

## Compulsory Altruism? Or, A National Moral Economy?

Pramod K. Nayar

*The Give It Up campaign opens as an appeal to altruism and then proposes a moral economy using a reasoning that aligns altruism with nationalism and a sense of national belonging.*

In April 2015, the Prime Minister of India coined a new slogan, ‘Give It Up’, urging subscribers to give up their gas subsidy. Initiated by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, the campaign, in its own words, ‘is aimed at motivating LPG users who can afford to pay the market price for LPG to voluntarily surrender their subsidy’ (<http://www.givitup.in/about.html>). When individuals give up this subsidy, ‘they also make a personal contribution towards nation-building’. The campaign lists people who have given up the subsidy and says:

They come from various walks of life and may seem like ordinary men, but they are much more. These are the ladies and gentlemen who strive for the betterment of India. They have decided to help the people from the poorer sections of society. They are the #GiveItUp Heroes... (<http://www.givitup.in/testimonial.html>).

There are several points of interest in the Give It Up campaign, which opens as an appeal to altruism and then proposes a moral economy.

Altruism is “any behaviour motivated merely by the belief that someone else will benefit or avoid harm by it” (Nagel 1970: 16). But it is always intentional (Monroe 1996: 6). Altruism is determined, scholars tell us, mostly by reason but occasionally by sentiment. Rationally we, as humans, would not advocate consistent selfish behaviour because it would be at odds with our own needs at some future date (Scott and Seglow 2007: 23). The GoI’s appeal fits in with the definition of altruism because its appeal is to reason when it tells us of the millions that may be saved if some of India’s population gives up subsidy. It appeals not to sentiment but to logic, especially the logic of a national economy and development.

Slowly, this reasoning aligns altruism with nationalism and a sense of national belonging: ‘these are the ladies and gentlemen who strive for the betterment of India’. Now, altruists, Kristen Monroe tells us, “seem to conceive of themselves as part of all mankind rather than as members of any particular group or subgroup ... as part of a common humanity, and not personalistic or empathic ties to family, gender, and religious, national, or ethnic groups” (204). The GoI campaign emphatically foregrounds national identity rather than giving for the sake of benefitting random needy strangers. With this, the campaign makes an appeal to *affective* connections: we are all Indians. With this altruism begins to shift toward a moral economy.

---

*Pramod K. Nayar is with the Department of English, The University of Hyderabad. Email: [pramodknayar@gmail.com](mailto:pramodknayar@gmail.com).*

---

*eSS The Sunday Edit, Pramod K.Nayar on Give It Up  
July 26, 2015*

The contours of this moral economy built on the erosion of altruism are as follows.

The campaign positions giving up as an act of social justice than as charity. If altruism is a response to a need (Miller 2004: 109) the campaign appeals to us in the name of justice for the poor. Miller writes: “would-be altruists are not only influenced by their perception of the needy person as “someone like me”. They also make moral judgements about the character of the recipient” (112-13). The Give It Up campaign specifically identifies the beneficiaries of the altruistic act as Indians unlike me. By foregrounding Indianness in both giver and (potential) recipient, it dilutes altruism into a moral economy.

By issuing scrolls of honour to those who had given up the subsidy, the campaign also makes another interesting move: it constructs a virtual and imagined *community* of givers, implying that these are people interested in *India*. David Miller writes: “thinking of one individual confronting a world with many needy others, and asking what that individual should do, we should recognise that there are many others who could help too” (116). While such campaigns reliant on a diffusion of responsibility run the risk of everybody waiting for somebody else to do the job, it also produces a form of peer pressure to join in, resulting in a collectivisation of responsibility – which is what the campaign sets out to do. This imagined collective responsibility and community are then *actualised* through institutionalisation.

The PM’s call has energised companies into a response resulting in what might be thought of as coercive altruism. The World Bank, whose stand on anti-subsidy is well established, noted this call to ‘civic duty’ by the Government of India:

Gautam Adani, an Indian business tycoon and the chairman and founder of Adani Group responded. Adani nudged his employees to participate in the Give It Up campaign by signing a letter to all of the group’s nearly 8,000 employees in India. The letter asks employees to opt out of the LPG subsidy, with the form for opting out attached. (<http://blogs.worldbank.org/publicsphere/things-we-do-nudging-people-give>)

The Tata Group did the same according to the report. Institutionalising charity is not new and both the Adani and Tata examples suggest a form of coercion by the employer. (Tax exemptions for donating to charity are forms of coercion as well, and blunt the edge of altruistic gestures. The docking of one day’s salary for most employees, by the employer, with no formal permission sought from the employee is another instance of coercive altruism.)

