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Between Doing Good and Doing Right:

Understanding the Ethical Presumptions and
Implications of Strategic Philanthropy in India

September, 2022

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the many sites, perceptions, and articulations of ethics in the discourse and practice of strategic philanthropy in India. Conceptualised as an exploratory inquiry, the research gleans perceptions of ethics from the practitioner narratives and prevailing communication trends of nine philanthropic foundations operating in India. It draws insights from unstructured interviews with the representatives of the foundations as practitioners of philanthropy, along with an analysis of digital content from the foundations. The research identifies four principle conceptual sites that delimit and determine the ethical possibilities in philanthropic practice: (a) a rearticulation of the telos of philanthropy and its risk-taking propensity; (b) the business and management turn in philanthropy; (c) architecture(s) of measurement and definitions of philanthropic effectiveness; (d) articulations of alterity and the locus of the philanthropic Other. The ethical presumptions and implications of strategic philanthropy, the research argues, are situated in perceptions of its telos, principles, and methods. It emphasises the need for further inquiry and an analytical shift in the academic discourse on strategic philanthropy that centres questions of ethical responsibility.

Amplifying practitioner perspectives that affirm the need for a radical reflexivity and deeper critique of the philanthropic enterprise, the research calls for a recognition of philanthropic actors as ethical agents and every philanthropic act—as one practitioner emphasised—as inevitably also an ‘ethical choice’.

Keywords: Strategic Philanthropy, Philanthrocapitalism, Charity, Philanthropic Foundations, Ethics, Responsibility, Reflexivity.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy or Ashoka University.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“... morality must precede philanthropy. Before we can do good we must do right.”

—Huntington, 1892

There has been growing academic interest in the thought and practice of philanthropy in India and in the possibilities and opportunities it presents for our times. The many destinies of our present are now presumed to be inextricably interlinked with the emerging philanthropic ethos—its principles, methods, and telos. And yet, there is remarkably little that we have sought to know and learn of the many moralities that it has afforded or of those that it has vanquished.

Philanthropy in India has undergone considerable transformations in the recent past. Amidst the growth and diversification in charitable giving—both in its religious or communitarian inspirations and more secular forms—India has also witnessed the emergence and institutionalisation of a more professionalised, market-led, and strategic philanthropy. The contemporary pre-eminence of the latter has been commonly regarded as indicative of a definite maturing of Indian philanthropy, with its proponents celebrating its scale, boldness, and catalytic impact. While there has been a growing recognition of the limits of this ‘new’ model of giving globally—primarily among practitioners and scholars in the West—there has been little critical inquiry into its constitution in the Indian context.

This study seeks to analyse the ethical presumptions and implications of strategic philanthropy in the Indian contemporary. It centres practitioner perspectives in understanding the ethical premises of philanthropic decision-making and attempts to situate the everydayness of philanthropic practice in textual and discursive narratives. Premised on interviews with senior practitioners in nine philanthropic foundations and an analysis of communication trends in organisational messaging, the research straddles the dialectic of practice and discourse, structure and biography.

The following section presents an overview of select literature on the shifts in philanthropic imagination, and the discursive pre-eminence of strategic philanthropy in India and the world. The subsequent section on Research Methodology recounts the methodological premises of the study including: (a) the review of literature; (b) the sampling process and selection criteria for identifying philanthropic foundations and practitioner-interviewees; and (c) coding and analysis of digital content to map communication trends from philanthropic organisations. This section also details the conceptualisation and use of interviews as a site for understanding practitioner perspectives on ethics and the negotiations of ethical responsibility in everyday practices of giving. The findings of the study are discussed subsequently.

The concluding note recalls insights from the study to situate ethics in perceptions of the telos, scope, principles, and methods of philanthropy, and as delimited by its discursive and structural constitution. It also points to possible opportunities for furthering the conceptual understanding of and research enquiries into the ethics of

philanthropy. In that, it calls for an analytical and discursive shift for the recognition of the political and ethical implications of philanthropic thought and practice—from 'doing good' to also 'doing right' (Huntington, *ibid*).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The practice of philanthropy—both in India and the world—has attracted growing academic attention. There is also significant research, now emerging from within the non-profit and development sector, that enquires into the scale and course of philanthropic giving. This literature affirms both the continuity and growth in charitable or more traditional forms of giving, and a definite turn to more professionalised and formalised philanthropy.²

For instance, the India Philanthropy Report 2022, suggests that retail domestic contributions constitute 25–30 per cent of the ‘total private domestic giving’ in India (Sheth et al., 2022). The study predicts that these contributions—whether formal or informal—are expected to grow at 10 per cent per year until 2026. A recent pan-India study by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, Ashoka University, on household giving reports that 87 per cent of the surveyed households in India had made some form of charitable donations through 2020–21, even as the pandemic continued to ravage lives and livelihoods (Shresth and Verma, 2022). This continuity and growth in charitable contributions notwithstanding, a growing body of research also attests to the emergent formalisation of giving and the discursive pre-eminence of ‘strategic giving’ in the Indian and global philanthropic landscape. Katz, for instance, argues that there has been ‘something of a sea change’ (2005, 123) in ways of thinking about, articulating, and organising philanthropy. Srivastava and Oh also recognise that ‘different models of giving involving a business or entrepreneurial orientation have emerged in the contemporary context’ (2010, 462). Morvaridi maps the emergence of ‘new structures’ of ‘capitalist philanthropy’ that have come to predominate the global philanthropic landscape over the last two decades, ‘imbuing capitalist business principles into the non-profit sector’ (2012, 1191).

In the Indian context, the existing literature has emphasised the inextricable interlinkages between the shifts in the conception and models of philanthropy and wider socio-economic and political transitions in modern Indian history.³ While recognising the distinctiveness and localisation of philanthropy in India, research also affirms a resonance of the global turn to ‘strategic’ and more formal and institutionalised models of philanthropic giving. India has witnessed the rise of formalised institutional giving through large foundations that have adopted new ways of organising philanthropy, often through a ‘market-led’ model. Cantegreil and colleagues, for instance, recognise ‘a new dynamism and professionalism’ in the Indian non-profit sector, driven by changing frameworks of philanthropy and the emergence of ‘a wave of institutions, corporate in spirit but social in mission’ (2013, 45). For Sidel, there is now manifest a ‘capital- and values-driven expansion and change of direction’ (2001, 41) in the philanthropic landscape of India. Kalra also

²Literature on ‘giving’ commonly makes a conceptual distinction between ‘charity’ and ‘philanthropy’ as two different modes of giving. Thelin and Trollinger make a distinction between the two concepts premised on the latter’s rational, institutional and instrumental constitution. Charity, they argue, is fundamentally rooted in tradition or is realised as an affective response in the form of ‘direct acts of compassion and service to others’ (2014, 37). Drawing from a Weberian schema, Bornstein (2009) also distinguishes philanthropy as ‘rationalized charity’ (p. 623) that was ‘instrumentally’ rational. For Bornstein, however, contemporary giving in India often transcends and obfuscates this neat dualism.

³For an historical account of the shifts in the conception and organisation of philanthropy in India, see Godfrey et. al., 2016. For comprehensive analyses of the historical transformations in the definition and meaning of philanthropy in the West, see Osella, 2018; Kumar, 2018; Sulek, 2009; Cunningham, 2016; and White, 2018.

recognises the market-led and business lexicon of the new philanthropic turn in India and its desire to 'bring the best management practices from the corporate world into the social space' (2013, 60).

Despite this marked interest in the emergence of new ways of thinking about and doing philanthropy in India and the world, there seems to be no singular conception or definition of these models. Efforts to describe or define this new and 'strategic' turn in philanthropy recognise a multiplicity of conceptual articulations and definitional specifications. For instance, while Katz argues that it is not easy 'to find a sentence-long definition of this kind of strategic philanthropy', for him, it 'seems to be recognized by its descriptive characteristics: one knows strategic philanthropy is taking place when certain things are being done in a certain way' (2005, 124). Haydon and colleagues identify a 'lexical potpourri' (2021, 1) of synonymic variants that refer to diverse aspects and connotations of this new philanthropy as deployed by various scholars, including 'strategic' philanthropy, 'philanthrocapitalism', 'catalytic' philanthropy, 'creative' philanthropy, 'entrepreneurial' philanthropy, and 'venture' philanthropy (Haydon et al. 2021, 1). Other scholars also include 'impact investing', 'market-based' philanthropy, 'effective' philanthropy, and 'technocratic' philanthropy in this inventory (see for instance, Katz 2005. See also Harvey et al. 2021; and Conolly 2011).

