Equality against hierarchy: Imagining modernity in subaltern India

Indrajit Roy

How do subalterns imagine their membership in India's political community? Many scholars argue that they imbibe the egalitarian ideals in India's political–economic sphere. Others suggest that subalterns identify the modernising impulses of the political–economic sphere as a greater threat to their ways of life.

Intervening in this debate, recent research enlivens analysts to the perspective that the political–economic sphere of the state cannot be unambiguously mapped onto modernity. Nor, for that matter, can the socio-cultural sphere be regarded as singular realm of uninterrupted tradition. This article is offered as a contribution to this strand of the scholarship. By exploring endogenous egalitarian impulses among subaltern groups in India, I seek to interrogate the widely prevailing notion that ideas associated with modernity are the preserve of and emanate from elites in the political–economic sphere of the Indian state. Subalterns eschew notions of hierarchy and value ideas of equality and social justice without necessarily drawing on statist vocabularies in their assertions.

Keywords: Bihar, Musahar, modernity, egalitarian ideals

> *Akai pātsakal baithāye, chhūti let dhown kaki?* [All people are seated on the same earth. Who should then call another untouchable?]
>
> —Kabir (1977, *Shabd* 41)

> *Unch neech ka sawal kahan se aaya? Hum sab barabar ke nahin hai kya?* [Where does the question of 'high' and 'low' arise? Are we all not equal?]
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> —(Shanichar Rishi, in conversation with author, 2 April 2010)

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I

Introduction

A recurring theme in the political sociology of democracy in contemporary India relates to the entanglements between the alleged 'inner tradition' of its socio-cultural sphere and the putative 'outer modernity' of its political–economic sphere (Beteille 2000; Gupta 2005a). Underpinning this theme is the coexistence of a caste-hierarchical socio-cultural sphere with a political–economic sphere marked by the bureaucratic state, capitalist enterprise and an electoral democracy. The nature and fate of these entanglements in relation to subaltern political aspirations have been a matter of considerable debate (Jayal 1999; Pai 2002). Scholars argue that the stranglehold over subaltern populations of hierarchical traditions marking the socio-cultural sphere can be most effectively weakened by the percolation and diffusion of egalitarian ideals of the political–economic sphere (Baviskar 2005; Beteille 2002; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Fuller and Harriss 2001; Gupta 2005b; Jodhka 2012; Parry 2000). Against their views, a range of commentators identify the modernising impulses of the political–economic sphere as a greater threat to subaltern populations (Chakrabarty 2002; Madan 1994; Nandy 1987). Consequently, they valourise the socio-cultural sphere as a zone of resistance for subalterns.

Intervening in this debate, some scholars have questioned the neat analytic dichotomies between tradition and modernity (Lele 1981) and between the political–economic domain of the state and the socio-cultural sphere of the society (Chatterjee 2004, 2011, 2012; Corbridge et al. 2005). Others have argued that the political–economic sphere of the state cannot be unambiguously mapped onto modernity (Sundar 2007; Waghmore 2013). Nor, for that matter, can the socio-cultural sphere be regarded as singular realm of uninterrupted tradition (Omvedt 2008). This article is offered as a contribution to this last strand of the scholarship. By exploring the endogenous provenance of egalitarian claims advanced by subaltern groups in India, I interrogate the widely prevailing notion that ideas associated with modernity are the preserve of and emanate from elites in the political–economic sphere of the Indian state. Readers should note that my modest objective in this article is to call into question the certitudes of a diffusionist model of modernisation, rather than to subvert the analytic category of modernity. As I point out elsewhere (Roy 2015), there is much to be lost by eschewing notions of modernity altogether.

Although definitions of modernity abound (Appadurai 1996; Eisenstadt 2001; Gaonkar 2001; Kaviraj 2005; Taylor 2004) and I can barely do justice to the rich and nuanced debates around the topic in this space, most scholars appear to agree that egalitarian ideals constitute an important ingredient of modernity. In this article, I explore the manner in which subaltern populations forge egalitarian subjectivities through their interrogation of the hierarchical suppositions of elites within society. Against considering the socio-cultural sphere of the Indian society as intrinsically 'traditional', then, in this article I argue that this sphere is a contested space between hierarchical assumptions and egalitarian imaginations. The vibrancy of this contested space signals, for me, the tortuous emergence of modernity in the Indian society.