The subsidy can be surrendered at a click/SMS. Now most acts of altruism involve considerable sacrifice (and even some risk to the self, thus shifting it to the domain of the supererogatory, (Scott and Seglow 2007: 31)). In this case, beyond giving up some savings accruing from the subsidy, the GoI believes that it has removed difficulties in the way of our ‘giving’. Once again, this erodes any altruistic gesture.

Give It Up is thus more on the lines of a moral economy. It is projected as unconditional --- one gives without hoping to gain anything in reciprocity. Some thinkers have categorised a good society or civilisation as one in which there exists a civil economy of what economist Luigino Bruni (2008) calls ‘unconditional reciprocity’. This form of reciprocity is not determined by what others choose but its effect and *outcome* is determined by others’ reciprocating response.

That is, my choice to surrender the subsidy is not determined by what others might choose. But its outcome is conditional upon others making the *same* choice. “Those who adopt a strategy of unconditional reciprocity ... will always cooperate, but their payoffs will depend on the strategies adopted by the other players with whom they are interacting” (Bruni 51).

The campaign constructs a cultural script of shame, extravagance and social justice. Invoking the spectacle of distant suffering of people without gas stoves and the prospect of national development, it marks the making of a discourse of national shame. Sara Ahmed argues that the role of the witness is to “transform shame into an identity” (2004: 107-8). A nation brings shame ‘on itself’ by its treatment of others (108), and this is precisely what the campaign seeks to achieve. Further, within the moral economy is an economy of surveillance as well. With the subsidy linked to AADHAR, data about those who give up and those who do not give up is generated easily. Together, the cultural script and surveillance economy constitute a form of social control. But above all else, it makes shame and sacrifice central to the construction of a national identity for India.

This cultural script runs with a subtext of vulnerability. By telling us of the households without stoves (as in the TV advert), the script proposes that numerous people in India live in environments not conducive to a full life. As sociologist Bryan Turner points out, the natural environment is not conducive to human life, and so we need to build social institutions that support life (2006: 26). Give It Up is an attempt at building a social structure founded on the acknowledgement of structural vulnerability of some and the necessity of sacrifice by others. In the process it also brings ‘heroism’ in line with ‘sacrifice’, suggesting that true heroes in contemporary India are those who give up subsidy. To *not* make claims on the state is heroic, the rhetoric suggests.

The moral economy as signalled by the Give It Up campaign is an attempt to develop normative frames for national belonging, but insisting that sacrifice is the marker of Indianness. The coercive altruism within the moral economy as suggested by the corporate sector clearly erodes the ideas of compassion and care. Further, ignoring the differentials that determine acts of charity (for instance, of salaried classes versus heavily subsidised ministers/MPs and tax rebates to manufacturers), it places a moral burden on *some* to participate in the exercise. Note Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s admission in June 2015: “MPs from the ruling party have not given up their LPG subsidy ... response from MLAs has been poor” (<http://www.dnaindia.com/money/report-modi-s-plea-falls-on-deaf-ears-only-035-lpg-users-gave-up-subsidy-2097585>).

Several responses and bloggers from the general population called for MPs and MLAs to give up *their* subsidies and freebies – telephone, medical, transport, housing (with electricity and water supply), among others – for them and their families, and of course their massive security apparatuses paid for by the taxpayer. (In July 2016 the Parliamentary Committee recommended a 100 per cent hike in Parliamentarians’ salaries --- just to shoehorn a point in.) In their responses one recalls an old definition of the politician: one who is willing to sacrifice your life for his

country. Thus, whether the projected moral economy is yet another indicator of the state of exception that marks India's ruling class remains to be seen.

#### References

- Ahmed, Sara (2004): *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Bruni, Luigino (2008): *Reciprocity, Altruism and the Civil Society: In Praise of Heterogeneity*. Routledge, London.
- Miller, David (2004): ' "Are They My Poor?" The Problem of Altruism in a World of Strangers', in Jonathan Seglow (ed) *The Ethics of Altruism*, pp 107-128, Frank Cass, London.
- Monroe, Kristen Renwick (1996): *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*, Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ.
- Nagel, Thomas (1970): *The Possibility of Altruism*, Oxford.
- Scott, Niall and Jonathan Seglow (2007): *Altruism*, Open UP, Berkshire.
- Turner, Bryan S (2006): *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, Pennsylvania State UP, University Park, Pennsylvania.