What remains unambiguous, however, is an emergent consensus on archetypical models that serve to imagine and delimit the scope and concept of 'strategic' giving.⁴ The 'strategic' turn in philanthropy for Brest, for instance, remains 'synonymous with outcome-oriented, result-oriented, and effective philanthropy' (27 April 2015, par. 2). Authors commonly regard the application of a business mindset, or of the tools and techniques of business particularly. For Bishop and Green, 'philanthrocapitalism' represents a 'new way of doing philanthropy', one 'which mirrors the way that business is done in the for-profit capitalist world' (cited in Mcgoey 2012, 187). Premised on their comprehensive review of literature on philanthrocapitalism and its conceptual variants, Haydon and colleagues broaden this understanding, making a fundamental conceptual shift from 'business' methods to the logic of markets and define 'philanthrocapitalism' as 'the integration of market motifs, motives and methods with philanthropy, especially by HNWI⁵s and their institutions' (2021, 15). Scholars also extend their analyses to the functional implications of this business orientation, recognising its exhortation for philanthropic actors to become 'increasingly directive, controlling, metric focused' (Jenkins 2011, 1). The pursuit of measurement,⁶ performance assessments, and data-driven decision-making, then, is also regarded as a fundamental correlate of the business orientation of the new philanthropy—a condition that, its proponents argue, makes for its presumed efficiency and effectiveness.⁷

⁴For a comprehensive survey of the definitions and descriptions of strategic philanthropy, see Katz, 2014. See also Edwards 2008 and Jenkins 2011.

⁵High-net-worth individuals.

⁶For a more detailed discussion of the regime of performance indicators, measurements and data in determining philanthropic practice, see Raval 2014. See also Katz 2005; Srivastava and Oh 2010 and Schambra 2013.

⁷Srivastava and Oh (2010) identify the two claims of 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' as arguments popularly posited for the advantages of this new philanthropy.

Amidst the calls for making philanthropy more strategic, however, there has also been a growing recognition of the limits of this model of giving. Recognising the global institutionalisation of 'strategic' philanthropy and its growing influence in directing political priorities, critics have raised concerns about its methods and aims, and failures in addressing enduring global challenges. Critical literature has questioned the newness,⁸ efficiency, and effectiveness of this model of giving, affirming its role in sustaining and furthering systemic inequity and injustice.⁹

Giridharadas, for instance, argues that the 'market world' logic of the new philanthropy urges a fundamental reductionism, recasting 'the world as an engineering problem' (2019, 34). It sustains for him an enduring paradox where 'the biggest beneficiaries of the status quo ... play a leading role in the status quo's reform' (2019, 30). Ramdas identifies two contradictions in the constitution and telos of strategic philanthropy: its own locus in growing global inequities and its inevitable adherence to a monolithic, singular model of neo-liberal development (2011). Edwards' (2008) comprehensive work draws attention to the epistemic and normative limits of 'philanthrocapitalism'. For Edwards, the hubris and hegemony of this new philanthropy obfuscates both its fundamental incapacity to achieve meaningful social transformation and its subversion and tampering of democratic accountability.

Implicit in the many critical perspectives on strategic philanthropy is a fundamental recognition of an obstinate and enduring ethical paucity. While the latter is often attributed to the inevitable instrumentalism of its 'business mindset' or to the presumed investment of strategic philanthropy in maintaining status-quo, rigorous research and inquiry into its ethical presumptions and implications has been sparse.

As an established domain of study in the humanities and social sciences, considerable research on philanthropy has drawn from the intellectual traditions of and theorisation on ethics and morality to understand charity and philanthropy.¹⁰ However, there has been little research on the question of ethics in strategic philanthropy specifically, and scholars have largely tended to pursue enquiries primarily through the lens of political economy or psycho-social conditions of personal motivations and factors that determine giving.¹¹ The application of frameworks of ethical enquiry to the study of strategic philanthropy, particularly in India, has been largely secondary and marginal. Ethical perspectives on Indian philanthropy for instance, have mostly been situated in historical comparisons or inquiries into

⁸See Mcgoey 2012 and Klopp 2015.

⁹This study also recognises the extensive body of conceptual and critical literature on philanthropic foundations, primarily as actors in international development and on the political economy of institutional giving. See Anheier and Leat 2013. See also, Srivastava and Oh 2010 and Jensen 2022.

¹⁰Martin (1994) Woodruff (2018), Illingworth and colleagues (2011), and White (2018) present a comprehensive survey of ethical concerns and perspectives in philanthropy. See also Thelin and Trollinger 2014. Singer's work makes important contributions to the study of ethics in philanthropy, particularly in its application of utilitarian perspectives on ethics to an analysis of the normative presumption and practice of contemporary philanthropy. See Wolfe 2015 or Merrill 2013. While recognising the wider and substantive theorisation on ethics in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in the philosophical traditions, this research abstains from espousing an a priori theory or analytical schema for defining the 'ethical' for the purpose of this study.

¹¹A 2021 study by Harvey and colleagues on the ethics of entrepreneurial philanthropy remains significant amongst such enquiries, but is limited in its focus on individual philanthropists. Giacomini and Jones' recent work is an important enquiry into 'the ethics and drivers of philanthropic foundations in emerging markets'. It marks a significant contribution to the study of the ethical foundations of philanthropic foundations outside of 'developed countries' (2021).

Indic conceptions of giving and in a language of religiosity or tradition (Copeman 2011; Eck 2013; Bornstein 2009; Agarwal 2010); in colonial governmentality and the precedents of contemporary institutional philanthropy (Haynes, 1987); or in individual- or business-centred profiling (Kumar 2018; Sarukkai, 2020).¹²

Premised on this diverse and significant body of work, this study attempts to address the enduring gaps in research and literature on the ethical presumptions and implications of strategic philanthropy in India. It remains situated at the intersection(s) of scholarship on the concept and scope of strategic philanthropy, research into the motivations and factors determining philanthropic giving, and the political economy of philanthropy. It shifts analytical focus from structure and organisation to practitioners as philanthropic actors with moral and ethical agency and responsibility. Departing from existing enquiries into strategic philanthropy, it serves as an important starting point to understand practitioner perspectives on ethics. It posits practice as a locus of critique, disrupting the existing critical discourse on strategic philanthropy and its ethical implications.

¹² Sarukkai's (2020) recent work, while limited in its analytical focus on the philanthropy of J.R.D. Tata, makes important conceptual contributions to the academic discourse on ethics in philanthropy. Sundar's (2021) recent work raises important questions on the ethical responsibility of philanthropists. While limited in its analytical scope, Sundar's perspective has served as a starting point for this research and its interest in understanding ethical presumptions and implications of contemporary philanthropy in India.

3. METHODOLOGY

Conceptualised as an exploratory enquiry into the sites, perceptions, and articulations of ethics in the discourse of strategic philanthropy in India, this paper is premised on unstructured interviews and the analysis of digital content from nine philanthropic foundations. A critical review of select literature informs its theoretical and conceptual frameworks, substantiating insights from primary data.

3.1. Survey of Literature: Mapping Historical and Critical Perspectives on Strategic Philanthropy

A preliminary review of literature was conducted to understand the scope of and emergent concerns in academic and industry-led research on strategic philanthropy in both India and the world. This initial survey of literature informed the conceptualisation of the study, including its theoretical presumptions and methodological design. The literature reviewed included academic and peer-reviewed articles and books; grey literature including industry reports and organisational communication from sample philanthropic foundations; and opinion pieces and news articles in print and digital media. Peer-reviewed research and academic literature was sourced primarily through popular electronic databases and sector-focused journals.¹³

The literature search was directed by keywords and terms drawn from exploratory readings on philanthropy, including strategic philanthropy and its synonymic and connotative alternatives.¹⁴ Further, bibliographic mining and forward citation searching enabled the sourcing of additional literature to broaden the scope of sources reviewed and diversify disciplinary and geographic representation.

3.2. Sampling

A mixed approach of opportunity and purposive sampling was used to identify a preliminary sample of 10 philanthropic foundations operating in India.

Given the discursive interest of the study, an initial universe of philanthropic actors was drawn premised on the researcher's appraisal of their contemporary influence—as constitutive of and constituted by the discourse of philanthropy in the country. This involved a survey of select sector/industry reports to rank foundations in terms of their scale of giving.¹⁵ Representation at key industry events and public platforms was also considered; this was based on a survey of select events.¹⁶ This research yielded a

¹³Representative journals and databases include *JSTOR*, *EBSCO*, *ScienceDirect*, *SpringerLink*, *Sage Journals Online*, *Taylor & Francis*, *Wiley Online Library*, *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, among others.

¹⁴'Strategic Philanthropy', 'Strategic Giving', 'Philanthrocapitalism', 'Impact Investing', 'Entrepreneurial Philanthropy', 'Catalytic Philanthropy', 'Venture Philanthropy', 'Ethics in Philanthropy', 'Morality and Philanthropy', 'Ethics of Giving', 'Philanthropy and Altruism', 'Charity and Philanthropy' were some of the key terms and concepts that were used to identify relevant literature.

¹⁵Reports/rankings surveyed included the *Edelgive-Hurun India Philanthropy List (2020–2022)*, *India Philanthropy Report (2020–2022)*, *Candid India Philanthropy Dashboard (2015–2018)*, *Enabling Philanthropy and Social Impact in India: State of Support Ecosystem Report (2019)*, *Global Philanthropy Report (2018)*, and the *OECD India Private Giving Report (2019)*.