My arguments in this article are based on the qualitative analysis of ethnographic material from a village in north Bihar that I will call Sargana. The data collected between 2009 and 2013 comprise notes from my 'ethnographic hanging out' and semi-structured interviews with agricultural labourers of the Musahar community in two study villages in that region. During fieldwork, my interlocutors presented their interpretation of events which I, in turn, interpreted as I wrote up my notes. Given my interest in political imaginations, I find that the distinction between true and false, as between hearsay and historic fact, is neither necessary nor useful. One form of truth may be the understanding of evidence in contemporary terms. Indeed, '[i]f we treat all versions of false stories as if they were true, we get a glimpse into the world our informants described to us' (White 2001: 295). That said, I ensure that my interpretations are analysed in the context of overlapping material inequalities based on caste and occupation.

In the next section, I introduce the study locations and highlight the skewed distribution of productive resources among members of different caste communities. I follow this up with a discussion of two different kinds of claims advanced by the 'untouchable' agricultural labourers upon local elites. In the subsequent sections, I elaborate key analytical themes arising from a study of these claims. In Section III, I argue that in making their claims, Musahar agricultural labourers insert their understandings of equality into the political–economic sphere. The discussion in this section joins issue with competing perspectives which suggest that subalterns appropriate, resist, evade or seek assimilation into the political–economic sphere. In Section IV, I highlight the usefulness of the perspectives of 'autochthonous radicalism' offered by R.S. Khare (1984) and Gail Omvedt (2008). Section V concludes.

II

Subaltern engagements

In this section, I want to first introduce the caste basis of occupational inequality so as to ground the ensuing description and analysis of subaltern political engagements. Since much of the material presented in this article focuses on my conversations with members of the Musahar community, the deprivations to which they are subjected are paid special attention.

Overlapping inequalities: Caste and class profiles of study localities

Tables 1, 2 and 3 present my analysis of data from a small survey I conducted prior to the commencement of my ethnographic work. The survey covered 2,210 households. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics pertaining to the survey localities, underscoring specifically literacy, landlessness and a multi-dimensional perspective of poverty.[1] Of the 2,210 households surveyed, nearly 77 per cent reported owning no land; the rates of poverty were as high at about 78 per cent; and nearly two-thirds of all households had no adult over 30 years of age who had ever attended school.

Table 1
Socio-economic profile of study localities

Variable	*Observations*	*Mean*	*Standard deviation*
Landlessness	2,210	0.769	0.422
Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) poverty	2,210	0.777	0.416
Literacy	2,210	0.667	0.471

Source: Own census data, collected 2009–10.

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[1] A composite measure of poverty that combines multiple dimensions to determine if a household is in poverty or not. For full details of this measure, see Alkire and Foster (2007).

Table 2

Caste basis of occupational inequality

Community	*Total*	*Agricultural labourer— landless*	*Agricultural labourer— 'Some' Land*	*Non-agricultural casual worker*	*Cultivator*	*Salaried*	*Retail trade*
Musahar	*18*	*26*	*2.19*	*22*	*0*	*2*	*0*
Other Dalit	16	20	5.81	19	2.70	30	7
Adivasi	1.49	3	3	0.63	3	2	0
EBC	23	22	26	26	16	8	6
OBC	16	11	34	12	27	16	28
'Privileged Caste'	12	5	23	4	46	39	51
N (Households)	**2210**	**510**	**228**	**1115**	**143**	**51**	**88**

Source: Own census data, collected from 12 administrative wards, December 2009/January 2010.

Notes: All figures, except bottom row, are expressed in per cent. Column figures are percentage of figure in bottom row. Caste-disaggregated data for Muslims (13 per cent of surveyed households) are not yet available, and hence excluded. The figures pertaining to members of the Musahar community, whose politics is the subject of this article, are italicised. The grey coloured columns indicate that the percentages indicated therein refer to the total population. The bold figures indicate the total numbers in the research universe under each category.

Tables 2 and 3 examine, descriptively, the overlaps between caste and occupational inequality. A consideration of such overlaps is an important reminder of the abiding influence of caste. Scholarship remains sharply divided as to whether the provenance of caste lies in India's religious traditions (Dumont 1980), feudal relations of production (Beteille 1974) or colonial modes of knowledge (Dirks 1993). But the concentration of occupations along caste categories is instructive for pointing out that caste is not merely a figment of administrative imagination but reflects very concrete social relations, encompassing solidarity as well as deprivation. In using administrative categories in these tables, I endorse the official appreciation of the social and economic deprivations structured by caste. However, for reasons enumerated below and elsewhere (Roy 2015), I use the terms 'caste' and 'community' interchangeably.

