which Bornstein notes that international Christian charities such as World Vision attempted to invoke in their own projects, to mixed success.<sup>71</sup> What makes the kind of relational empathy that SASA members invoke notable is the ambiguity of its context and borders. SASA is interested in those with an overlapping set of life experiences. Their intended audience is likely familiar with Hindu festivals but are not necessarily Hindu themselves; they are likely Indian international students who grew up in India, but there are certainly exceptions to this rule. On an organizational level, they are also interested in “adopting” and integrating smaller or less-established student groups into their events.

Although non-profits and development based organizations often appeal to potential donors through emotional appeals to both commonality and pity, I argue, continuing Bornstein’s perspective, that relational empathy offers another potential framework through which we can understand the possibilities of generosity. SASA members do not connect themselves to the kinds of religiously meritorious forms of giving that have formed our comparative and contextual framework, but neither do they engage with the frequently abstract individualistic rights discourse that underlies much philanthropic and development work.

In another aspect to the potential of relational empathy: the sense of inherited duty, service and charitableness that students attributed to familial example. Gita, like the students in the stories above, attributed her own investment in charitable action saying, “That’s what Indian culture is. That’s what most of our parents have taught us, to give.”

The desire of SASA members to engage in the world of development and philanthropy

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<sup>71</sup> She explains that although the rhetoric of a global Christian family seemed to appeal to international families sponsoring children, invoking this rhetoric did not seem successful within Zimbabwe, even though many Zimbabweans are Christian (see *The Spirit of Development*, 90).

involves a capacity to abstractly understand or sympathize with the suffering or disempowerment of strangers. The rhetoric of SASA members makes it clear that this develops into a quasi-familial concern for well being for people they have come to understand as something like family, at least within their current transnational context. Taking the examples of their actual biological family members, SASA members come to extend their circles of exchange first to the broader Indian (and South Asian) community on campus, and then, through their personal connections with members of non-profit groups on campus, to populations “in need.”

### **The Uncertain Future**

In the middle of answering a question about why SASA chose to collaborate with particular non-profit groups on campus, Nasir mentioned that in the future, SASA might not be able to work with Nanhi Kali, the group with whom they typically hold their Diwali event. Surprised, I asked why that it would be. Nasir explained that since SASA is an undergraduate organization and Nanhi Kali is a graduate organization, they are overseen by different university offices. The offices were considering no longer having collaborative events between graduate and undergraduate organizations because it required complicated coordination between the offices as well as the student organizations themselves. When I asked if SASA would be doing anything different with Diwali going forward as a result, Nasir said no. He felt that SASA would continue to try to host large, celebratory festivals with the goal of first addressing their main audience, and their secondary and perhaps less successful goal of reaching a diverse audience from across the campus.

Here again, as in the last chapter, it becomes clear that the basis for exchange is always uncertain. The donors and donees in Parry and Laidlaw's work by and large function within cultural milieus in which both donors and recipients can expect to carry out their exchanges, even with the contradictions and friction within such systems. For SASA, however, the changing policies of the university administration mean that there is a great deal of instability. Although they have maintained a personal and organizational relationship with Nanhi Kali over the course of several years, the administrative concerns of the university have created a situation in which future relations are untenable.

Much like the problems SASA faced with serving food, the differences between student groups' understandings of their cycles of exchange and the interpretations of the university administration created a disjuncture in which the university administration's concerns prevailed. Generosity and relationality might both have been at work within SASA and Nanhi Kali's collaboration, but this one particular instance of undergraduate-graduate organizational good intentions could not outweigh the broader administrative complexities that the university evidently struggled to handle.

This, together with the difficulties around serving food recounted in the past chapter, demonstrate that cycles of exchange require a legitimizing authority. In this case, rather than it being the religious context of *dana*, it is the secular authority of the university that allows — or does not allow — exchange to occur. Although the students who participate in SASA have multiple frameworks through which they understand and refer to charitable giving, not all of them can function within the context of the university. The concept of *dana*, shared in different iterations by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, continues to function as an acknowledged and established form of religious

and meritorious giving in South Asia, as does the Muslim tradition of *zakat* and Christian alms-giving. Within these contexts, however, actors — both donors and recipients — generally understand themselves to be acting within the same system, despite the contradictions and potential for inauspiciousness, corruption, or improper behavior. The vulnerability of SASA's forms of exchange are the result not only of the fact that they enact them outside of a cultural sphere in which authorizing figures would be familiar with the material goods they may exchange, but also one in which SASA members' authority is always necessarily contingent.