¹⁶Forums/events surveyed included the India Leaders for Social Sector Fundraising Conference (2020, 2022), the Nudge Forum (2020, 2021), Dasra Philanthropy Week (2020–2022), and other dialogues and conferences organised in the last three years by the Asia Venture Philanthropy Network and Arthan.

list of 31 philanthropic foundations prioritised on the basis of their scale of investments and inferred discursive influence in the sector.

Of these, 10 foundations were selected as the research sample through a scoring tool that enabled scores across four indicators: (a) Recognition; (b) Scale of Giving; (c) Discourse Influence; and (d) Researcher's Access.¹⁷ The foundations adopt either an exclusively funding approach or a mix of funding and operational or programmatic models, with a 50 per cent distribution across each type.

Interviewees were subsequently identified from each organisation based on their current role, seniority or leadership levels, and potential involvement in organisational and/or investment strategy, evaluation, grant-design or grant-making roles.¹⁸

3.3. Content Analysis: Understanding the Philanthropic Self

Select content from the digital properties (organisational websites) of the 10 foundations was analysed to (a) understand communication trends and vocabularies that constitute the self-perception of philanthropic foundations; (b) situate the key concerns and themes emerging from academic and popular critiques of strategic philanthropy in the public positioning of and communication from the foundations; and (c) examine the textual production of the discourse of strategic philanthropy and its implicit ethical presumptions.

The content analysed included a total of 60 sources primarily consisting of key webpages and texts available publicly on organisational websites. This content was drawn from website sections relevant to an understanding of the foundation's vision, mission, goals, grant-making priorities, areas of work and/or investment, investment history and strategy, values and principles, ethical policies or codes of conduct, and their thematic variants.¹⁹

The coding for the analysis was done both inductively and deductively, with codes derived from the literature survey and review of the sample digital sources. This mixed method allowed for intertextual learning, while enabling an exploratory enquiry into the discursive frames constituting the self-presentation of philanthropic foundations. The codes as such integrate the subjective conceptual understanding of the researcher with the discursive emphases in the foundations' communication, without the former overriding a recognition of their self-presentation.

An inventory of terms was developed prior to developing a definitional code book including single words, word pairs, and thematic phrases.²⁰ A list of 38 codes was then derived, including 15 parent codes and 23 sub-codes (See Appendix 1) for conceptual analysis, mapping the occurrence of select terms, and the narrative context of usage.

¹⁷Access here pertains to the subjective estimation of the organisation's and/or interviewees' accessibility to the researcher through her personal and professional networks.

¹⁸One foundation declined to participate in the study, specifically to permit interviews with staff members. While the original sample of 10 organisations has thus been used for content analysis, only nine foundations are represented in the interviews conducted.

¹⁹ Quirkos, a content analysis and qualitative research software, was used for subsequent coding and analysis.

²⁰For the complete inventory of terms, see Appendix 1.

Parent codes included broader thematic and hypernymic concepts, with particular references and terms incorporated as sub-codes.²¹



Figure 1: Word cloud representation of concept frequency

3.4. Interviews: Understanding Ethics at the Intersections of Practice and Discourse

3.4.1. Interview Design

Senior representatives from nine foundations were interviewed to understand the ethical presumptions and concerns of strategic giving at the intersections of discourse and practice. Conceptualised as informal, semi-structured, and exploratory conversations, the interviews were sought through the researcher's professional networks and through sourcing of interviewee profiles through the research undertaken as part of the sampling process. All interviews were conducted online and recorded. A list of themes²² was drawn up to serve as a guide for the interviews, keeping with their conversational and dialogic imperative. This guide incorporated thematics that addressed the more fundamental criticisms of strategic philanthropy emerging from the review of literature, while opening spaces for conversations on their praxeological import.

²¹For instance, the parent code of 'Humility' incorporates sub-codes relating to the sites and mechanisms for beneficiary feedback, the significance of beneficiary or partner voices in designing and evaluating grants and investments, references to local expertise, partner knowledge, and agency, and references to trust and trust-based giving

²²For the list of themes or complete interview guide, see Appendix 3.

3.4.2. Interview as Dialogue and Reflexive Learning

The interview is conceptualised as a critical locale for situating a foundation's self-narratives and the academic critiques of strategic philanthropy in its practice. As a site for the enunciation of philanthropic everydayness, the interview provides an opportunity to disrupt the neatness of discourse. Practitioner-perspectives straddle the personal and institutional,²³ allowing for an understanding of practice as it intersects the personal, institutional, and discursive-structural in the organisation of giving. In its unstructured and narrative form, the interview becomes both survey and life-history.²⁴

It is the 'moral biography'²⁵ of the philanthropic self—of the philanthropic institution and the interviewee as a discursive agent and practitioner—that the interview takes as its principal subject. As a biography, it contains both the facticity of philanthropy and its institutional and individual possibilities. As such, it reconstitutes strategic philanthropy in terms of 'capacity and moral compass', including 'the constraints, resources, knowledge, feelings, and values' (Schervish 2005, 3) that determine perception and practice.

Unsettling a scientific methodological dualism, the interview is also reimagined as a reflexive stance.²⁶ As such, the interview makes possible a recognition of the researcher's own positionality as a fundraising professional in the non-profit sector in India and of the act of research as fundamentally delimited by the inevitable hierarchies that accrue. It makes possible a critical self-contestation, an interrogation of the researcher's biases and prejudices, effecting a transformation of both the researcher and her research presumptions in its dialogic encounter.

²³The interview guide was designed to enable the interviewee to deploy her own perceptions, opinions, and subjective voice transcending institutional particularity, or shift unfettered to represent the foundation's stance and practices. Narrativisation, as such, is regarded as being both mimetic and transcendent, and dialogic itself in its constitution.

²⁴For a recent study using the life-history interviewing approach in philanthropic research, see Harvey et al 2020.

²⁵I draw here on Schervish's (2005) use of the term 'moral biography' in his study of elite philanthropy. Schervish defines 'moral biography' as 'the confluence of capacity and character' that determines philanthropic giving by wealth-holders (p. 2). While Schervish deploys this conceptual category to understand individual giving, this study uses the analytical category to understand philanthropic giving by institutions—specifically, philanthropic foundations. The analytical category of 'moral biography' allows for the reconstituting and annulling of the dichotomies of structure–agency, freedom–constraint, institution–individual to understand the intersections of discourse and practice.

²⁶For an elucidation of the methodological pertinence of reflexivity, see Gouldner 1970. For a comprehensive review of the many sociological imaginings of reflexivity, see Giddens 1990, 1991; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Clifford and Marcus 1990; Bourdieu 2004; and Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this research interrupt the existing critiques of strategic philanthropy, urging a praxeological engagement with the everydayness of philanthropic practices and their narrativisation. They situate the predominantly academic literature in everyday articulations and perceptions of ethical responsibility that constitute, and are inevitably constituted by, the discursive limits of strategic philanthropy in India today.

The themes presented later in the paper are premised on both the preliminary review of literature and the concerns and discursive emphases emergent in the organisational communication and interviewee narratives. They cautiously straddle the subject-position and analytical lens of the researcher, while allowing for a 'grounded' understanding²⁷ of the many sites and contestations that define and circumscribe the tenor of ethics in the discourse of strategic giving.

4.1. Risk, Responsibility, and a Radical Conservatism: Perspectives on the Role and Scope of Philanthropy

Perceptions of the role and scope of philanthropic giving communicate shifts and continuities in the ontological and epistemic presumptions of the philanthropic act—and, thereby, in the articulations of purpose, promise, alterity, and responsibility.

An analysis of key concepts and terms²⁸ relating to the purpose and ambitions of giving, for instance, reflects a recognition of the role of philanthropy in contributing to systemic and transformational change: the pursuit of audacious and aspirational goals that can create impact at scale. Foundations continue to communicate their vision and aspired impact in terms of 'catalytic' and 'disruptive' changes that seek to transform systems wholesale or the lives and life-chances²⁹ of a significantly large proportion of people: 'The problems we try to solve are big and complicated'; 'all our work is aimed at creating large scale impact either directly or indirectly ... we believe that in a large, complex and diverse country like India, small-scale, intense work in narrow pockets is unlikely to create any significant impact on the system.'³⁰

²⁷The use of the term 'grounded' here alludes to a methodological concern with the enduring practice–theory disjuncture in the social sciences and its implications, particularly for academic studies of the non-profit sector (see for instance, Katz 1999 and Donmoyer 2009). Alnoor Ebrahim (2004, cited in Donmoyer, 2009) argues for a 'grounded theory' to bridge the identified gap between theorisation or scholastic reflection and applied research or practice.

²⁸See Appendix 1.

²⁹I draw here on Weber's sociological concept of 'life-chances'. For Weber, life-chances relate to the resources and opportunities that an individual has at her disposal to improve her life and life-conditions. While Weber uses 'life-chances' as an analytical term in his analysis of social class, it may find resonances in Sen's 'capability-approach' to poverty and development. See Weber 1978 or Sen 1999.

