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Our own poor: transnational charity, development gifts and the politics of suffering in Sylhet and the U.K.

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'Our own poor': transnational charity, development gifts and the politics of suffering in Sylhet and the U.K.

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork in Bibiyana, NE Bangladesh, this paper compares the transnational charity offered to known individuals by migrant, UK based families, with the philanthropic efforts of the multinational company Chevron, who operate a large gas field in the neighbourhood. Applying Fassin's notion of the 'politics of suffering' to both types of exchange, the paper argues that the two types of giving are underlain by incommensurate moral economies. Whilst in instances of transnational charity, social inequality and the compassion felt towards the suffering of known people, or 'our own poor', underscore the exchanges, in the philanthropic efforts of 'community engagement' the inequality of giver and receiver is repressed and the exchange is animated by a moral economy, rooted in Christianity, in which compassion guides actions towards the suffering of unknown, anonymous strangers.

Key words Suffering, Bangladesh, Transnational charity; philanthropy

In this article I consider the relationship between what Didier Fassin has termed 'the politics of suffering' with, on the one hand, transnational charity which takes place between Britain and Bangladesh, and on the other, philanthropic efforts at community development by the multinational corporation Chevron in the villages surrounding its gas field at Bibiyana in Sylhet, Bangladesh.[1] Like Fassin, I am interested in the ways in which suffering – how it is recognised and represented, and the solutions created to reduce it rather than how it is experienced – arises from particular historical and political conditions. But here, rather than the Christian genealogy of Western humanitarianism which Fassin describes, the theological context of the charitable donations is Islamic. The setting is an area of roughly five square miles of densely populated and intensely farmed paddy land in Sylhet, North East Bangladesh known as Bibiyana. Bibiyana's profound connections to global capitalism are shadowed by ruptures and disconnections.[2] Not only has the area experienced sustained globalisation for many generations via a long history of migration to Britain but more recently it has become of central importance to Bangladesh's energy sector due its rich reserves of natural gas. This has led to the construction and operation of the Bibiyana Gas Field, inaugurated in 2007 by Chevron and currently supplying approximately thirty per cent of Bangladesh's gas[3].

In my previous work I have analysed transnational charity and corporate philanthropy via theories of the gift and its politics.[4] In what follows I focus on the ways in which suffering and morality are configured, drawing inspiration from Erica Bornstein's call to examine 'the impulse of philanthropy' rather than simply its effects. Like Bornstein, I define philanthropy as the systematisation and regulation of impulsive, affect laden charity.[5] Yet in contrast to the Hindu *dan* (gift), that Bornstein analyses, in which the most sacred donation is the disinterested charitable gift offered without expectation of worldly return, in Bibiyana charity is offered to known recipients - 'our own poor' - and

[1] Fassin, D. 2012 *Humanitarian Reason: a Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ of California Press, p. 9

[2] Gardner, K. 2012 *Discordant Development: Global Capitalism and the Struggle for Connection in Bangladesh.* London: Pluto Press

[3] In 2014 the Bibiyana field further expanded and now has a capacity for producing three hundred million cubic feet of gas a day.

[4] cf. Gardner, *Discordant Development,* 2012, Gardner, K. 2015 'Chevron's gift of CSR: moral economies of connection and disconnection in a transnational Bangladeshi village.' *Economy and Society* 44(4), Dec, 495-518

[5] Bornstein, E. 2009 'The impulse of philanthropy'. *Cultural Anthropology*, 24(4), 622-651, Bornstein, E. 2012 *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

animated by feelings of obligation and duty as well as compassion.[6] As we shall see, in contrast to the global humanitarianism which Fassin outlines as a hall mark of high modernity, the vectors of compassion and 'helping' within Bibiyana are governed by kinship and locality. Suffering is expressed and recognised within the boundaries of personal relationships and charitable works take place within these degrees of relatedness.[7] Charity is part of a moral economy in which the rich have an obligation to relieve the suffering of the poor. This is informed by Islamic ideals of social welfare, manifested in some instances by what Benthall calls 'financial worship'.[8] Suffering and the compassion it provokes is the main emotional currency within this moral economy, used for claims upon known donors, who are moved to offer *'shahajo'* (help). Here, it is compassion, which I define as empathetic kindness, which is evoked rather than pity, a more objectifying emotion of sorrow for distant others. Crucially, within transnational charity inequality is taken for granted; indeed, it underscores the ethics of local and transnational giving.

Meanwhile the philanthropic programmes offered by Chevron attempt to deny inequality between individuals, creating an undifferentiated population of recipients: a 'community' with whom it is a 'partner'. Individual suffering, mediated by personal relations is denied; instead, the programmes are animated by anonymized pity for the unknown poor and a professed desire to 'empower' them. But as with all humanitarian programmes the need for solidarity versus the politics of pity, which are inherently those of inequality, creates deep tension.[9] As I shall describe in the concluding sections of the paper, by attempting to establish The Bibiyana Foundation, which was to draw upon and systematise transnational charity, Chevron were introducing incommensurate modes of giving and affect, attempting to control and bring spontaneous, individualised transnational charity based on care and compassion for known but unequal people into rationalised ordered philanthropy, based on a professed desire to 'empower' pitiful strangers.

The paper is based on a three-year research project involving myself and a team of researchers from Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka. Running from 2008-2011, this was funded by the ESRC-DFID to whom I am grateful for their support. Fieldwork involved detailed household case studies conducted in Bibiyana by my colleagues Masud Rana, Fatema Bashir, interviews with local leaders conducted by Zahir Ahmed, and interviews in Dhaka, Bibiyana and the UK with Chevron officials and transnational villagers carried out by Zahir Ahmed and myself. This work was supplemented by a series of short visits by myself to Bibiyana, an area where I have been conducting fieldwork since 1987.