The privileged castes refer to the self-styled 'upper' castes who consider themselves at the apex of a hierarchical caste system as Savarnas. In the

Table 3
Occupational basis of caste inequality

Class	*Total*	*Musahar*	*Other Dalit*	*Adivasi*	*EBC*	*OBC*	*'Privileged caste'*
Agricultural labourer—landless	23	*34*	26	45	22	16	10
Agricultural labourer—'some' land	10	*1.29*	3	18	12	22	19
Non-agricultural casual worker	50	*63*	62	21	57	38	17
Cultivator	6	*0*	0.8	12	4	11	25
Salaried	2	*0.26*	4	3	0.77	2	7
Retail trade	4	*0*	1.2	0	0.96	7	17
N (Households)	2210	*398*	353	33	519	353	269

Source: Own census data, collected from 12 administrative wards, December 2009/January 2010.

Notes: All figures, except bottom row, are expressed in per cent. Column figures are percentage of figure in bottom row. Caste-disaggregated data for Muslims (13 per cent of surveyed households) are not yet available, and hence excluded. The figures pertaining to members of the Musahar community, whose politics is the subject of this article, are italicised. The grey coloured columns indicate that the percentages indicated therein refer to the total population.

fieldwork localities, the privileged castes comprised such communities as Brahmans, Kayasthas and Rajputs. Members of such communities regard themselves as Savarnas and hence socially and ritually superior to others. Some of the wealthiest people in the locality are Savarnas. They are, by far, members of the most privileged communities in Bihar on account of their control over land as well as public sector jobs.

The Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Bihar include 22 communities whose members are stigmatised as untouchable by the privileged communities. Members of SC communities are entitled to affirmative action under the provisions of the Indian Constitution on account of the historical oppression to which they have been subjected. In 2007, the Bihar state government classified 18 of the 22 communities as Mahadalit, in recognition of the chronic collective deprivation to which they continue to be subjected. Such a classification enabled the government to offer special assistance to help members of Mahadalit communities overcome their manifold deprivations.[2] The members of the Musahar community are the most numerous among the 18 communities.

The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) represent more amorphous categories. Both stem from the state government's efforts in 1951 to institute affirmative action for the communities regarded by the privileged communities as 'low caste' but not 'untouchable'. These are the so-called Shudra communities, classified by the Bihar government as 'backward classes' on account of the multifaceted disadvantages they face. Members of communities classified as 'backward class' tend to be better off than members of 'untouchable' communities but worse off than those of privileged communities.

The interlocked inequalities between caste and occupation are striking from the two tables. From Table 2, it is clear, for instance, that Musahar households, who make up 18 per cent of the population in the surveyed villages, comprise 26 per cent of the landless agricultural labour households. They also form 22 per cent of the non-agricultural casual workers, thereby confirming their occupation in lowly remunerative 'jobs' in the locality. The well-remunerative occupations are cornered by the privileged castes that comprise 12 per cent of the population in the surveyed area, but constitute over half of all households engaged in retail, nearly 40 per cent of all the salaried households and 46 per cent of all the owner-cultivators. Even the share of the politically influential OBCs, at 16 per cent of the surveyed population, in these better remunerative households falls behind that of the privileged castes.

Table 3 confirms these interlocked inequalities. Landless agricultural labourers comprise 23 per cent of all households in the survey area, but 34 per cent of the Musahar households. Similarly, half of all households in the surveyed population are engaged in non-agricultural casual work, while 61 per cent of all Musahar households fall into this category. Owner-cultivators comprise 6 per cent of the total population, but as much as a quarter of the privileged caste households. Likewise, salaried households make up 2 per cent of the households but nearly 7 per cent of the privileged caste households. And further, 4 per cent of all households in the survey region are engaged in retail trade, compared to 17 per cent of the privileged caste households.

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[2] Subsequently, all SC communities have been designated Mahadalit, effectively negating any advantage that might have accrued from being designated Mahadalit.

From the survey data, it is clear that members of the Musahar community suffer systemic exclusion from any of the more remunerative and secure livelihood opportunities available to others. At 18 per cent of the population, they make up 2 per cent of all salaried households and are completely unrepresented in owner-cultivator and retailer households. Their share in the population of landless agricultural labourers and non-agricultural casual workers far exceeds their population in the locality. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Musahars are engaged in low-paid manual labour. Their systemic exclusion from ownership over productive resources as well as from well-remunerated livelihood options is stark.