³⁰Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

And, yet, the everydayness of giving centres a markedly constrained perception of what philanthropy could offer in a remarkably complex contemporary. Philanthropy is regarded as both supplementing and providing an alternative to market- and state-led solutions. While it is the risk-propensity of philanthropy that is perceived as its distinction, interview narratives also demonstrate a recognition of an enduring conservatism. Despite its potential to offer creative and ethical alternatives, strategic philanthropy in India continues to be circumscribed by the limits of the state and the market in its typical rendering. Emphasising the difference between what is and what ought to be, a practitioner affirms a large proportion of the philanthropic enterprise is ‘still doing what state and markets do’.³¹ As philanthropy continues to draw its legitimacy from the state, its risk-propensity, potential radicalism and ability to urge greater accountability from the state and market remain fundamentally compromised. This conservatism is also manifest in discursive emphases that continue to demonstrate both the pre-eminence of market-led and market-oriented investments from philanthropic foundations and a marginal recognition or contestation of the excesses of or deficiencies in market (and state) provisioning.³²

It is the ability to take risks, however, that marks the perceived potential and distinction of philanthropy for most practitioners. Philanthropy is primarily perceived as a mode of giving that ought to provide a platform for experimentation and pilot-testing solutions, with a larger appetite for risk and innovation. That is, unlike the market and the state, philanthropy is regarded as bearing the unique privilege of risk-taking, of testing out new ideas and solutions, and bold, disruptive innovations—hence also of permissible failure.³³ Interview narratives underscore its capacity to address and effectively bridge gaps in state and market incentives and provisioning, and to drive resources and action where the market and state have proved inadequate or failed.

This rendering of philanthropy as an essential enabler of risk-taking and a site for experimentation finds correlation in the epistemic and ontological shifts that constitute its discursive stance. Philanthropy’s risk-taking privilege remains inextricably interlinked with the presumed decentring of responsibility and accountability: the fact that foundations remain ‘insulated from the consequences of risk taking’ (Washatka 2019).³⁴ As such, while it is the voluntary nature and presumed

³¹Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022

³²As a part of the content analysis, 38 references to market-led approaches to giving or market-incentives and opportunities as domains of investments were mapped. However, only seven related to the limits of or gaps in market provisioning, the need for greater accountability from markets, or the role of markets in furthering systemic inequality and injustice(s). For an inventory of coding, see Appendix 1.

³³As one practitioner emphasised, ‘The big gap is in experiments ... the government does not have the privilege to test what works and what does not work. Philanthropy should test out solutions at a small scale, experiment, and then take what works to the government.’ Another practitioner circumscribes the role of philanthropy against the potential scale of impact of the state and the market, asserting that, as compared to their role, ‘philanthropy continues to be minuscule ... but ... the defining feature of philanthropy in the development discourse is that it is the most risk-propense ... which is why we call it catalytic capital’ (Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022)

³⁴For a more detailed discussion on philanthropic foundations, their capacity for risk-taking, and the problem of accountability, see Anheier and Leat 2013 and Reich 2018.

‘private’ ownership of philanthropic capital that may be construed as enabling innovation and disruption—serving, in turn, to bolster state and market capacities—it is its self-directedness and the obfuscation of accountability that remain of concern. As one practitioner emphasised, ‘Unlike venture capital, there is little pressure when it comes to philanthropic capital ... it is upto the philanthropist to lay out ground work as to what he or she thinks is the best use of money and build risk appetite.’ Another practitioner used an eloquent analogy: the relationship between a philanthropic organisation and its grantee/investee, he emphasised, was like that between husband and wife (in the context of a patriarchal rendering of domesticity) where the philanthropic organisation exerted power and made demands without taking responsibility for the consequences of the philanthropic act.

What presents itself, then, bears marked implications for both the heart and the mind (Katz 2005) of philanthropy and its ethical import. While the discourse of strategic philanthropy centres its ability to take risks as its distinctive trait, it does not translate into a recognition of its own responsibility and accountability for its own consequences. As the growing scale of philanthropic capital renders profound agency to the philanthropic self, this presentation of the philanthropic act remains of critical concern. It departs from the very conception of ‘risk’ that ought to presume the centredness of the self in an appraisal of outcomes, an inevitable recognition of and responsibility for its consequences.³⁵

Recognising philanthropy’s own positionality and role in imagining, testing, or institutionalising risk-consequences can offer apertures of possibilities that can secure and further its quintessential promise—to realise a better world through the welfare of all. Thus introversion and reflexive recognition together become a fundamental ethical stance, particularly as the intersections and overlays between the privateness and voluntariness of philanthropy and its public and institutional implications dilate. Interview narratives emphasise this growing influence of philanthropic agency and capital in directing both state and market priorities: that ‘philanthropists have a certain degree of influence and ... can influence public policy to an extent that voters cannot’, or that ‘risk capital can prime market-sectors for acceptance of innovations and disruptive ideas ... creating a market for impact’.³⁶ Practitioners argue that it is critical to recognise the role of philanthropy in entrenching inequality and power disparities and in ‘disrupting the citizen-state contract’. It is also crucial to recognize its receding role in ‘empowering communities to hold the state and market accountable’.³⁷ As philanthropy continues to yield disproportionate power and influence on the state and the market, a recognition of its own responsibility in and for its systemic and profound consequences remains critical.

³⁵Sociological literature on the concept of ‘risk’ as a condition of late modernity, for instance, differentiates it from the traditional notion of ‘hazard or danger’. ‘Risk’ refers to ‘hazards that are actively assessed in relation to the future’ (Giddens, 2002:22). Along with this marked future-orientation, ‘risk’ also presumes a distinctive reflexive orientation that necessitates a ‘subversive, unintended and unforeseen self-questioning’ (Beck 2000, 101). It places the self squarely at the centre of its own assessment, where risk becomes an outcome, foremost, of one’s own intervention. See also Giddens’ concept of ‘manufactured risk’ (Giddens 1991).

³⁶Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022

³⁷Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–August 2022.

4.2. What's Strategic about Strategic Giving? The Calculus of Risk³⁸

Critiques bear little agreement in their conceptual delineation of strategic giving. What is evident, however, is an emergent consensus on the scope of strategic philanthropy across its many synonymic alternatives: conceptual and analytical literature on strategic giving situates its distinction in (a) the pursuit of a clearly defined goal or outcomes; (b) a commitment to address deep-seated and underlying causes rather than symptoms; (c) performance measurement and systematic deployment of data and evidence; and (d) the application of business tools, practices, and mindset to philanthropic giving.³⁹

Not different from conceptual enquiries, there appears to be a marked incertitude across interview narratives about both the pre-eminence, distinctiveness, or definitional specificity of strategic giving and its newness.⁴⁰ Practitioner-perspectives affirm the enduring significance of the 'impulse of charity' that underscores the growing scale of retail giving in India and, in its resilience, disrupts the institutionalisation of strategic philanthropy even within philanthropic foundations: 'There has been no sweeping shift from charity to philanthropy ... the principles that determine giving or core philanthropy continue to be driven by individual leaders or businesses ... there is no big thinking that goes into strategic giving'; 'The impulse of charity is a powerful and pure instinct ... many more Indians give to charity because they cannot give to philanthropy ... I don't see the two pitted against each other. Charity will always exist.'⁴¹

While recognising this contemporaneousness of charity, practitioners regard the emergence and institutionalisation of strategic philanthropy as a necessary correlate of the 'deep economic and political shifts' of the past decades.⁴² Along this continuum, strategic philanthropy is itself regarded as being in flux, necessarily heterogenous, and still emergent. Implicit in this distinction between charity and philanthropy—in the presumed departure from traditional modes of giving—is also a recognition of a marked shift in the intent and telos of giving: conversations allude to a shift from compassion, generosity, and the welfare of others as motivations for traditional philanthropy to an objective assessment of community needs or gaps in state and market provisioning, and of practitioners' own capacities and role as enablers of change.

This decentring of humanism, compassion, and generosity as the foundations of philanthropy is also evidenced by trends in organisational communication. The analysis of digital content from the sample foundations, for instance, presents only 12 references (out of 479) that relate to the universal humanistic values of love, generosity, service, universal welfare or the greater good.

³⁸The 'calculus of risk' here draws from Beck's conceptualisation of the scientific and technocratic regimes of expertise that come to define the 'basic principles underlying industrial production, law, science, opportunities for the public and public policy ... that decide about data, knowledge, proofs, culprits and compensation' (of risks) (Beck 1995, cited in Mythen 2004, 54).

³⁹See Katz 2005. See also Jenkins 2011 and Brest 2015. For a more detailed discussion on the conceptual constitution of 'strategic philanthropy' and its definition(s) in this study, see Section 2, 'Review of Literature'.

⁴⁰See McGoey's critique of philanthrocapitalism (2012). McGoey argues that what is new about the new giving ('philanthrocapitalism') is not the confounding of private gain and public good or the application of business methods to philanthropy, but rather its scale and the salience of self-interest as a prerequisite for altruism.

⁴¹Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

⁴²Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–August 2022.