Background: transnational connections in Bibiyana

Bibiyana has had a long and intimate relationship with the global economy, stretching back to the beginning of the Twentieth Century when a small number of men travelled to Calcutta to work on British ships as *lascars* (sailors). In Talukpur, the village where I did my fieldwork one man in particular became a '*sareng'* (ship foreman) actively recruiting other men from his lineage and neighbourhood to work on the ships. As has been documented by Adams and Chowdhury many *lascars* jumped ship in London, finding work in the restaurant and hotel trade.[10] By the 1950s there were already a small number of men settled there. This changed dramatically in the post war period when British

[6] Parry, J. 1986 'The gift, the Indian gift and "the Indian gift"', *Man* 21(3), 453–73.
[7] Gardner, K. and Ahmed, Z. 2009 'Degrees of separation: informal social protection and relatedness and migration in Biswanath, Bangladesh', *Journal of Development Studies* 45(1), 124–49.
[8] Benthall, J. 1999 'Financial worship: the Quranic injunction to almsgiving.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 5(1), 27-42.
[9] Fassin 2012, p. 3-4
[10] Adams, C. 1987 *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Sylheti Pioneers in Britain*. London: Tower Hamlets Arts Project, Choudhury, Y. 1993 *The Routes and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers*. Birmingham: Sylhet Social History Group

industry actively recruited labour from the Commonwealth. Encouraged by their contacts in 'London' men left Sylhet in their thousands, working and living in British industrial cities over the 1960s and 70s whilst regularly remitting money back to the *desh* (home). During the 1980s, when I was conducting my doctoral fieldwork, the *Londoni* men began to reunite their families in the UK.

Whilst today most families are orientated towards Britain, with children and grandchildren growing up who only visit Bangladesh for holidays the original migrants spent most of their earnings buying up land, building houses, and transforming their status.[11] By the 1980s, when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork, access to the local means of production (land on which to grow rice) was almost wholly based on one's access to foreign places: *Londoni* families owned almost all the local land whilst those families who hadn't migrated but were once large landowners had slipped down the scale to become landless or land poor. Local economic and political hierarchies were dominated by relative access to the U.K. and other destinations in Europe, the US or the Middle East.[12]

These inequalities took on a distinctive local pattern, adhering to kinship networks. Whilst large and dominant lineages capitalised on the opportunities of movement to Britain and have built substantial power bases in their villages, in another village a few miles across the fields (which I call *Garibpur*) that was originally settled by in-migrant labourers, no-one had the economic or social capital necessary for migration. During my doctoral fieldwork this village supplied agricultural and domestic labour to the far wealthier Londoni village of Talukpur, with established relationships between particular families and their Londoni patrons across the fields. At the time of our 2008-11 research, this relationship had partly broken down, largely because of the competition over jobs and contracts that the gas field had caused. The village was over eighty per cent landless, far higher than the national average of fifty-six per cent; a high preponderance of people lived in mud and thatch dwellings and had no access to electricity: the power line that leads from the two *Londoni* villages passes it by.[13] In 2008 our research found many people who did not eat more than two small meals a day, and / or who did not know where their next meal was coming from.

Whilst British based families now largely invest money in British businesses (e.g restaurants) rather than *deshi* (homeland) fields, transnational migration has continued to dominate the local economy, with high amounts of dependency on remittances and / or irregular donations by UK relatives in times of need. Indeed, there is now what Steve Vertovec has described as a 'transnational habitus': the aspirations of young people from middle income households are almost wholly directed at getting abroad, often via marriage with British based partners.[14] Crucially, the charitable donations or 'helping' (*shahajo*) of *Londonis* is central to the livelihoods of the majority of households in the area; either in the form of regular remittances for those with a close *Londoni* relative, or an irregular lump sum in times of need or crisis. When we asked the poorer households how they coped in times of crisis, we learnt not only of disastrous floods, illnesses and accidents that threatened to tip them into destitution, but also how they were saved by charity from *Londonis*. Often the charity flows from *Londonis* to their less well off kin, but they can also encompass unrelated poor, who are still encompassed by the phrase 'our own poor'.

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[11] cf. Zeitlyn, B. 2012 'Maintaining transnational social fields: the role of visits to Bangladesh for British Bangladeshi children'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(6), 953-968, Zeitlyn, B. 2015 *Transnational Childhoods: British Bangladeshis, Identities and Social Change.* London: Palgrave MacMillan, Gardner, K., & Mand, K. 2012 'My away is here': place, emplacement and mobility amongst British Bengali children. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(6), 969-986.

[12] Gardner, K. 1995 *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Migration and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Gardner, K. 2008 'Keeping connected: security, place and social capital in a Londoni village in Sylhet', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* NS 14: 447–95, Gardner 2009 'Lives in motion: the life course, movement and migration in Bangladesh', *Journal of South Asian Development*, 4, 229-251

[13] Toufique, K. and Turton, C. 2002 *Hands not Land: How Livelihoods are Changing in Rural Bangladesh*. Dacca: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

[14] Vertovec, S. 2009. *Transnationalism*. London: Routledge.