## Conclusion

Looking at SASA and the events they put on allows us insight into the social, emotional, and religio-cultural lives of a relatively new kind of transnational population. At the same time, it also reveals the nuances and complications of exchange and the forms of authority that make exchange possible. The relatively large population of international students from India and the South Asian diaspora more broadly at Syracuse University demonstrates that there is a young, dynamic class of South Asians coming to the United States on a non-permanent basis who are determined to carve out a space for themselves in their temporary, adopted homes. They self-consciously understand themselves as a different population to South Asian Americans on campus and understand themselves to share a cultural background and set of references as a result of their upbringings and familial backgrounds. They seek to create a kind of quasi-familial network to address their particular emotional, psychological and social needs and desires.

SASA's transnational identities must be contextualized. They simultaneously have easy access to communication and news from home via modern technological innovations and have a strong sense of their distance from familiar surroundings and the comfort and security of their familial network. The emotional experience of that distance brought students to SASA, both as event attendees and as members of the organization itself. For SASA members, the organization and the social network it gave them access to provided a friendly home and they hoped to extend that same sense of belonging to the rest of their broader community. The rhetoric of domesticity was firmly established amongst SASA's members. This language highlighted that students are simultaneously conscious of the difficulties that result from their choice to seek an education so far from

the homes of their childhood and of their desire to establish themselves within Syracuse during their time here. Through embodied actions, SASA members attempt to bring their compassionate, imagined notions of what will comfort and cheer people.

Clearly, they do not always fulfill all the wishes of their audience, but their events are grounded in a desire to mitigate distance, create a comfortable space within Syracuse University, and advance the charitable causes championed by people they include in their network of relational empathy. In making Syracuse a “home away from home,” SASA members constructed environments in which they imagined Indian international students would feel comfortable, secure, and amongst peers who cared for them. The events were simultaneously intended to anchor SASA members and their organization into local networks, through their relationships with non-profit groups operating on campus. Their transnational Indian aesthetic and ethos was centered on a multi-pronged conception of generosity and giving, which included material goods, financial support, and embodied effort and time on the part of individual members.

### **Cultural but Not Religious?**

In a twist on the increasingly common self-identification amongst Americans as “spiritual but not religious,” I argue that we might label SASA members “cultural but not religious,” based on their own self-identifications. Many of the SASA members I interviewed seemed to regard themselves as fairly disengaged from what they personally consider “devout” religious behavior. At the same time, they clearly implement and encourage elements of Hindu devotional practice at their festival events, and SASA members who grew up in a variety of religious communities continue to engage with embodied religious practices. In her ethnographic analysis of Indian IT workers and how



they conceptualized their own engagement with Indian identity, Smitha Radhakrishnan explains, “While there was little explicitly shared agreement on the content of this elusive “Indian culture,” the historical context in which these discourses came to be suggests first that Hinduism plays a central, constitutive role in this culture.” She further concludes the conceptions shared by her mobile, transnational interlocutors suggest “that what is at stake here in the new, emerging notion of Indianness they are making is the beginning of a new hegemonic consensus to replace the seemingly unviable secular, socialist democracy . . . [with] a new transnational elite, a globalization-friendly version of Indian culture.”<sup>72</sup> Although the SASA members who have informed this thesis are all younger than Radhakrishnan’s IT workers, they belong to a similar transnational population and are likewise building a new conception of what being “Indian” involves, particularly when away from the familiar context of Indian family home.

Hinduism clearly plays a role in Indianness for SASA members, but it is a Hinduism of aesthetics, taste, and sound. SASA members characterized these aspects of religious life as falling within the potentially more neutral category of “culture,” which does not require belief to be enacted and claimed for one’s own. The embodied, sensory aspects of festivals that were so carefully curated and emphasized as significant — ranging from food to decorations to music, and indeed to the *pujas* and *aartis* — seem to count as “culture” because of the ways in which they can potentially be enacted regardless of theological belief. This is not to say that “culture” is not an equally troubled term. Like “religion,” culture clearly means many things to many people. In the case of SASA, what I have referred to as aesthetics, sensibilities, and embodied practices become

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<sup>72</sup> Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2011), 16.