Incongruous though it may seem, it is also this shift that unsettles what may be regarded as an extant philanthropic paternalism: ‘... earlier, [giving] was very much gratifying to me because I [was] doing charity ... it almost [gave] me a stature because of my charity. Today it is about the beneficiary’, ‘... the starting point of traditional philanthropy is usually that I have so much money, I have the intent and what is the best way to spend that money. Strategic philanthropy works the other way around ... what is the problem and, in that context, what is the role I can play to bring the most value?’⁴³

4.2.1. The Regime of Measurement and Technocratic Bias

At the centre of this reorientation of philanthropy is a marked turn to the pursuit of clear and unambiguously defined outcomes and meticulous measurement to inform giving. This ‘calculus of risk’, now grounded in the regime of scientificity, is presumed to make for the radical distinction of strategic philanthropy. Interview narratives affirm this turn to rigorous measurement, and the role of the data as ‘evidence’ in both the identification of outcomes⁴⁴ and their measurement, as the defining characteristic of strategic philanthropy—one that marks its differentiation from more traditional forms of giving: ‘Outcomes-orientation is the key distinguishing factor for strategic philanthropy ... this is the outcome that we are looking to change ... and this is how I will measure it’; ‘... in strategic philanthropy, one is a lot more intentional about the kind of entity one gives money to based on outcomes one wants to work towards ... and once I make the grants, I would also want to see if the organisation is able to deliver ... that is where the whole measurement and assessment space becomes critical’.⁴⁵

This emphasis on data-driven and evidence-based giving and the significance of rigorous measurement is also evidenced by the analysis of digital sources from the sample foundations. Of the 479 references coded, 67 relate directly to expert knowledge systems, impact evaluation, rigorous assessments, and scientific evidence—the second most frequently occurring theme across all analysed content. Fifteen references relate to terminological and conceptual emphases that prescribe a clear definition of impact and its assessment.⁴⁶

⁴³Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

⁴⁴I want to recall here an implicit yet commonly emerging distinction in practitioner narratives between the what-is and what-should-be of philanthropy. While most practitioners affirm a discursive and aspirational turn to rigorous research and evidence-building in philanthropy, there remains a definite scepticism about the role of this strategic turn in the identification of domains of philanthropic intervention: ‘I think the way philanthropy is actually working... is on areas that each philanthropist or business is passionate about ... it’s not looking at it from the point of leverage or [strategy] ... it is actually within domains you tend to talk about strategy in terms of outputs and outcomes’; ‘... Ideally, the strategy should have played out in identifying the right domains and challenges where state and markets have failed’ (Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022).

⁴⁵Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

⁴⁶Sample references coded include: ‘Robust processes have been put in place at every stage of grant making and grant management to facilitate data driven decision making’; ‘Because we can’t improve what we can’t measure, we help to develop and deploy standard assessments that give us a roadmap to improve’; ‘The foundation funds programs and organizations that can document a measurable impact on the lives of children and families’. For an inventory of coding, see Appendix 1.

Of concern to practitioners, however, is also the monoculture⁴⁷ of and implicit expert-bias in this architecture of measurement. For some, it is precisely this scientific or technocratic reductionism that poses profound ethical concerns. Interview narratives, for instance, allude to the normalisation and valorisation of success and achievement that the pursuit of measurement encourages. While practitioners recognise a need for legitimising failure and for greater discourse on its imminence or inevitability, the regime of impact assessment and evaluation often makes failure a discursive impossibility. As one practitioner asserts, 'Everybody talks mostly about results, achievements ... the room for failure is being killed. Philanthropy was a place where things were supposed to fail ... but I think this is a place of ... a grandeur of achievements.'⁴⁸

Also manifest in practitioner-perspectives is a marked discomfort with a convergence in both the imagination of impact and outcomes, and their measurement. 'The pursuit of standardisation and replicable models,' one practitioner argues, 'is killing the nuances that could have been its potential.'⁴⁹ Another practitioner demonstrates both a radical recognition of a need for a comprehensive 'critique of method' and a contestation of the very scientificity of standardised frameworks: 'The term "strategic" needs to be redefined to mean the optimal use of resources responsive to the needs of the community, rather than pushing towards a particular predefined outcome ... it is not even scientific to do that because science does not go after a fixed outcome.'⁵⁰ What is called for is a new imagination beyond 'metricisation' and 'the log-frame model' to a more plural epistemology of giving.⁵¹

4.3. What's Strategic about Strategic Giving? The Business of Philanthropy⁵²

In a marked departure from conceptual literature⁵³ on strategic philanthropy, interview narratives make only a marginal or ancillary reference to the application of 'business methods' to philanthropy as a distinctive and definitional feature. Practitioner-perspectives do, however, recognise emerging trends in philanthropic practice that draw from business, particularly corporate practices. The growing 'business-like' (Kramer 2019, par. 1) turn of philanthropy recognised in both the emerging domains or mechanisms of philanthropic investment and its operationalisation and 'rhetoric'.⁵⁴

⁴⁷I borrow this term from Shiva (1997) to emphasise the epistemic convergence and valorisation of scientific and technocratic systems of measurement and evaluation in strategic giving.

⁴⁸ Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁴⁹ Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁵⁰ Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

⁵¹ Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁵² I borrow this phrase from Badr Jafar's homonymous podcast: <https://www.badrjafar.com/the-business-of-philanthropy/>.

⁵³ Kramer (2019), Edwards (2008), Jenkins (2011), Ramdas (2011), and Giridharadas (2019), among others, all centre the 'business mindset' in their conceptual delineation of strategic philanthropy or 'philanthrocapitalism'.

⁵⁴ I draw here from Dart's conceptualisation of the three categories where the business-like turn of non-profits is manifested: 'business-like rhetoric, business-like organization of NPOs' core and support processes, and business-like goals' (Dart 2004, cited in Maier et al. 2014, 6).

One correlate of this pursuit of translating business acumen and its 'process efficiency' to the non-profit sector, for instance, is the emerging and deepening 'partnership' between philanthropic capital and the market. While philanthropy continues to draw its legitimacy from and work closely with the state in India, its growing identification with the business and corporate worlds makes it increasingly look to the market as a critical ally. Communication trends from the sample foundations, for instance, reflect this recognition of the market and businesses as critical partners in philanthropic practice: 38 out of the 479 coded references relate to market incentives, enterprise or entrepreneurship as domains of investment, and to market-approaches to giving. For one practitioner, this alliance also reflects a growing discomfort with the Indian state and an inevitable outcome of the increasing regulatory burdens imposed: 'There is a push to ally more meaningfully with the market, and the civil society also feels that the private sector is a better ally because of the regulatory environment of the state.'

It is also this business-mindset that is regarded as driving strategic philanthropy in its pursuit of evidence, data, and measurement now inevitable given its risk-taking mandate. The 'calculus of risk' (See Section 4.2) remains firmly grounded in the business of giving. It is this business turn, then, that practitioners agree, brings a robust 'project-management approach' to philanthropy; greater 'value through a sense of objectivity and efficiency'; and 'the right frameworks in thinking about giving, monitoring and evaluation'.⁵⁵ It exhorts philanthropy to be 'strategic', to 'focus on outcomes, to constantly review and course correct'.⁵⁶ The 'causal linkages between inputs and outputs ... and a clear sense of the bottom-line' that the for-profit space presumes is regarded as bringing definite value to the non-profit sector, particularly in helping civil society organisations think more sharply about impact and their own work.⁵⁷

Practitioners also argue, however, that it is important for the sector to be able to develop its own vocabulary that allows it to account for its own distinct and complex reality. As one practitioner asserts, the uncritical adoption of 'a corporate mindset in philanthropy ... is a symptom of a deeper poverty of imagination in philanthropy'.⁵⁸ Practitioners recognise the deep-seated bias and convergence that a business-mindset tends to bring to philanthropic practice: one that reifies an obstinate epistemic hegemony and distorts the complexities of socio-political and economic realities in its reductionism.⁵⁹ The replication of business methods and 'process optimisation' to an industry that 'has no profit motive at all', is also presumed to lead to a conceptual convergence in the kind of 'impact' that philanthropic capital seeks to optimise: 'The only impact that can be optimised ... is direct impact'.⁶⁰ What is considered fundamentally problematic is not so much the borrowing of tools and frameworks that enable greater efficiency or effectiveness, but their reification: 'The problem is a certain value attribution made to things like evidence ... but we don't look at the political and cultural or social factors that shape how that evidence is weighed, what is considered good evidence.'⁶¹

⁵⁵Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

⁵⁶Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁵⁷Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁵⁸Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

⁵⁹For a more detailed discussion on the problem of 'metricisation' and standardisation in philanthropic measurements and assessments, see Section 4.2.

⁶⁰Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022

⁶¹Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

Practitioner-perspectives also attribute the growing ‘professionalisation’ of the non-profit sector to this exaltation of the corporate world.⁶² The non-profit sector is regarded as distinct from market enterprises, with people working with a conviction and passion often unseen in the corporate world. While professionalisation is regarded as making for greater efficiency, effectiveness, and more gainful opportunities for people working in the sector, practitioners remain ambivalent about its implications for philanthropy and the non-profit space at large.