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In the U.K, for example, we met a man whose family fund the education of several children from very poor unrelated families in his village. When asked why he did this, he explained that it was part of his duty as a Muslim, and that he would always extend help to those within his home village who were poor (*garib)* and suffering *(kostor).*

'Under our fields is gold': Bibiyana's gas

If migration has shaped Bibiyana's political economy in particular ways, creating new forms of inequality and possibility, the area's rich reserves of natural gas were to lead to new forms of connection and disconnection.[15] The gas was discovered by Occidental in the mid 1990s and by 2000 the multinational Unocal was developing the resource, with plans for a large gas field. The land was to be forcibly acquired by the Bangladeshi government and rented to Unocal, who were contracted to develop the site. In 2005 Unocal merged with Chevron, and by 2007 the gas field went into production. Today, the Bibiyana Gas Field produces over thirty per cent of Bangladesh's gas[16]. Given the forcible loss of land, it is hardly surprising that the development of the gas plant met with substantial local resistance. As soon as people heard of the plans, 'Demand Resistance Committees' were set up and a series of demands put to Unocal: the rate of land compensation was high on the list, as was a supply of the gas (the villages do not have piped gas). A school, a hospital, a fertiliser factory and improved roads were also key. Today, people say that Unocal agreed to these stipulations; if this was the case they were making promises they could never keep: rates of compensation, the piping of gas to the communities and the development of power plants and factories were not in their gift, but determined by the government. The negotiations took place in a context of passionate agitation: in the perspectives of landowners in particular, they were about to lose a resource which sustained not only their households but those of many people around them and which was irreplaceable.

In 2005 the road was blocked by local people in an attempt to stop construction work. The police were called, threats made by the District Commissioner, arrests made and writs issued. Yet whilst some local leaders tried to hold out against the inevitable, others started to negotiate. Whilst the rate of land compensation was crucial, offers of a programme of 'community engagement', including an 'Alternative Livelihoods' project, the distribution of building materials and sanitation for the poorest households, a health clinic and education stipends were to be part of this. As we shall see, whilst in utilitarian terms this programme might be understood as a means to obtaining a 'social license to operate', not to say a way of boosting Chevron's reputation, both locally and globally, the programme was underlain by the ethics of philanthropic humanitarianism, professed compassion for the poor, a desire to empower and uplift 'the community'.

From this background let us now return to my central theme: charity, philanthropy and the politics of suffering in Bibiyana.

Humanitarianism and the politics of suffering

In his analysis of the rise of Western humanitarianism in the contemporary period Didier Fassin argues that recognition of the suffering and psychic distress of unknown others has entered the political sphere as never before, framing policy, creating new problems and new solutions.[17] The effect is the perfect anti-politics machine. Disaffected urban youth are seen as 'excluded' rather than being part of an underclass, the solution being 'listening

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[15] Gardner, *Discordant Development*, 2012

[16] The three gas fields which Chevron operates (in Bibiyana, Moulavi Bazzar and Jalalbad) contribute to around fifty per cent of the country's natural gas. The gas is sold to Petrobangla, the national oil company. For more information see Chevron Bangladesh, 'Our Businesses' http://www.chevronbangladesh.com/business/#b4 [accessed 06/07/15]. Meanwhile in 2014 the Bibiyana field further expanded and now has a capacity for producing 300 million cubic feet of gas a day.

[17] Fassin, 2012

rooms' staffed with mental health workers, whilst 'bio-legitimacy', based on the need to save lives and alleviate suffering which finds its roots in Christianity, propels humanitarian military action and disaster relief alike.[18] Never before, it seems, has there been so much pity for people in distant places, nor so much attention to their physical or emotional well being.

Fassin's point, ultimately, is political. Contemporary moral economies have been constituted around a new relation to suffering, he argues, making it central to public life. Whilst the 'spectacle' of suffering has disappeared (for example, public executions) its representation has become commonplace. Indeed, although within earlier periods of Western Christianity individual suffering led to redemption this was not linked to compassion in the public domain. As Fassin observes: 'With the entry of suffering into politics we might say that salvation emanates not through the passion one endures but through the compassion one feels. And this moral sentiment in turn becomes a source of action because we seek to correct the situation that gives rise to the misfortune of others.'[19]

Whilst Fassin's work primarily concerns state schemes in France we can identify similar humanitarian ethics underlying modern philanthropic missions rooted in the West, be these NGOs aiming to save the lives of distant others, or institutions set up in the name of philanthropic billionaires such as Bill Gates.[20] For all, compassion for the suffering of unknown victims of war, trafficking, exploitation, poverty and disease motivates those who donate to save lives or 'hearts and minds'. Besides compassion for strangers, what also distinguishes these schemes is the ordering and systematisation of the charitable impulse. Whilst the theological context is different a similar process can be seen in India. As Bornstein notes in New Delhi, whilst pious Hindus spontaneously give *dan* to beggars outside the gates of their houses, an act of charity that evokes strong emotions of compassion and a sense of the immediate suffering of those who receive the donation, social welfare anonymizes the donation, regulating and nullifying emotion and affect and thus controlling suffering. With reference to the long history of state and NGO schemes for social welfare in India, from colonial times to the present day, Bornstein notes the tendency for philanthropic organisations to harness dissent and protest into something far more manageable, for: 'Philanthropy under this lens is a vehicle for capitalism to assimilate the resistance to its practices'.[21]

Anthropologists working on the philanthropic efforts of mining companies have come to similar conclusions about the ways in which philanthropic efforts, based on the ethics of humanitarianism, or its 'liberal diagnostics' both nullify protest and offer moral salvation to mining companies.[22] In contexts where mining has led to protest movements or has had overtly damaging results, philanthropy offers moral redemption. In her work on the Anglo-American mining company in South Africa, for example, Dinah Rajak shows how Corporate Social Responsibility brings morality into business practice, allowing mining companies to extend moral authority over the places where extraction takes place via discourses that stress partnership, responsibility and so on.[23] Here then, suffering, with a solution provided by the programme of Corporate Social Responsibility, has entered

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[18] Bornstein, E., & Redfield, P. (Eds.). 2011 *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School for Advanced Research Press, Redfield, P. 2012 'Bioexpectations: life technologies as humanitarian goods', *Public Culture*, 24(1 66), 157-184, Fassin, 2012. For a review of the anthropology of humanitarianism since the 1980s see Ticktin, M. 2014 'Transnational humanitarianism.' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43, 273-289.