“culture” because of the term’s assumed mobility and applicability beyond those who would self-identify as devout Hindus.

I suggest that considering these “cultural but not religious” young people also helps us understand the ambiguous boundaries of what can be considered “religious life.” By using this phrase, I am deliberately invoking the rhetoric of “spiritual but not religious.” Scholars of religion have suggested that the increasing number of Americans who identify as “spiritual but not religious” should be understood within the context of American religious history and the significance of individualism. Radhakrishnan argues that a similar ethos of individualism is significant to how some of her interlocutors, specifically those living in large Indian cities like Mumbai and Bangalore. Like “spiritual but not religious” people in the United States, Radhakrishnan’s IT workers selected and focused on aspects of Hinduism that were of personal interest.<sup>73</sup> In a similar manner, SASA members selected portions of Hindu festival traditions to build what they saw as widely appealing events.

This comparison to spiritual but not religious people also helps demonstrate the ways in which groups that challenge the boundaries of what can be considered “religious,” also rely on communal organization. Scholars have frequently viewed “spiritual but not religious” people as “indicative of (or the consequence of) ongoing social fragmentation and weakening social ties, increased social mobility” and other factors.<sup>74</sup> Following Courtney Bender, I want to point to the ways in which people who deliberately disengage or distance themselves from the term “religion” very much engage in and rely on communal organization as a source of identity and fulfillment. In her

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 175-6.

<sup>74</sup> Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

ethnographic work on spiritual communities in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Bender observes that “few spiritual groups were freestanding alternative religious institutions” and that “everyone [she] spoke with could identify other spiritual practitioners, groups, and individuals.”<sup>75</sup> SASA, unlike Bender’s relatively loosely connected networks of spiritual seekers, is an explicitly organized student group with an institutional history and an evident hierarchy of leadership. Yet like Bender’s spiritual seekers, SASA members find something worthwhile in aesthetic and embodied engagements with religion. They fall outside the usual organization of religious student groups hosted through the university chapel and members profess to various levels of devoutness and knowledge about their own religious backgrounds and identities. Even with this relatively weak association with a religious community, however, aspects of religious life remain the grounds that allow them to carry out their social mission. Just as religious studies has turned towards taking “spiritual but religious” as a serious category of study, we must also consider how organizations like SASA engage with religion as “culture.”

Although many SASA students seem able to reconcile the religious portions of their events without their own personal sense of distance or sometimes discomfort with religion, this is not to say that these students are not of interest to religious studies scholars. For obvious reasons, many religious studies scholars study self-identified or self-consciously religious communities and materials. Some of the field’s most intriguing scholarship, however, has demonstrated the many ways in which the tool of religious studies can be applied to illuminate seemingly non-religious communities, places, and texts and the ways in which religion may underlie or permeate them. In this vein, I

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 6.

suggest that looking at SASA opens an example of a group that engages with and utilizes religion in ways that correspond with many other community-oriented groups, both within universities and outside of them. SASA members may not emphasize theological belief and regular practice, but religion remains a “cultural” reference point for how to live appropriately and well.

### **Ethos, Religion, Respect**

Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized the significance of embodied practices and personal, quasi-familial relationships as a motivating factor for how SASA members enacted multiple forms of exchange and I argue that these aspects are equally important for understanding the ways in which religion is entwined with SASA’s events. In their interviews, SASA members directly associated embodied religious practices — Hindu and non-Hindu — with their family members, their childhoods, and a burgeoning understanding of how to be caring and compassionate people with the capacity to affect others’ lives. Varsha, for example, who told me she considered herself an atheist, also does a daily *puja* with her mother now that she has returned to India. She also connected her own desire to host Diwali with Nanhi Kali not only to pragmatic issues of attracting the largest possible audience but also to her own parents’ support of Nanhi Kali in India. What does it mean for a group that contains a self-identified atheists, a young woman who overtly stated she was still in the process of exploring her own religious identity and beliefs, and at least a few non-Hindu students, to celebrate Hindu festivals and see them as addressing a cultural desire?