On the one hand, ‘over-professionalisation’ and ‘over-consultation’ of the non-profit sector are associated with a marked ‘influx of techno-managerial talent’ and a devaluation of talent and skills in the sector itself. For instance, ‘there is conversation about how the NGO sector needs more talent ... there is a question about how do you define talent and why is talent being defined in one way and not the other’.⁶³ On the other hand, it is also regarded as leading to an inevitable marginalisation and obfuscation of the distinct professional, personal, and emotional needs of people working in the sector. As one practitioner emphasised, ‘People in the social space do care about macro outcomes, about justice and equality, and if there is no systemic progress, it can affect people emotionally ... that is lost in professionalisation’.⁶⁴

In philanthropic practice, more specifically, the business-turn has meant a fundamental reconstitution of the relationship between funders and grantees/ investees or communities. The centrality of consumer or customer interests in business, for instance, has shifted focus to the philanthropic Other, with the objective assessment of community needs now at the centre of giving. However, practitioners argue that the professionalisation and instrumentalism of business has also led to a ‘trust-deficit’ in philanthropy, with a growing turn to ‘performance-linked’ financing. ‘The flip side of the business approach’, as one practitioner articulates, is that it ‘begins putting you on the opposite side of the table’ as relationships become more ‘contractual and transactional’.⁶⁵

What is called for, then, is a greater reciprocity of thinking and frameworks of operation: a ‘cross-pollination’ where lessons from philanthropy and the non-profit sector can also inform and reform business.⁶⁶ Interview narratives demonstrate a critical recognition of this epistemic deficit and identify possibilities of reform that maybe be contained in a reflexive critique: ‘The corporate mindset in philanthropy is a symptom of a deeper poverty of imagination in philanthropy ... which has the resources to think differently’.⁶⁷

⁶²While a conceptual distinction between a business-mindset and corporate organisation is recognised, the two have been used interchangeably in interview narratives. This paper retains this conflation, also indicative of the aforementioned convergence and monolithic reductionism inherent in the business-turn in philanthropy.

⁶³Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June–July 2022.

⁶⁴Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁶⁵Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022.

⁶⁶Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁶⁷Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

4.4. Negotiating Alterity: Collaboration, Co-creation, and the Philanthropic Other

The management or business turn in philanthropy makes for an inevitable paradox in its contemporary discourse and practice. While the customer-centrism of the business mindset in some sense dislodges the institutionalised paternalism and donor-centredness of giving, it also reconstitutes the philanthropic Other through newer hierarchies of knowledge and agency. Practitioner narratives and the trends in communication from philanthropic foundations both demonstrate this emergent ambivalence: the many articulations of alterity in the interstices of practice and discourse and ‘strategic-ness’ and ethical responsibility.

An analysis of digital content from the sample philanthropic foundations affirms this shift in the recognition of the philanthropic Other: of the 479 references coded, 25 relate to a perceived need for working together with grantee/investee-partners or communities or for collaboration and co-creating value. A whopping 60 relate directly to a terminological shift referencing grantees/investees as ‘partners’ in the philanthropic enterprise—the most frequently occurring theme across all analysed sources.⁶⁸

This discursive dislocation of philanthropic paternalism is also manifest in an emerging recognition of a greater need for learning and listening as a ‘strategic’ prerequisite of philanthropic effectiveness. Discursive trends demonstrate an acknowledgement of the limits of philanthropic capacity, emphasising the need to incorporate both community or ‘partner’ experiences and knowledge(s) and periodic reviews and assessments of philanthropic practice itself. For instance, these shifts constitute the third most frequently occurring theme in the content analysed: 30 references from amongst the coded themes relate to the importance or practice of listening to community voices, learning from partners, and a recognition of the limits of the foundation’s own knowledge and practice.⁶⁹

Practitioner narratives correspondingly allude to an emerging recognition of the need for collaboration *within* foundations and *between* philanthropic organisations or other ‘partner’ institutions. Practitioners emphasise the importance of creating spaces for incorporating community perspectives in ‘strategising’ for giving and its measurement(s). Foundations report having structured and formal processes for reporting from grantees, and also third-party assessments and practices that allow community feedback. Others recognise consultations with grantees/investees as a fundamental component of their investment strategy and evaluation processes: ‘When we create a program structure ... a lot of effort is put in right at the beginning essentially to identify people ... who are from the community ... We make them a part of the program.... It is not that we are parachuting in with a solution’; ‘it’s a constant process ... at the beginning of a program you would have a discussion about what is that common metric that both of us have the vision to change ...’.⁷⁰

⁶⁸For an inventory of coding see Appendix 1.

⁶⁹For an inventory of coding see Appendix 1.

⁷⁰Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

Burgeoning philanthropic ‘collaboratories’ or ‘collaboratives’ attest to the growing interest among philanthropic foundations in working together and with a shared strategy for impact. Philanthropic organisations partner with other philanthropic organisations or other institutions that may bring technical knowledge or other influences to facilitate the shared philanthropic vision. The pursuit of collaboration emerges as a necessary condition of strategic philanthropy’s increasingly aspirational telos—the ‘strategic’ pursuit of ambitious change at scale that must make imperative an expansion of influence, capacity, and impact. Practitioner narratives make a vehement case for greater collaboration to drive both efficiency and effectiveness, for philanthropy to be able to realise its transformative potential. While strategic philanthropy continues to strive towards ambitious goals of large-scale transformation, philanthropic organisations increasingly recognise their own limitedness in effecting change at scale and the limits of their capacity. I argue that collaboration emerges as a necessary condition of strategic philanthropy as philanthropic organisations increasingly straddle both the transfer of money or wealth and of knowledge and expertise to ‘co-create’ large-scale and systemic impact⁷¹. As one practitioner asserts, ‘We are a part of multiple funder collaborations ... collaborations are a given for us because we are not a huge foundation ... on our own we can’t do anything ... then we might as well just sit and write cheques and not worry if anything is getting solved.’⁷².

Interview narratives also recognise more fundamental shifts in grant-making decisions towards a more democratic philanthropic practice. For one practitioner, this shift was manifest in a reformed grant commissioning/solicitation process, where the foundation no longer commissioned or requested grant applications. Allowing grantees to solicit grants through their own initiative and distinction enabled a more inclusive platform to make grantee voices and preferences heard, and for making investments that were of value to communities. For another practitioner, this meant ‘participatory grant-making where we bring in community leaders or organisations directly in grant-making decisions’.⁷³

However, practitioner perspectives also reflect a marked ambiguity about the institutionalisation of such efforts, calling for both a reflexive recognition of enduring hierarchies of power and agency in philanthropy, and for more inclusive practices of giving. Collaborations between funding organisations, while ‘strategic’ in their pursuit of transformative large-scale impact, are also viewed as potentially undermining philanthropy’s democratic possibility in the augmentation of their convergent and monopolistic power: ‘There is a severe competitiveness that philanthropy brings to the non-profit world ... collaboration is the most abused word in the ecosystem of charity and philanthropy ... the foundation of most collaborations as of now is to magnify their [the foundation’s] own work to attract more resources ... this locus of collaboration is not correct.’⁷⁴

⁷¹Strategic philanthropy’, for instance, is assumed to be distinct in its shift from the exclusive transfer of money and wealth to the transfer of knowledge, expertise, skills, and ‘capacities’ to communities/grantees. See, for instance, Katz 2005. See also Harvey et al. 2020 and Giridharadas 2019.

⁷²Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁷³Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

⁷⁴Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

With its mandate of process optimisation and efficiency, the business-turn in philanthropy is also regarded as exacerbating the disenfranchisement and marginalisation of grantee/investee partners and the communities it is presumed to serve—of its quintessential philanthropic Other. The drive for scale and process efficiency, and formalised frameworks of operationalising philanthropy often deter democratic consultations as being considered marginal to or retarding the giving process: “The core business is investing a certain amount of money ... a lot of pressure is about spending a certain amount of money every year ... that creates a space that doesn’t necessarily let you think about ... am I trying to find the time to engage with my partner, can I create feedback loops...?”⁷⁵ There is then ‘a price to pay in terms of efficiency’: the cost of a democratic and inclusive giving, and a trade-off that does not always find legitimacy in its business ethic.

This marginalisation of the philanthropic Other is also evidenced in communication from the sample philanthropic foundations. While foundations increasingly speak of the pertinence of collaboration and learning from communities, the latter are often objectified as sources of information and field data, with little agency in determining the praxis of philanthropy. The analysis of digital content from sample foundations, for instance, indicates 60 references to the need for and practice of collaboration, while only 12 relate to local expertise, the knowledge-agency and experience of grantees, and a recognition of their expertise in informing giving. Only three make a direct reference to trust-based giving, and 11 regard ‘expertise’ and expert knowledge(s) to be firmly situated within the philanthropic foundation.⁷⁶

As one practitioner asserts, then, while there has been a palpable shift in the recognition of and relationship with the philanthropic Other, enduring hierarchies and power disparities remain difficult to overcome. What is called for is a ‘deeper introspection’ and thinking about the discursive presumptions that constitute and reconstitute the relationship between the philanthropic Self and Other: the translation of linguistic subversions into practice that recognises ‘communities not as beneficiaries, but communities towards whom we hold an ethical responsibility’ for justice and fairness.⁷⁷

4.5. Perspectives on the Meaning and Implications of Ethics in Philanthropy

Practitioner-perspectives on the ethical presumptions and implications of strategic philanthropy demonstrate a remarkable plurality. They attest, nevertheless, to a conceptual distinction between ‘doing good’ and ‘doing right’: while philanthropy is perceived essentially as a practice of ‘doing good’, perceptions of what it means to ‘do right’ often differ corresponding to the many articulations of philanthropic effectiveness, telos, and the negotiations of alterity that determine giving.