Side by side, members of the Musahar community are ambivalent about their identity within the caste hierarchy. The self-referential term to describe themselves as a collective was not *jaati* (caste) at all but community (*samaj*).[3] My interlocutors from among the Musahar community did not use hierarchical terms such as 'upper castes' and 'lower castes' to describe themselves in relation to others. When I enquired about the behaviour of the 'upper castes' (*unchi jaati*) during one of my many conversations with Shanichar Rishi, a 50-plus agricultural labourer, he looked puzzled. He then asked me the reason for my invoking the language of 'high' and 'low'. Consequently, I follow my interlocutors in using the collective descriptor of community rather than caste. Many among them were uncertain about even being called Musahar because they considered it to be an imposition by the privileged caste communities in order to stigmatise them. However, there was little agreement about alternative terms, such as Bhuiyan or Rishdeo. As a result, and given the widespread use of the name 'Musahar' among activists, policy-makers and academics alike, I have chosen to retain it for this article.

Subaltern claims 1: Occupation of private property

After Independence in 1947, Bihar state government promulgated legislation to redistribute the vast agricultural properties owned by colonially appointed landlords or zamindars (Bayly 2001; Blair 1980; Frankel 1989;

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[3] For instance, in referring to specific observances and customs, they would say *Humare Musahar samaj mein* (In our Musahar society) rather than saying *Humare Musahar jati mein* (In our Musahar caste). Sometimes, I was told about Musahar *varg*, which would translate into Musahar class.

Hauser 1993; Prasad 1979). However, the government's efforts were frustrated by the landlords who were well connected through their kinsmen and other caste connections with the bureaucracy and the judiciary. The government's failures provoked the state's landless labourers and poor peasants to attempt occupation of private property held illegally by the landlords. Their attempts were supported by militant communist parties, including most recently the Communist Party of India (Marxist/Leninist-Liberation) (CPI[M/L-L]). Domi Rishi, a CPI(M/L-L) activist in his fifties, offered the following justification for their occupations:

> We wanted our children to lead dignified lives [*ijjat ke saath jee sake*].[4] How can the oppressor castes [*dabang jatis*] own so much property when so many of us have nothing? Whichever way you look, you only see their properties. This is not fair. When Brahma created the world, he made everyone equal. But then these bastards [pointing to the hamlet of the Rajput landlords] created the myth that some of us were touchable and others were untouchable (personal communication, Chandi Temple Machan, 11 April 2010).

The reference to a primordial form of equality originating with Brahma, the creator in the Hindu cosmology, resonates with the thoughts of the militant ascetic peasant leader Swami Sahajanand Saraswati who blazed through Bihar's political firmament during the 1930s, leading the region's peasants in their agitations against the concentration of agricultural properties in the hands of the landlords. Saraswati was the leading light behind the founding of the All India Kisan Sabha, which provided the organisational basis for the peasants' demands on the colonial government as well as the Congress politicians who were getting ready during the 1940s to take over power in postcolonial India. Although Bhumihar by caste, his agitations targeted members of his own and other privileged castes. As a Shaivite scholar of the ascetic Dasnami sect, he claimed a command over Hindu religious texts that was ordinarily difficult for less religion-oriented leaders to do. In a celebrated tract, he argues that 'Brahma did not differentiate among his creations. Everyone was equal. It is only later that a division of labour emerged and the different classes were differentiated.'[5]

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[4] The similarity between Rishi's narrative and the account provided by the scholar-activist A.N. Das (1982) is striking. Das interviews a dalit widow in Bihar's Bhojpur region. During their interview, she tells him that for her, the struggle against landlords and the police is a matter of dignity and honour. That an entire generation separates the similarities in the two accounts makes the commonalities all the more striking.

While Saraswati's interpretation of a putative primordial equality is questionable, what is interesting for me is the resonance of Domi Rishi's account with this perspective among my interlocutors. The CPI(M/L-L), the party to which Rishi was affiliated, maintains an ambivalent position vis-à-vis Saraswati's political agenda. As a party representing the interests of peasants, its local leaders often draw on the legacy of Saraswati's political practice. However, as a party that also claims to represent the interests of agricultural labourers, often at odds with the richer peasants who employ them, local leaders maintain a studied silence about the very same legacy. The CPI(M/L-L) assiduously distances itself from religious imageries and its local leaders are no exceptions, so it is unlikely that the party would have propagated the religious element of Saraswati's political philosophy. At any rate, not once did Rishi invoke Saraswati's memory and I find it difficult to trace a link between the two. But the shared belief that Brahma created everyone equal is one that cannot be ignored.