Their investment in the aesthetics and embodied practices of a Hindu-flavored conception of “Indian culture” points to the amorphous space between a secular

conception of Indian identity and a Hindu nationalist one. Radhakrishnan observes that for the IT workers she interviewed,

a Hindu identification was not connected to political support for a Hindu nationalist party, since most informants declared no interest in politics. These articulations suggest that Hinduism remains an important source of identity and belonging for IT professionals, but that Hinduism as they understand it is largely decontextualized and depoliticized.<sup>76</sup>

A similar phenomenon appears to be occurring amongst SASA students. They equate Hindu festivals with a recognizable pan-Indian set of references, albeit one they recognize contains far more diversity under the surface than they can actually include in their own events. At the same time, however, my interviewees for the most part did not offer much political commentary on the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations in contemporary India when I asked.

Varsha and Vidhya, the exceptions to the rule, both explained that although there were ways in which they felt Hindus as a majority population or Hinduism as a religion had influenced Indian culture read broadly, this did not mean that other communities were therefore less Indian or belonged there less. Vidhya responded to a question about how, if at all, she saw Hinduism and Indian identity being related by saying, “Wow, that’s a loaded question,” which is certainly true in the current political climate and in light of the history of communal violence in India. Vidhya first pointed to the origins of the word “Hindu” originally being a geographical description, then pivoted to her understanding of the modern relationship between Hinduism and Indian identity. She explained, “But knowing that a majority of Indians are Hindus, I would say they have a strong connection. Although I don’t feel like that weakens the relationship that Muslims, or Sikhs, or Christians have to their Indian identity.” Vidhya’s analysis was far more

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<sup>76</sup> Radhakrishnan, 176.

explicitly political than most of the SASA members with whom I spoke, but nicely demonstrates SASA's members' ambiguous understanding of Hinduism's significance to Indian identity and culture. Hinduism contributes in important ways to Indianness but being non-Hindu simultaneously does not make one less Indian.

### **Public Space as Domestic Space**

Related to SASA's attempts to create a comforting, caring, and welcoming environment within Syracuse, is their use, transformation, and translation of space. There is no denying that their festival events were fundamentally public, a fact that was only underlined by the space they selected: an auditorium. In this transnational context, the generally domestic celebrations and rituals of festivals like Navaratri and Diwali take place in a space more obviously welcoming to events like plays, performances, and film screenings. It would be impossible to recreate people's memories of celebrating such festivals in their own homes, but equally importantly, SASA members recognize that they could never recreate such situations because they would differ so much from person to person. Instead, SASA utilizes the opportunity and the physical locations available to them to translate these events into public spectacles.

The aesthetics of SASA's Navaratri and Diwali were essential to the way SASA constructed an atmosphere that combined familiarity with innovation. Vidhya told me that she knew that people specifically brought their best (South Asian) outfits from home just to wear at Diwali. The central element of this sensory experience was arguably focused on food. They might not be serving the special dishes people fondly remembered their mothers preparing, but they were attempting to fulfill a craving for home-like food that people did not need to buy or prepare themselves. In this understanding, food became

not just an attraction but also evidence of a kind of generosity and care usually expected in domestic spaces and within familial relationships. The physical space of the auditorium was undeniably public and the celebrations had been adapted for this no-longer domestic setting. At the same time, however, aesthetic and sensory elements of the festivals were a clearly construction of a familiar, caring, and specifically Indian environment.

### **#FOMO as a Transnational Phenomenon**

SASA members' assessment that they fill an emotional and social need for students comes in part because of their own personal experiences dealing with the physical distance and intimate knowledge of things occurring "back home." Varsha in particular emphasized what she saw as the kind of unique experience of international students in the current day, in light of the advances in social media and communications technology. In Varsha's eyes, the ways in which social media and easier communication mitigated distance between students and their families outside the United States could also end up reinforcing their own sense of distance.

FOMO, or the "fear of missing out," entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013, an indication of the term's popularity, particularly among millennials. In a July 2016 article, a Forbes writer referred to FOMO as "the 21st century equivalent of keeping up with the Joneses."<sup>77</sup> More specifically, FOMO usually refers to the sense of "missing out" on something in comparison to one's peers, due to social media. Varsha's analysis suggests that FOMO can also create a specifically transnational phenomenon as well. As

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<sup>77</sup> Melody Wilding, "Career FOMO: How to Stop 'Fear of Missing Out' From Ruining Your Happiness," Forbes, July 6, 2016, accessed March 4, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/melodywilding/2016/07/06/career-fomo-how-to-stop-fear-of-missing-out-from-ruining-your-happiness/#153a75e22924>.