[19] Fassin, 2012, p. 250

[20] Redfield, 2012

[21] Bornstein, 'The impulse of philanthropy', 2009, p. 628

[22] Reid‑Henry, S. M. 2014 'Humanitarianism as liberal diagnostic: humanitarian reason and the political rationalities of the liberal will‑to‑care', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39(3), 418-431.

[23] Rajak, D. 2011 *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

business as well as politics. If there is suffering (poverty or illness) then corporate philanthropy and the application of neo-liberal economic tenets via health programmes, income generation, micro credit and so on, can relieve it. It goes without saying that these solutions never recognise that the cause of the suffering might be political or indeed the consequence of the mining, a point made by other anthropologists working on the CSR or mining companies. Elana Shever's work in Buenos Aires for example focuses upon the 'smiling face' of Shell Oil in a PR campaign to improve community relations, representing itself as a good and caring neighbour with a smiling, female face, when in fact the environmental and health problems faced by local people were caused by its operations.[24]

As I shall show later, through its CSR programmes in Bibiyana Chevron is cast in the role of compassionate 'partner' who is able to extend help to the suffering populations of new territories. As the Community Liaison Officer at Bibiyana put it when telling me about the programme of good works that Chevron had instituted in the area: 'Before we arrived, there *was nothing here.'* Crucially however, the company has no direct relationship with the suffering poor. Reflecting what Jamie Cross has termed the 'corporate ethic of detachment' the poor are dealt with by intermediaries, the 'local leaders', who are their 'partners'.[25] As we shall see, inequality underscores these relationships, but is strenuously denied by the language of 'community', 'sustainability', 'helping people to help themselves' and 'empowerment'. Before examining these programmes, let us turn to local and transnational charity and the politics of suffering in Bibiyana.

Our own poor: transnational charity and the politics of suffering

Within the villages surrounding the gas field at Bibiyana charity is based not upon humanitarian ideals of compassion for the suffering of a distant and global 'poor' who might be uplifted or empowered but tied into a moral economy in which the suffering of known supplicants involves a personal claim to patrons who are obliged to offer particular forms of support, as classically described by James Scott in South East Asia.[26] The closer the connection to the supplicant, whether this is via kinship or neighbourhood, the greater the obligation to help. Whenever I visit the village, for example, I am besieged by requests for *'shahajo'* (help) by destitute women and men, many of whom are known to me, or who are part of the extended family who I stay with. A son has been injured in a bus crash; a woman's husband has died; a house was damaged in a flood; there was sickness. These stories inevitably lead to a request for *shahajo*: a cash donation. The request is made not so much because I am a rich foreigner, but because I am a known patron, part of a network of duty and responsibility. Indeed, when I expressed irritation at the requests for money from a distant cousin who came from a relatively prosperous household, I was told that the reason she could make such demands on me was because 'she is part of the family'.

Rather than being 'helped to help themselves', those who receive charity expect long term support, which those close to them are duty bound to give, and the closer the relationship, the greater the claim. Two recent examples come to mind. In the first, I sat with Amma, the elderly matriarch of my Bangladeshi household, in the courtyard of her

[24] Shever, E. 2012 *Resources for Reform: Oil and Neoliberalism in Argentina*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, see also Welker, 2014 *Enacting the Corporation: An American Mining Firm in Post Authoritarian Indonesia.* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, Zalik, A. 2004 'The Niger Delta: 'Petro Violence' and 'Partnership Development.' *Review of African Political Economy* 31(101), 401-424

[25] Cross, J. 2011 'Detachment as a corporate ethic: materializing CSR in the diamond supply chain.' *Focaal*, 60, 34-46, Gardner, K., Ahmed, Z., Bashir, F., & Rana, M. 2012 'Elusive partnerships: gas extraction and CSR in Bangladesh.' *Resources Policy*, 37(2), 168-174.

[26] Scott, J. C. 1977 *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

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bari (homestead) as she talked with Lacky, a landless woman from Garibpur.[27] Amma's household is partly supported by three adult sons settled in the U.K. Now in her fifties, Lacky has a long term relationship with the household having worked on and off as a domestic servant for them since the 1980s, labour which was largely rewarded with food, old saris and rice rather than money.[28] The women talk companionably, exchanging family news. Finally the conversation turns to Lacky's health: the reason for her visit is that she needs money for medicine. Appealing to Amma and I, she explains with a grimace how her chronic asthma stops her from working. When we give her a hundred taka she tucks the money into her sari and leaves.

If Lacky is included as a member of 'our own poor' to whom small amounts of money or goods might be given because of her geographical proximity and familiarity (food, betel nut, old clothes), others are more closely encompassed by the links of actual kinship. Over the fields is the *bari* of another family of very poor and distantly related cousins. Since the 1980s they have been living on *khas* (government) land on the edge of the village, arranged for them by the village Chairman, not because they are servants but because they are members of the same lineage (*gusthi*). Working as a caretaker at the local school whilst his older sons are agricultural labourers, Tahir, the father of eight, also helps make ends meet via the charity of his wealthy cousins. When I visited in 2014 I was shocked to find them camping in the fields in a shack made from tarpaulin and plastic bags, their belongings spread out over the earth. There was a fire, Tahir told me, their *katcha bari* (made from straw and mud) was destroyed. But as he gestured to the ruined remains of their home, I noticed that brick foundations for a new house had already been laid. Amma's UK based sons were paying for it, Tahir added. In a few weeks his family would have a brand new home, constructed this time with bricks and a tin roof.

