

Book Review: Revealing Indian Philanthropy

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On reading “Revealing Indian Philanthropy”, Francesco Obino asks whether domestic philanthropy can support equitable and sustainable development in India.

The growing potential of India’s domestic philanthropy inspires hope. The number of Indian millionaires (in US\$) is estimated to reach a [staggering 242,000 by 2017, up from 153,000 in 2012](#). India’s middle class is also expected to occupy between [two-fifths](#) and [two-thirds](#) of India’s demographic charts by 2025—between 500 million and one billion people. For both India’s new elites ([who refer to themselves as middle class](#)) and its middle class (that longs to partake of the elite’s lifestyle), ‘giving’ has a central role in claims to social status. Moreover, a recent amendment in the Indian Companies’ Bill set at a minimum of 2 per cent of net profits the legal corporate social responsibility (CSR) target for India’s large businesses, pooling together an additional US\$1 billion to US\$2 billion a year.

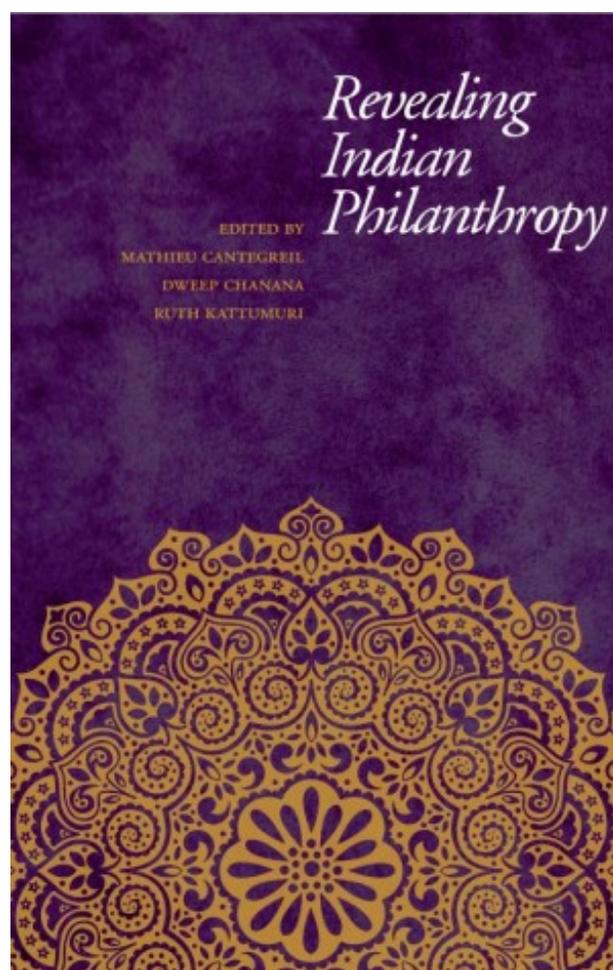
With a pyramid of income distribution increasingly similar to Northern countries and rapid economic growth, in other words, India’s domestic philanthropists could grow bigger – at least in absolute numbers – than the population of Europe and the United States put together, and that too in less than two decades. In sum, Indian citizens and businesses have the real potential of becoming India’s major development donor.

If hopes are legitimately high, however, caution must be of the essence. A better understanding of how much money will be available and how funds will be used is essential if philanthropy, [as some argue](#), is to emerge as an alternative approach to India’s development. If the sudden growth of private giving in India is much too recent to infer long-term trends, questions remain around whether, and how, domestic philanthropy can actually contribute to tackling India’s development challenges.

In light of this premise, the [recent launch](#) by UBS and LSE’s India Observatory of “Revealing Indian Philanthropy”, a book edited by Mathieu Cantegreil, Dweep Chanana, and Ruth Kattumuri, is very timely.

Alternating the personal reflections of eminent Indian philanthropists – old and new – with short narratives about the emergence, focus and direction of the sector, the editors weave a potted history of philanthropy in India. The booklet succeeds in shedding light, particularly for a non-Indian audience, on the diversity of Indian philanthropy, both in terms of motivations and approaches, as well as on the role of the Indian diaspora. The reader will find many references to Indian philanthropy’s deep historical roots, cutting across social, geographical, political and religious lines.

Underlying the booklet is a focus on the potential of what model US philanthropists Carnegie and Rockefeller referred to in the late 1800s as ‘scientific philanthropy’, that is the creation of social-purpose trusts and foundations by individuals with large fortunes. The editors identify some of the large families and individuals whose giving has contributed to the ‘making of modern India’ – the Tatas, Reddys, Birlas, Premjis etc. – as well as [a growing new generation of philanthropists](#). The picture that emerges is one of an expanding number of India’s rich that are eager



to put part of their fortunes to work for the country's development by building schools, higher education and research institutions, housing, and improved food distribution programmes.

While the book celebrates convincingly India's philanthropic tradition, however, it does not grapple enough with the most urgent question: how to make philanthropy work for development that is equitable and sustainable?

In her ethnography of philanthropy in New Delhi (2009), anthropologist Erica Bornstein contrasts Jacques Derrida's idea of 'pure gift' – that which is unbound from any obligation, right or even relationship between the giver and the recipient – with Marcel Mauss' idea that 'gifts' always involve exchange and reciprocity; that is, they are part and parcel of a social, economic and political relationship. Bornstein argues that giving in India must be understood through the tension between the impulse to give in an unaccountable way – which she associates with the Hindu practice of giving to religious institutions, or *daan* – and the desire to promote social welfare in both a systemic and systematic way, by paying attention to considerations of justice and impact. Bornstein associates the latter with the rights-based constitutional framework and with activists' attempts to address the root causes of poverty and the entrenched ways of the socio-political and economic systems.

The idea of 'scientific philanthropy' sits rather uncomfortably between these two extremes. However well executed and planned, philanthropy is a personal event and often – as banks openly market it – a personalised investment. While some of the contributors have a clear vision of philanthropy as an add-on to, rather than a replacement of, other development actors, others fall in the trap of presenting private philanthropy in sharp contrast to the flawed efforts of the state and the less-than-transparent NGO sector. Most of the first-hand accounts in the book fail to frame poverty and development as inherently political issues requiring long-term engagement and often painstakingly slow progress; they also rarely start with the premise that its targets are social and political actors with a voice of their own. Philanthropists are reluctant to consider that they are as much a part of both the problem and of the solution as the people they strive to help.

Much like middle-class donors' propensity towards charity as a mindset rather than right-based frameworks, the lack of coordination with other development actors and broader development debates can severely limit philanthropy's role in addressing India's systemic inequality and poverty. So too can a focus (geographical as much as thematic) inevitably dependent on the personal inclinations of individual philanthropists.

There is not much new in saying that wealth and deprivation coexist in India to a degree and scale that is unique. What might be new, however, is the claim that the expanding philanthropic culture among India's wealthy will be increasingly instrumental to address India's development challenges. India's potential as a philanthropic market, especially in the face of the widening development challenges the country faces despite rapid GDP growth, needs urgent attention. "Revealing Indian Philanthropy" will help introduce the subject of philanthropy in the larger debate on India's development and its catalysts, but the debate must go beyond the celebration of what is already being done.

[Click here](#) to download "Revealing Indian Philanthropy" for free.

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