I have previously emphasized, SASA members who are international students may or may not remain in the United States following their undergraduate or graduate schooling. They are, however, explicitly aware of their own current distance from their homelands and the surroundings of their childhoods. They spoke about their choice to come to Syracuse both in terms of the opportunities it afforded them and the sense that they were missing out. Even as they are more easily communicate with distant loved ones than previous generations of migrants and transnational individuals, they are also more consistently aware of what they have “missed out” on by choosing to go so far from home. SASA events, then, in some way attempts to mitigate the sense of missing out that might be particularly strong when seeing that distant friends and family are celebrating.

### **The Gift, Relational Empathy, and Religion as Exchange**

Looking at the forms of exchange that SASA members enact, which are shaped by their transnational desires and empathy, I propose we must also understand relational gifts. These are not classic gifts in the Maussian sense of establishing and maintaining personal relations between individuals or groups, but rather at least partially non-reciprocal gifts made out of a sense of shared emotional experience. Looking at two different kinds of giving explored in the earlier chapters, I argue that they demonstrate the multiple ways in which an ethics of care can be infused into systems of exchange. Although the exchange of food and the support (both financial and social) of non-profit groups may seem relatively unrelated, considering SASA events demonstrates that they can in fact be understood as on a continuum of actions based on relational empathy. I have paired these two forms of giving not only because they both happened to occur at



SASA events but also because they stretch the concept of relational empathy in ways that demonstrate how the concept could be applied in other circumstances.

I consider SASA's forms of giving as ultimately rooted in a sense of shared experience and a desire to shield or comfort those with whom people share certain important and recognizable emotional and social characteristics. Unlike liberal altruism or rights-based arguments for development and charity, this kind of relational empathy does not dissolve into the universal and sometimes universalizing rhetoric of shared humanity. I argue that the relative specificity of relational empathy, which might initially seem to be a limiting factor, in fact offers a potentially powerful method of understanding people's emotional investment in charitable causes and community-based work.

The capacity of SASA members to see specific ways in which they can relate and care for not only their audience but also their friends involved in charitable and development-based organizations demonstrates that embodied and enacted relational empathy has the potential for wide-ranging results. The same relational empathy that caused SASA members to speculate about and attempt to address the desires of their audience members operates on the same personal and organizational-levels in their relationship with non-profit groups. Individually, it is the personal connections of specific SASA members with Thrive Projects and Oxfam that brought about SASA's interest in collaborating with both groups. On a broader level, the overlap in interests and audience members with Nanhi Kali meant that coordinating with one another for Diwali allowed both to better reach people. Individual members of SASA's executive board might have very little personal investment in the kinds of issues that Oxfam, for example, tackles.

Because of the overlap in the organizations' membership and the personal relationships that link the two groups, however, they felt a desire to assist.

SASA, as a relatively well-established student organization, had access to resources that their non-profit collaborators did not. SASA members' sense of their own organizational history, replete with difficult situations, made them particularly sympathetic to the problems faced by their friends. "Giving back" therefore became a multi-layered process. SASA members could not only help non-profits fundraise but also give their friends a platform to get greater recognition for their own organizations through inviting them to table at large SASA events.

In bringing together relational empathy and exchange I do not aim to stretch the meaning of "gift" to the point of uselessness, but instead to emphasize the ways in which we can understand social relations as exchange without falling into an assumption of utilitarianism. SASA certainly profits from successful events, but the level of work, time, and imagination that members invest is not a simple matter of expecting returns. They understand that they may not receive the thanks or appreciation they feel is commensurate with their efforts. Empathy and generosity, then, can still operate within commodity exchange and reciprocal exchange.

Finally, I want to suggest that exchange is also a method of understanding religious life. Mauss, after all, saw exchange extending beyond human-human interactions into human-supernatural relations, whether that was exchange with ancestors or deities. Phillip Arnold argues, "Exchange, as a religious phenomenon, is an essential feature of indigenous religions. It is also a central organizing feature of material life."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Phillip Arnold, *The Gift of Sports: Indigenous Ceremonial Dimensions of the Games We Love* (San Diego, CA: Cognella, 2012), 21.