⁷⁵Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022.

⁷⁶For an inventory of coding, see Appendix 1.

⁷⁷Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

⁷⁸Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022.

Practitioners commonly perceive ethics as being located in the adherence to fundamental moral principles or deeply held personal or organisational values. For instance, it was the principle of ‘do no harm ... even if it comes at the cost of not initiating [philanthropic investment] or not engaging in a space’⁷⁸ that became, for one practitioner, a fundamental ethical prerequisite in all of the foundation’s decisions. Practitioner-perspectives on ethical dilemmas in strategic giving also affirm an adherence to more utilitarian perceptions of philanthropic effectiveness,⁷⁹ with the principle of maximising returns—that is, outcomes—considered a fundamental ethical consideration in grant-making decisions: ‘Am I using my philanthropic resources for the most critical problems ... as compared to using those philanthropic resources for the easiest of the problems?’: making decisions with an understanding of where investments can ‘make the maximum impact and utility’.⁸⁰

Ethical conduct is viewed both as an outcome of corresponding presumptions of morality and as general and consistent, making them pragmatic predicates of practice. ‘Most fundamentally, ethics is something that I would put my hand to heart and ask if it were the right thing to do, and if I would do the same thing in another situation,’⁸¹ as one practitioner states. For another, while ethics remain squarely founded in an adherence to moral principles, it is the recognition of their inevitable subjectivity and relativism itself that makes for the ethicality of one’s practice: ‘There are certain things that are universal... but then ... a lot of stuff is very contextualised. My credo is to try and be as authentic as I can be to my lived reality ... being plural, open and fair in my understanding ... always being completely open and receptive and participative in dialogue’.⁸² It is dialogicity and pluralism, a recognition of the ‘manyness’⁸³ of perspectives and truths, that make for the ethicality of practice.

An ethics of giving also implies overcoming the asymmetry in the knowledge of both the philanthropic Self and its Other. For practitioners, this meant an earnest recognition of the many implications of the philanthropic act, including the far removed consequences of their ‘giving’, the practices and business-decisions⁸⁴ in which their own giving was situated,⁸⁵ as well as the life conditions of communities served: ‘The assumptions of giving and feeling happy about it need to be also checked ... in a sense you know what is very close to you but you don’t know the justice or injustices that are operating beyond your view; ... ideally... the efforts which we are [making] should not lead to a perpetration of existing practices which are not positive practices ... which increase income disparity.’⁸⁶

⁷⁸Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022.

⁷⁹I draw here from critical discussions on Singer’s utilitarian perspective in philanthropy. See Wolfe 2015 or Merrill 2013. For a delineation of the applications of utilitarianism in charity and philanthropy and the regulatory challenges that it posits, see Fleischer 2014.

⁸⁰Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁸¹Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁸²Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁸³I draw here from Radhakrishnan’s delineation of the Janina principle of Anekantavada as a doctrine of the ‘manyness’ of reality (2009). This dialogicity and pluralism also became a fundamental ethical premise for Gandhi. See, for instance, Gandhi 1955.

⁸⁴Narratives about ethical dilemmas that practitioners confronted, for instance, alluded to the need for review and contestation of both the business processes and consequences that made giving possible—particularly in the context of CSR or business-endowed philanthropies—and of personal biases and prejudices that may impinge on grant-making decisions within foundations.

⁸⁵For instance, a practitioner emphasised that this self-appraisal also made imperative an understanding of the ethical challenges emerging from chronic disparities beyond the purported role of philanthropy: ‘increased polarisation, delegitimisation of civil society’ and increasing regulatory burdens. For her, where ethical dilemmas were also ‘seeded by our regulatory frameworks’, it was important to question whether a giving delimited by this contemporary was potentially also exacerbating the fragmentation of civil society (August 2022). Regulatory frameworks as circumscribing the possibility of ethical giving were also recognised by other practitioners, alluding to the need for a revaluation of the legislative regime that governs contemporary philanthropy.

⁸⁶Practitioner-interviewees in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

The philanthropic Self becomes at once an object of its own practice, amenable to listening and learning from the philanthropic Other, and from 'evidence' or data derived through the rigours of measurement. Based on this research, I argue that it is this call for reflexivity and self-reform that emerges as a critical and predominant condition of a philanthropic practice that is considered not only 'strategic' but also 'ethical'. As one practitioner asserted, ethical giving commands an inevitable self-contestation: 'How do you challenge your own assumptions ... question efficiency rates.' For another, it meant situating and questioning one's practice through a value-based lens: 'Are we being fully transparent, are we being extractive or inclusive ... are we actually trying to listen to the voice of the people from the field?'⁸⁷

To know oneself was also to enshrine the possibility of failure(s) and of the need for self-reform: 'Being able to look at information and data ... and to make the right changes ... if I need to shift my position, I am willing to shift my position for the greater good of the community.'⁸⁸ While measurement and data could aid such critical self-appraisal, for practitioners, this introversion also necessitated a subversion of the 'strategic' pursuit of process efficiency and measurement.⁸⁹ It called for creating apertures of learning and dialogue and for a recognition of the legitimacy of failure in the pursuit of complex, transformational goals. A recognition of failure demanded the same 'transparency' and 'authenticity' from the philanthropic Self that it so often expected from its Other, and was fundamental to both the effectiveness and ethicality of the philanthropic enterprise.

What this presupposed more fundamentally was a dismantling of extant hierarchies of knowledge and power in philanthropy and a reappraisal of alterity. The enduring and obstinate inequities in philanthropy meant a definite misproportion of power and accountability that ought to have been rectified if philanthropy were to move beyond doing good to also doing right. Recognising an inevitable a power disparity in the philanthropic relationship—that 'money does drive a power hierarchy'⁹⁰—practitioner narratives affirm the need for a democratisation of the discourse and practice of philanthropy and a radical reconstitution of alterity: 'A lot of organised civil society continues to be donor driven and not community driven ... how do you shift that? The most powerful lens to unpack ethical dilemmas in philanthropy is the lens of power ... a power analysis is very important'.⁹¹

⁸⁷Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, July 2022.

⁸⁸Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁸⁹For a more detailed discussion of the regime of measurement and the impossibility of failure, see Section 4.2.

⁹⁰Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, June 2022.

⁹¹Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

5. CONCLUSION: BETWEEN DOING GOOD AND DOING RIGHT

This paper posits that the ethical implications of philanthropy remain fundamentally delimited by the constitution of its methods, principles, and telos. As such, the many sites, perceptions, and articulations of ethics that inform philanthropic practice remain a necessary correlate of the epistemic and ontological presumptions that determine its course and discourse. It is this discursive stance that this research has sought to understand through the perceptions of practitioners who, every day, effect and negotiate philanthropy's profound possibilities.

Discursive trends and practitioner perspectives alike affirm a marked shift towards more strategic forms of giving in India. This new way of thinking about and doing philanthropy is considered distinctive for its risk-taking propensity, its pursuit of systemic and large-scale reforms with clearly defined goals, the institutionalisation of a method of careful performance assessment and deployment of data in informing its own practice, and in its technocratic bias and increasingly professionalised organisation and business mindset.

Practitioners and literature alike recognise that strategic philanthropy has made philanthropic giving larger, more effective, and more efficient, increasingly influencing governance, market provisioning, and large domains of public action and political decision-making. Critics of strategic philanthropy, however, have contested both its 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency' (Srivastava and Oh, 2010), arguing for a recognition of the misproportion of power and accountability and the enduring entrenchment of the philanthropic project in systems that continue to protect and perpetrate global inequities.

Drawing from this burgeoning critical literature on strategic philanthropy, this research has sought to inquire into practitioner perspectives on its ethical and moral presumptions. While the study is limited both in its scope and method, it urges a reorientation of research and discursive focus: a shift in the analytical lens from history, political economy, and social-psychology to an ethical and normative inquiry into its contemporary ordering.

The findings of the research affirm an emergent and pronounced recognition of the limits of this model of giving and the obfuscation of ethical concerns and contestations in its practice and discourse. A correlate of its technocratic bias and methodical extroversion, this discursive marginalisation of the ethical is implicit in its scientific reductionism, valorisation of business and management principles in stewarding social change, its disruption of democratic political process, and in its furtherance of a convergent and hegemonic model of development. What is effected is a 'trust-deficit' in the ordering of giving and a marginalisation of the philanthropic Other as, principally, an object of research, assessment, and reform. Legitimised and institutionalised in this is a discursive decentring of the humanistic impulse, now rendered peripheral to the philanthropic enterprise.