Such charitable acts are commonplace in Talukpur for whilst the moral economy of patronage is localised for 'our own poor', these days charity is transnational as well as local. Indeed, as I have documented, poor people in *Londoni* villages are often dependent upon the support of their migrant kin / patrons for their survival.[29] Saleha Begum is a case in point. Another cousin, who is structurally in the position of paternal aunt to Amma, Saleha survives from the charity of her *Londoni* relatives, and is housed in a brick building that I too helped pay for after pleas from her British based family when her original home was damaged in a flood. Similar patterns of charitable donations, offered by transnational migrants to communities 'back home' have been observed in a variety of contexts, prompting considerable discussion concerning their potential for local development.[30]

Such is the clamour for *shahajo* that the demands of those in the *desh* can sometimes feel overwhelming for people settled in Britain. Whilst they may take pride in what they are able to do for their own poor in Bangladesh – one man proudly showed us records which demonstrated how he had paid for the education of poor children in his home village – others find the burden of expectation too much. In Manchester, a restaurant owner complained of how he had to spend thousands of pounds on gifts and charitable donations on visits to the *desh*. It was too much, he said; he could no longer afford to return. Crucially, the demands made on *Londonis* revolve around two emotive states upon which the ethics of local and transnational charity rest: suffering and Islamic piety. Within

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[27] Garibpur was founded by leaders from Talukpur in the late 1960s who rehoused their servants on nearby *Khas* (government) land. Directly adjacent to the gas field, people from here have become the major supply of casual labour for the construction of the plant, leading to extreme tensions with Talukpur, Gardner, 2017 forthcoming.

[28] Gardner, *Global Migrants*, 1995

[29] Gardner, *Global Migrants,* 1995, 'Lives in motion', 2009, *Discordant Development*, 2012

[30] Portes, A., Escobar, C., & Radford, A. W. 2007 'Immigrant Transnational Organizations and Development: A Comparative Study'. *International Migration Review*, 41(1), 242-281, Opiniano, J. M. 2005 'Filipinos doing diaspora philanthropy: the development potential of transnational migration'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 14(1-2), 225-241, Sidel, M. 2008 'A Decade of research and practice of diaspora philanthropy in the Asia Pacific region: the state of the field'. *U Iowa Legal Studies Research Paper*, (08-09), Johnson, P. D. 2007 'Diaspora philanthropy: influences, initiatives, and issues.' *The Philanthropic Initiative*.

this moral economy, bodily suffering – hunger, homelessness and illness – is a claim that can be made upon patrons / kin, who are moved to provide support, not only out of compassion but also by their religiosity and desire to be good Muslims. On meeting Londoni relatives, Saleha Begum is apt to burst into tears, bemoaning her lot as a poor woman and falling to their feet as she expounds upon her suffering, whilst they, out of compassion, a sense of duty and desire to do good, give as much as they can. As a large landowner in another village explained, the sense of largess and generosity that comes with extending help to poorer kin and neighbours is an important aspect of his identity as a good and honourable Muslim. He allowed the local poor to use his pond, he said; it did not matter if they were Muslim or Hindu, all were neighbours.

Meanwhile the experience of suffering (*kostor)* is understood as leading to piety and redemption, just as it was within pre-Modern Christianity. If a woman is beaten by her husband, she is told that the more bruises she has, the more likely she is to get into Heaven.[31] The laments of individual suffering, from beggars to poverty stricken relatives thus work at two levels: as claims for support and as claims for piety amongst those who suffer, for their earthly ordeals bring them closer to God.[32]

Organised and formal donations: *zakat* and *Qurbani Eid*

Whilst the charitable acts described above are integral to the moral economy of transnational patronage they are carried out on an ad hoc basis and determined by individual circumstances as well as the disposition of the givers. This contrasts with the formal distributions made at *Qurbani Eid* and as part of *zakat*, one of the five pillars of faith and thus obligatory. During my 1980s fieldwork a proportion of the harvest was donated to the mosque as *zakat*. This was then redistributed to local poor people. In conversations with transnational *Londonis* in the UK in 2013 I was told that it was possible to give *zakat* by donating money to a mosque in Britain, or via donations to the Bibiyana mosque. Whatever the route, the point was that *zakat* was an obligatory donation, more like a tax than an act of charity, given in order to purify wealth and relieve the suffering of the poor, not in Britain but in Bangladesh or other Muslim countries. Indeed, my UK based interlocutors were dismayed at the prospect of donating charity to the poor and homeless in Britain; 'real' poverty could not be found in Britain, one man laughed: only alcoholism and addiction. For him, charity could only be offered to one's own people, be these local *deshi* poor or Muslims in other parts of the world. It was possible to donate via international Muslim charities such as Islamic Aid,[33] he said, though he would not personally do this for he had his own poor back in the village.[34]

This principle, of basing what Benthall calls 'financial worship' in the *desh* in order to relieve the suffering of local supplicants is vividly materialised during the sacrifice of bulls at *Qurbani Eid*.[35] Purchased by money sent by their Londoni relatives, the cattle are sacrificed by specialist butchers in the *bari* courtyards. The meat is divided into piles: a proportion for the consumption of the household and close relatives and another for the poor, who gather in anticipation. These people are local *chotomanoosh* (low status people without connection, often in-migrants). Donning their prayer caps, family men move down a line of the waiting crowd, filling the outstretched cloth bags of the *garib* (poor) with meat. Once the distribution is finished, the poor move off to the next *bari*; for some it will be the only time of the year that they taste meat.

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[31] Gardner, *Global Migrants,* 1995

[32] See also Grima, 1992. *The Performance of Emotion among Paxtun Women: the Misfortunes which have befallen me"* (Vol. 17). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press

[33] See Islamic Aid, 'How money is spent' https://www.islamicaid.com/how-money-is-spent/ [accessed 21/07/15]

[34] I did not meet any *Londonis* who gave to international Muslim charities, since all had their 'own poor'. This may well be different for younger British born Bangladeshis, which this research did not include.