Based on the work and experiences of SASA members, it seems Arnold's observation could be extended to other circumstances. Arnold analyzes indigenous religion as based on forms of ceremonial exchange, which also constitutes the most significant portion of the *pujas* performed at SASA's event. Through their insistence on performing *aarti*, SASA members continue to acknowledge the significance of ritual exchange between humans and deities, regardless of the issue of belief.

### **The Problem of Authority**

The particular context of SASA as a student group currently made up largely of and for Indian and South Asian international students, under the supervision of the university administration, demonstrates that systems of exchange may be very vulnerable to the whims of authority. Much scholarship on systems of exchange, including ones I have frequently referenced, such as Parry, Laidlaw, Raheja and Mauss, explore exchange systems in which both donors and recipients generally understand themselves to be operating with the same set of references. As these scholars demonstrate, donors and recipients may have competing understandings of what exchange is intended to accomplish. Interactions between donors and recipients may also illuminate the discrepancies and contradictions within particular systems of exchange. A similar issue arose in the disjuncture between SASA members and event attendees. Although SASA members emphasized the amount of work they put into creating the best, most successful event they could, attendees often had other unmet demands.

More significantly, however, the role of the university administration in dictating whether SASA's systems of exchange could take place at all demonstrates that the authority that allows for the existence of exchange may lie with neither donors nor

recipients. When the overarching social authority is not literate in the significance of certain forms of exchange, as was the case for food, or simply opposed to its continuation, as with the Diwali collaboration, even established systems of exchange are no longer viable. SASA's reliance on the secular authority of the university makes it vulnerable. SASA relied on the university's capacity to comprehend unfamiliar demands and accommodate their needs or desires. More than once, however, the university administration did not decide in their favor.

In the translation of religiously affiliated forms of giving, such as *prasad*, *dana*, and *seva*, to the context of the university, the background of Hindu religious authority has fallen away. There is an absence of ritual specialists such as priests, and students themselves shy away from even identifying as "religious." Instead, the ultimate authority that allows or disallows the events and their constituent elements is the university administration, a secular entity that often has different priorities than SASA members do. For SASA members, their Navaratri and Diwali events are opportunities to make international students feel at home in Syracuse and on campus and to reinforce a sense of community and familiarity. Through food, they enact a form of embodied caring and welcome. The events are acts of generosity. For the university administration, however, these events are evidently a source of potentially complicated problems. University catering's lack of familiarity with Indian cuisine lead to a frustrating ruling against SASA's attempt to abide by rules on food safety and the complications of coordinating separate university offices have potentially ended SASA's collaboration with Nanhi Kali.

The inability of various university administrative offices to comprehend the significance of these exchange systems from the point of view of students means that the

best option is often to creatively circumvent the university. Even though SASA members are part of a group of well-educated, mobile transnational class, in the context of Syracuse University, they have had to utilize tactics that fulfill the university's demands in name while still allowing SASA to achieve their goals. Being at odds with the authority that legitimizes their existence as an organization is clearly a complicated and frustrating experience for SASA members.

When we understand exchange as embedded into the establishment and perpetuation of social relations, it becomes clear why this issue of authority and competing understandings of exchange is so significant. When university administrative office decided to limit or curtail SASA's capacity for exchange, it also by nature limited SASA's ability to actually act on its relational empathy. Without its embodied actions, through the giving of food and the sharing of events with charitable groups, SASA's mission would only be partially fulfilled. Clearly, the authorizing force of the university remained an influential and sometimes difficult to predict influence throughout the academic year.

Looking at SASA's events and the lives of SASA members gives us an intersection of how international students navigate within (and outside) American higher education institutions, negotiating with authority in order to address their own emotional, psychological and social needs and desires. Even universities that welcome or deliberately seek out international students such as Syracuse do not yet address such students' interests with the same kind of relational empathy that SASA members approach one another and those who attend their events. This, of course, may be something of an overly ambitious goal, but it is clear that the perspective the university

administration took regarding SASA's proposed food choices and the desire of undergraduate and graduate student organizations to collaborate reveals a certain lack of imagination and cultural competency. The example of SASA students shows that students want to and are very much capable of constructing comforting environments and networks of mutual support for one another, provided the university allows them to do so.

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