However, in this recognition lies a radical aperture of possibility. Practitioner narratives affirm an urgent need for self-appraisal—for a ‘deeper introspection’⁹² and ‘deeper critique’⁹³—that can interrogate both the methods and telos of philanthropy. They call for a reflexive rethinking of philanthropy itself and for sites and conversations that make known and legitimise an acknowledgement of its failures. Further research can make critical contributions to inform due reforms in both the structure of philanthropy and its regulatory ethos to encourage such appraisals. A recognition of philanthropic actors as ethical agents, the inevitable imbrication of philanthropy in political and moral action, and the impending possibility of its failure(s) can allow humanistic interventions into its technocratic edifice.

Efforts to democratise grant-making are already underway, even if still nascent. Making philanthropic decision-making more inclusive and participatory necessitates a reappraisal and rearticulation of alterity. It calls for recognising the philanthropic Other not only as a bearer of rights, but as a moral agent who ought to become the locus of philanthropic accountability. The disruption of philanthropic paternalism that the strategic turn makes possible offers an opportunity for critical interjections that can reconstitute the philanthropic Other in a reform of both its own methods and telos.

What is called for is a recognition of philanthropy as deeply, inevitably, and inescapably political, and of every philanthropic act—as one practitioner emphasised—as ultimately and necessarily an ‘ethical choice’. In that can be reclaimed and reinstated the promise of philanthropy.

⁹²Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

⁹³Practitioner-interviewee in conversation with the researcher, August 2022.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF CODES AND DESCRIPTIVE CODING GUIDE

Parent Code	Sub-codes	Code Guide/Definition	Concept Frequency
Ethics of Giving	Ethics of giving	References to ethics, morality, justice, and responsibility towards the philanthropic other, or for systemic injustices, inequality; and a recognition of the role of the self in systemic change	9
	Responsibility	References to the foundation's own responsibility (not only accountability) for inequities or consequently in the possibility of change	5
	Ethical expectations from grantees/investees	References to ethics/ethicality of, or ethical expectations from investees, grantees, partners, and/or communities	1
	Giving as duty	References to giving for itself in terms of its substantive, intrinsic value, and devoid of an instrumentalism (pursuit or desire for results)	0
Justice, Equality, and Rights	Justice, equality, and rights	References to/recognition of injustice and inequality (both of which recognise relationality in the framing of the problem) or the pursuit of justice and equality	25
Humility	Humility	References to humility, learning, and a recognition of the limits of the foundation's own knowledge(s) and the need for listening to other voices, beneficiary/field and or grantee/community perspectives in the designing of giving or its evaluations	30
	Grantee/Partner feedback	References to community/beneficiary/partner feedback, mechanisms for reporting and acting on overreaches or grievances heard from partners/grantees and/or beneficiaries/communities	0

	Trust	Manifest references to trust-based giving, trust in the experience and knowledge of grantees/partners and/or communities	3
	Grantee/Partner knowledges and expertise	References to local expertise, the knowledge, agency and experience of grantees/partners/communities, recognition of their expertise and experiences	12
Collaboration	Collaboration	References to collaboration and co-creation, the need to work together with local partners to achieve goals	25
	Grantees' to 'Partners'	A terminological shift in communication from 'grantees' or 'beneficiaries' to 'partners'	60
Love	Love	References to giving as an act of love, and the pertinence of care and empathy in informing giving	2
	Goodness/the greater good	References to the greater good, humanism, and universal progress/welfare as drivers of giving	8
	Service and generosity	References to generosity and largeness of spirit, service to fellow beings and/or the country, the spirit of service as drivers of giving	2
Science & Technology	Science & Technology	References to technology as a domain of investment, technocratic models of giving, valorisation of technology-based solutions, scientific achievements, and the role of science in social change	26
Regime of the Expert	Regime of the Expert	Drawing from Giddens (1990), this refers to an emphasis on expert knowledges, expert consultations, and technical and scientific expertise	11
	Data and measurement	Emphasis on rigorous measurement, impact evaluation, assessments, data, evidence, and a clear theory of change	56

Strategic Giving	Strategic giving	Explicit terminological reference to strategic giving, strategic philanthropy, strategic investing, or the role of strategy in informing giving	7
Ambitious, Big Goals	Ambitious, big goals	References to transformative impact, impact at scale, big, grand, or audacious goals, systemic change	18
Markets & Innovation	Markets and innovation	References to business or market solutions, market-led change, innovation, market-led philanthropy, business methods-induced efficiency or business methods in giving	27
	Market accountability and market gaps	References to limits of and gaps in market provisioning; greater accountability from markets, business and private enterprise; the role of markets in furthering inequity, injustice or in systemic challenges	7
Impact/Outcomes (outcomes-driven giving)	Impact/Outcomes (outcomes-driven giving)	References to a pursuit of outcomes, impact, measurable change, measurable impact, impact-led giving; terminological and conceptual references that presume a clear definition of impact and its assessment	15
Themes of Work	Themes of work	Focus areas of work, domains of investments, grant-making priorities, thematic interests or portfolios	0
	Education	N/A	9
	Policy and governance	N/A	10
	Gender	N/A	6
	Rural Transformation	N/A	4

	Rights and justice	N/A	5
	Climate	N/A	10
	Health	Includes covid-relief among other health-related initiatives	12
	Capacity-building/ Organisational development	References to non-programmatic support, support towards organisational capacity-building, leadership development, process infrastructure, etc.	5
	Market incentives	N/A	11
	Employability and livelihoods	N/A	12
	Data and evidence/Research	N/A	5
	Other	Includes all other domains not included in the above thematic categories. For eg. animal welfare, arts and culture, etc.	20
Diversity & Inclusion	Diversity and inclusion	References to DEI commitments—diversity and inclusion in terms of recruitment and team culture, or in informing giving	5
Community Participation and Agency	Community participation and agency	References to building community agency, and the need for a recognition of/need for their participation and contribution in social change	9
Power Inequities and Hierarchies	Power inequities and hierarchies	References to the potential manifestations of expert-grantee/community, foundation-grantee/community power hierarchies in grant decision-making and design; degree of involvement of the foundation in the funded project or in the grantee's organisational decision-making	7

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. The why and what of philanthropy: its role and scope.

- a. How do you understand the role of philanthropy today? What contribution does philanthropy make in the context of the role of the state, markets, and civil society in furthering development?
- b. Popular criticisms of philanthropy often argue that (a) it is fundamentally undemocratic, (b) it might not be the most efficient way of allocating public resources for public good, (c) it increasingly furthers a singular model of development, particularly, a market-led, neoliberal model. Against this backdrop, what is the value that you think philanthropy brings?

2. The 'strategic' in strategic giving: what does it entail?

- a. There are several, and often overlapping definitions and descriptions of 'strategic' philanthropy but there is little consensus or agreement on what it really means - in your experience, what is its distinction?
- b. How is this model different from older forms of philanthropy, if at all?
- c. If it is different, are there lessons that you think your organisation has learnt from the old? Or broadly, are there lessons that you feel this model can learn from older models of philanthropy?

3. The business of philanthropy: what are the limits and opportunities that business methods offer?

- a. A popular perception and even criticism of strategic giving has been that it applies the logic and principles of business, including its tools and processes, to philanthropy - in practice, how do you see this playing out?
- b. What value does this turn to business methods bring, and are there domains where you would want to temper them?

4. Measuring philanthropic effectiveness: what do we measure and how?

- a. When do you consider your philanthropy or grant-making to be effective?
- b. How important is the founder's or the organisation's vision in this? How do you align both, or navigate situations of conflict, if any? Could you elaborate with an example?
- c. How important are grantee and beneficiary perspectives in your understanding and assessment of effectiveness? What spaces do you create and nurture to enable these?
- d. What are the tools and frameworks that you use to measure effectiveness? Is this the same as grant evaluation or impact assessment?

5. Understanding collaboration: where and how do we collaborate?

- a. As a foundation, apart from your founders or funders, you also have two other key stakeholders, your grantees and the last mile beneficiaries. Could you elaborate on your engagement with these in (a) your identification of investment areas (b) measurement of impact and designing grants (c) enabling authentic feedback that can inform your work
- b. Have there been instances where your grant-making has conflicted with beneficiary perspectives? How have you as an organisation navigated this?

6. Situating ethical responsibility

- a. Ethics is both a complex, and elusive term - however, a growing criticism of strategic giving draws from what is considered to be an inevitable ethical paucity: Could you take a moment to reflect on and share what ethics means to you in your role as a leader in philanthropy?
- b. Is this vision shared by the foundation? How is the foundation's vision of ethical giving communicated to you, and the rest of the staff?
- c. What kind ethical dilemmas do you confront as a practitioner? What have been some of your learnings?
- d. As a senior leader in the foundation, what do you feel is your ethical responsibility towards your grantees and beneficiaries? How does the organisation enable this?
- e. Do you have ethical expectations from your grantees and beneficiaries? What are they? How do they inform your giving?