[35] Benthall 1999; Benthall, J., & Bellion-Jourdan, J. 2003 *Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*. IB Tauris.

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As this implies, within Bibiyana and its transnational social fields it is not possible to make a strict distinction between spontaneous charity and more systematised donations. Rather, *shahahjo* (help) is motivated both by compassion for the suffering of known people and formalised Islamic worship, via *zakat* and *Qurbani*. As Bornstein notes in the Indian context, philanthropic systems can encompass both the spontaneous and the formal, whereas social welfare bleaches giving of its emotional content.[36] Let us now move to Chevron's programmes of community engagement, which by chiming with international ideals of sustainability, empowerment and the ethics of humanitarianism, made little sense to the *Londoni* donors who the corporation wished to enlist. Here, the contrast between the compassion of charity and the depersonalisation and detachment of agendas of empowerment and sustainability could not be more stark.

Corporate philanthropy arrives in Bibiyana

If local charity is embedded in social relationships and geared around alleviating the suffering of known supplicants who make claims via stories of personal pain and suffering the programme of good works initiated by Chevron in the name of 'Community Engagement' draws upon opposite principles: the problems that the programmes alleviate are experienced by a depersonalised 'population' and plans made according to the standards of contemporary development discourse: community, capacity, needs.[37] Take, for instance, the following extract from the Bibiyana Newsletter, which reconfigures the suffering of poverty in the technical terms of 'needs' and 'capacity':

Our goal was always to forge a partnership with the local community to play a part in the overall development of the community. Therefore we felt the need for a strategic approach to our development plan. We conducted several studies with the help of local research organisations.... we went for a baseline study to assess the socioeconomic condition of the locality. The latter gave us indications of the critical needs and capacity of the community [38]

In order to meet these 'critical needs' a programme of works was established, running largely through a local NGO, Friends in Village Development. Whilst approved by the ex-patriate British CEO, the projects were implemented by Bangladeshi nationals: the Director of External Affairs based in Dhaka and his community liaison team. Whilst in our interviews and discussions all espoused the core values of partnership and sustainability that are shared widely by NGOs and aid agencies within Bangladesh, each individual involved was inevitably motivated by a range of personal objectives, ranging from ideals of national development, a desire to help 'the poor' and ambition to initiate a flagship community engagement project for the company. These ideals and aspirations rested uneasily alongside the realities of the team's work, in which protest and complaint often stymied their attempts at the positive 'community engagement' and partnership. Their remit was, after all, to 'manage' a largely non compliant population who in 2005 were not minded to offer the company a 'social license to operate' [39]. Despite the politically charged context, the projects were set up enthusiastically by the Director of Exernal Affairs who explained to us how the experience of offering monetary compensation for land in a nearby gas field a decade earlier had led to anger amongst local people, for the money was soon spent and they were left with nothing. In Bibiyana, sustainability was therefore key. The projects included income generation, training, credit groups and so on.

[36] Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts,* 2010
[37] Cornwall, C. 2010 'Introductory overview - buzzwords and fuzzword, deconstructing development discourse' in Cornwall and Eade, D (eds.) 2010 *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords.* London: Practical Action Publishing, 1-19
[38] Chevron 2008. *Bibiyana Gas Field, First Anniversary Report,* 11
[39] Prno, Jason, and D. Scott Slocombe. "Exploring the origins of 'social license to operate'in the mining sector: Perspectives from governance and sustainability theories." *Resources Policy* 37.3 (2012): 346-357.

Stipends were awarded to promising students at the local school and two clinics built, whilst housing materials, sanitary latrines and stoves were distributed to the poorest households. Recipients for the assistance were chosen by the NGO in conjunction with 'Village Development Organisations' (VDOs). These comprised of members of the local elite, who often also worked as contractors for the company, providing labourers. Indeed, Chevron official had very little direct contact with the people its programmes were aimed at. The rare occasions when they were encountered were largely during ritualised 'handing over' ceremonies, in which officials –often expatriate British or Americans - would, with much fan-fare, hand over the donations, part of the performative work of development projects, which as David Mosse has observed, are largely focussed upon the production of success.[40] Unlike the handing over of cash or other forms of help to 'our own poor', these ceremonies involve the handing over of development largess either to intermediaries, or unknown recipients. For example, when told that the children who were being awarded stipends for schools were in fact from wealthier Londoni families, a top official was surprised, then added: "I thought they didn't look very poor!"

Crucially the personalised ties of charity and dependency are seen as morally suspicious rather than a route to piety. Indeed, much of the assistance comes with a caveat: recipients are to contribute to the upkeep or costs of the goods or services. This chimes with the discursive trope of 'sustainability', which all Chevron officials were keen to stress. As the CEO at the time told me: "Give a man a fishing rod..."[41]. After all, he continued, in a statement which in my view showed total ignorance of the local politics of charity, relying instead on a romanticised vision of independent, feisty villagers, struggling in the face of adversities which Chevron could help alleviate: "These are a proud, self reliant people..."

Here, by constructing the company as compassionate yet non-patronising, drawing upon popular development discourse, Chevron manages to keep some unpleasant realities of the on-going protests against the gas field at bay, posing as a morally pure and ethical business whose good works address the problems faced by the local population by providing a range of services. In the case of the stoves a Bangladeshi NGO worker explained that when it appeared that people were not caring for them properly, they were 'sold' to recipients at a cost of two hundred taka (production costs were eight hundred taka), in order to instil a sense of ownership[42]. In terms of development discourse, such initiatives encourage responsibility and sustainability; ultimately the relationship between donor and recipient is to be cut off. By being the intermediaries between Chevron's largess and its recipients, it is the NGO fieldworkers who have relationships with poorer people within the villages and who receive the most flak for failing to give enough, or being too dictatorial about how gifts should be used: for example, we heard frequent complaints that so and so from the NGO hadn't allowed so and so from Garibgram to join the savings group. Meanwhile, Chevron's community liaison officers were rarely seen around the place.

Other gifts came with similar conditions, again, aimed at producing a sense of ownership. Two 'Smiling Sun' medical clinics were built, run by the NGO SSKS, and partly funded by the donations of Londonis. These provide diagnostic services but not medicine, with a further programme of outreach health workers, and an ambulance which could take patients to the nearest hospital in Sylhet, though at a cost. As mentioned earlier, however, money for buying medicine is one of the main things that poorer people request from their patrons, as the example of Lacky's visit to Amma shows. Our research in 2008-11 indicated that the poorest households in the area did not use these services since in their view there was little point in having a diagnosis if they could not afford the prescribed medicines and, if in dire need, the fare of a CNG[43] was lower than that of the

[40] Mosse, D. 2005 *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. Pluto Press, London.
[41] For a wider discussion of the centrality of this phrase to development, see Ferguson, J. (2015). *Give a man a fish: reflections on the new politics of distribution*. Duke University Press.
[42] Personal communication from FIVDB field officer
[43] Scooter rickshaw, run on natural gas

ambulance. Whilst not actually building a school, the company has provided support for four high schools in the area, via the funding of teachers and teaching materials, the distribution of school uniforms and providing several hundred scholarships for pupils each year[44].

Whilst some people told us they appreciated these programmes others complained that the costs were too high. As one man put it:

Chevron has established a community hospital but we don't benefit from it. What's the point if all the expenses are born by us? First you have to pay 40 taka to register, then you have to pay twenty taka for every visit. None of the medicine is free. Once I used the ambulance, but to get to Sylhet it cost one thousand taka.

To sum up, the main aim of Chevron's philanthropic efforts in Bibiyana has been to promote the image of the company as morally irreproachable in order to further its 'reputation', both nationally and internationally. To do this, two important elements must be present: engagement in morally 'pure' philanthropic action based upon an (unachievable) ideal of equality rather than inequality between donor and receiver and resting upon the notion of 'sustainability', and the idea, strongly promoted by the company, of 'partnership'.[45] Yet as Fassin reminds us, however much such programmes insist upon compassion and solidarity, inequality inevitably remains. After all, Chevron decide which programmes to fund, and whilst refusing in some contexts to become a local patron, at other times are lured by the performative production of project success to enact precisely that role. Consider, for example, the following:

Buffie Wilson, wife of Chevron Bangladesh President Steve Wilson recently made a visit to the village of Karimpur, located next to the Bibiyana Gas Field in Habiganj. Her visit heralded a brand new beginning for the families of Champa Begum and Jotsna Dev. Both women lost their homes during the devastating flood of 2007 and in standing by the community, Chevron gave them the chance to restart their lives afresh by rebuilding their homesteads. Their homes were officially presented to the proud new owners in a simple, heart-warming ceremony and Ms Wilson was accorded a rousing reception. Champa Begum and Jotsna Dev finally found a reason to smile after last year's floods wreaked havoc, chaos and devastation in their lives. [46]

In her ethnography of a charitable mission for orphans run by Franciscan nuns and a modernised NGO offering projects aimed at empowerment for children and their carers in Uganda, China Scherz shows how both organisations embody the contradictory ethics of charity, patronage and interdependence on the one hand, and independence, self reliance and sustainability on the other.[47] Whilst the Franciscan mission has no qualms about taking on lost and hopeless cases of suffering children, the NGO is careful to choose only clients who are likely to become empowered. Predictably, whilst the latter garners funding and appreciation from international donors, the former is seen as retrograde and faces a crisis of support. Like other work, Scherz's research points to the contradictory ethics that underlie philanthropic programmes that stress empowerment and self-reliance, whilst severing ties of support between donors and recipients.[48]

We should, however, beware of drawing the lines too clearly between local patronage and inter-dependence on the one hand and global humanitarianism on the other. In the

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[44] *Bibyana Gas Field First Anniversary Report, 2008: 39*
[45] Gardner, Rana. Bashar and Ahmed, 2012; see also Zalik, 2004
[46] Chevron Bangladesh Newsetter, Year Y, Issue 2, July 2008
[47] Scherz, C. 2014. *Having People, Having Heart: Charity, Sustainable Development, and Problems of Dependence in Central Uganda.* Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
[48] Elyachar, J. 2002. 'Empowerment money: the World Bank, non-governmental organizations, and the value of culture in Egypt.' *Public Culture*, 14(3), 493-513, Karim, L. 2011 *Microfinance and its Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh*. Minneapolis, Minn.: U of Minnesota Press, Pattenden, J. 2010 'A neo-liberalism of civil society? Self-help groups and the labouring class poor in rural South India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37(3): 485–512.

final section of this paper I turn to the Bibiyana Foundation, an attempt by Chevron to merge the two, bringing together the impulse of local and transnational philanthropy aimed at the alleviation of the suffering of known supplicants, with the ethics of international humanitarianism, drawing upon compassion for anonymous and unknown populations.

Partnership requested: the Bibiyana Foundation comes to the U.K

In 2010 Chevron's Director of External Affairs, travelled to the U.K to meet members of Bibiyana's transnational community. His purpose was somewhat unusual: to set up a Foundation which utilised the charitable donations of expatriates from Bibiyana for community development activities in the area, rather than the largely individualised contributions, which, as we have seen, can amount to thousands of pounds per person per year. The plan was that Chevron would match these funds: for every hundred or a thousand pounds raised by the *Londonis* the company would contribute an equal amount. This innovative scheme was directly aimed at both core ideals: partnership and sustainability, creating a charitable foundation which eventually would rely only upon the funding of expatriates with a long lasting stake in the development of their 'homeland' communities. For the Director of External Affairs who was pursuing the project the scheme had the potential to meet both of his professed objectives: to further the interests of the company, and to harness the resources of the company to improve the lot of the rural poor in Bangladesh[49]. It thus potentially marked an important transition in transnational relations: from personalised, individual charity from *Londoni* patrons and *deshi* clients, to a more formal systematised philanthropy. The need for donors to gain status and local recognition was acknowledged by the plan: scholarships, community facilities and so on would be named.

Partnership with members of the Bangladeshi diaspora was key to the project. Whilst these partners might be from the actual villages of Bibiyana, the plan was also for a wider set of alliances from civil society groups in the U.K and U.S., in which the donors would have no pre-existing social links with the poor of Bibiyana. Similar projects organised by BRAC have been successful in attracting the enthusiasm of a younger generation of British Bengalis, who often have only limited links with poor relatives in the *desh*.

For many *Londonis* from the various villages in Bibiyana the transition from *shahajo* to formalised donations organised via the NGO that Chevron planned to commission with the work, was however viewed as problematic. During the consultation meetings we attended the vast majority were vociferously opposed. What would be the *point* one man asked; he already gave large amounts of money to people in his village, and was contributing to the building of a mosque in his British neighbourhood; the Fund would be yet another obligation. Another *Londoni*, who had taken steps to raise funds for a hospital with non Bangladeshi members of the Rotary Club explained that whilst it was all very well asking non Bangladeshis to contribute, he couldn't ask his compatriots for charity: not only would he get ensnarled in the complex politics of his community in the U.K in which he would be at risk of rumours of misappropriating the funds, but his request for donations might be misinterpreted as begging; it simply wouldn't be appropriate to ask his neighbours and relatives in Britain for money. Moreover, partnership with Chevron, the presence of which has been so controversial in the area, would bring its own dangers to his reputation. In the end the Director of External Affairs returned to Bangladesh empty handed. He had met with many transnational villagers, but none had agreed to form a partnership with his company. Instead the meetings had largely involved them criticising him for Chevron's presence in the area, damage to the environment and problems involving financial compensation for land.

As the above implies, the politics of charity and philanthropy in Bibiyana (both in the *desh* and transnationally) are complex. The transition from charity to philanthropy is not

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[49] Interview notes, 2010

simple, for each form of giving is embedded in a significantly different moral order involving a different relationship between giver and receiver and a different understanding of suffering and its alleviation. This is not to say that individuals are unable to engage in both forms of donation. Rather, not only are transnational villagers already committed to a range of personalised obligations in the *desh*, from building a village mosque to paying for the education of poor clients, in which a move to impersonal donations doesn't make much sense, but the work of fund-raising, a practice that is seen in Britain as morally 'good', might be interpreted differently within the transnational community, where requesting money both puts one in danger of accusations of corruption / malpractice, plus the threat of being in the role of low status receiver rather than high status giver. This danger is exacerbated by the involvement of Chevron, which is viewed within Bibiyana and transnational communities in the UK with ambivalence and suspicion.

The partnership that the Fund needed if it was to be successful, at both a practical level and in terms of how it would be positioned within Chevron's narratives of successful community engagement (as another example of uncontroversial and mutually beneficial connectedness to satisfied locals) was thus harder to achieve than the programme's creators had originally imagined. Indeed, from the perspective of the British villagers we met, Chevron's needs seemed greater than theirs. They already had excellent relations with their home villages; many had established reputations as community leaders and patrons, whose moral standing was continually reproduced via their generosity to their 'own poor'. They did not need 'partnership' with Chevron in the funding of community development programmes. What they required was accountability over environmental issues, appropriate grievance procedures and dialogue.

Conclusion

If Chevron's philanthropy can be traced to the humanitarian and development discourses of Western modernity, and transnational charity to Islamic edicts of duty and redistribution it would be incorrect to set up a simple cleavage between 'traditional', localised/ transnational charity and 'modern' globalised philanthropy. Though arising from different moral economies and theological roots, both 'systems' (for want of a better term) result from economic change, globalisation and (un)development. Rather than transnational charity being in some way traditional or pre-modern, it exists in symbiosis with the global capitalism and high modernity that have produced Chevron's philanthropic ambitions. As Chevron's executives tell tales of the good works created by their programmes of 'community engagement' and sustainable development at international conferences via power-point slides, landless people in Bibiyana make claims for charity based on idioms of suffering and dispossession: both are produced by the same global conditions and histories yet rooted in contrasting moral and theological orders.

Erica Bornstein has suggested that within the Indian Hindu context philanthropy is the systematisation of impulsive and emotive charity, arising with capitalism and modernity.[50] Amongst Muslims in Bangladesh, however, the evolutionary schema implied by this – increasing regulation of charitable organisations by the state as the result of capitalist development – is less clear, for giving has been regulated and organised by third parties for centuries via zakat and other forms of 'financial worship'.[51] In analysing the relationship between moralities of giving, the politics of suffering to which they adhere, and economic change we thus cannot assume a straightforward, Weberian transition into rational or utilitarian systems. As Bornstein concludes, both impulsive charity and systematised charity can co-exist.[52] Indeed, localised ideologies, forged by on-going poverty as well as on-going transnational relationships between places, both products of

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[50] Bornstein, 'The impulse of philanthropy'. 2009, p. 629
[51] Benthall, 1999
[52] Bornstein, 'The impulse of philanthropy'. 2009

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contemporary global capitalism and modernity, push in the opposite direction to the post-Christian humanitarian project of relieving the suffering of anonymous masses.