The CPI(M/L-L) is a political party committed to combining parliamentary communism with mass mobilisation. It was a successor to the Indian People's Front (IPF) (Jaoul 2011). It stopped its underground activities in 1990. Since then, it has successfully contested elections in different parts of the state and, at present, sends six members to the 243-strong Bihar Legislative Assembly. Recounting the beginnings of his own association with the CPI(M/L-L), Rishi narrated the story of a Bengali physician from the nearby district of Begusarai, by whom he was deeply influenced. The physician combined his medical practice with political work and was responsible for recruiting activists to the IPF, the precursor to the CPI(M/L-L). Rishi first met him when he took his aunt for treatment. The physician casually started talking about the condition of the rural poor with his patients and the ways in which their condition could be ameliorated. He recalled the physician's emphasis on the injustice of the inequalities that prevailed in northern Bihar, not only in terms of the material wealth that people possessed but also the social discrimination which dalits and other 'low castes' faced. The physician invited Rishi to become a member of a discussion group. Here, Rishi discovered a network of young men of similar age and socio-economic background as him. The glimmer in Rishi's eyes was unmistakable as he recounted the debates they had within their discussion groups, the activism of the physician and of the other young men, of their collaborations against the police and of the naive hope that some sort of revolutionary age was imminent. It was through these discussion groups that Rishi got to meet Vinay Mandal, who went on to remain his lifelong friend, adviser and well-wisher. Mandal was more than happy to share his reminisces from his days at the discussion group. According to Mandal, what most impressed him and the other members of their group was the physician's talk about equality:

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[5] The original Hindi says: *Brahma ki paida ki hui sristi mein koi bhed ya dal na tha. Sabhi barabar the. Yeh toh peeche chalkar vibhinn kamon ke chalte hi vargon ka judi-judi rachan hua* (Saraswati 1994: 136).

> Doctor babu (honorific reference to the physician) was a well-read man. He spoke about many things. Most of what he said went above our heads. But one thing stuck: his repetition that no one was high and no one was low. This is what Kabir Saheb had told us thousands of years ago: no one was high and no one was low. Doctor babu was like Saheb. This is what Saheb must have been like. Doctor babu was Saheb reborn (personal communication, Chandi Temple Machan, 10 April 2010).

Mandal's reference to 'Kabir Saheb' recalled the teachings of the 16th century saint Kabir, who preached values of love, friendship and equality in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Kabir's compositions are replete with taunts against the privileged castes and calls to his followers to shun hierarchies. An ode by one of his disciples, Ravidas, to the fictitious city of Begumpura invites his audience to think about 'a regal realm with sorrowless name'. This realm, he claims, is achievable in the secular domain and not in a spiritual afterlife (Omvedt 2008). Latter-day activists have celebrated Kabir's teachings for their humanism. For instance, R.S. Khare tells us that the anti-caste ascetic, Swami Achhutanand, active in Gangetic northern India, interpreted Kabir's thoughts to proclaim that 'all human beings are equal…the feeling of high and low is an illusion' (cited in Khare 1984: 84). Although Mandal made no reference to Swami Achhutanand during our many conversations, he referred time and again, as in the above quote, to Kabir's injunction that 'no one was high and no one was low'. I observed that he regularly invoked Kabir through his couplets, which he seemed to have memorised. One of Mandal's favourite couplets can be roughly translated as: 'All people are seated on the same earth. Who should call another untouchable?'

Mandal became involved with the work of the IPF and its successor, the CPI(M/L-L). His interpretation of his mentor's ideas through the prism of equality associated with Kabir's preaching is of interest because there is little evidence to suggest that the communists made this connection. In a similar vein, Mandal recalled the humiliation inflicted on him and his community when Karpuri Thakur became Bihar's first socialist chief minister in 1970. The socialists had campaigned for the provisions of affirmative action to be extended to Bihar's OBCs and Karpuri Thakur was widely hailed (and reviled) as a champion of equality. Mandal recounted the disparaging references made by the privileged communities against Thakur being of the Nai community—the community of barbers. The Rajputs and the Kayasthas of the neighbouring hamlets would tell Mandal to ask 'their' chief minister to go to Delhi and open a barber's salon rather than waste his time as chief minister.[6] Mandal was in his teens back then. He was not Nai but Kevat, a community enumerated as 'backward class', and the jibes paradoxically increased his identification with the 'backward class' label. When Thakur's ministry fell, within six months of assuming office, the privileged castes publicly rejoiced and a pall of gloom enveloped his Kevat neighbourhood, Mandal reminisced. The CPI(M/L-L) did not contest elections till as late as 1982. Therefore, even as he remained a member of the party and drew on the network of support offered by party activists, he consistently voted for the socialists and their successor, the Janata party, as did his family members and neighbours. The choice was less clear for Rishi whose friends and neighbours tended to vote for the Congress party. But Rishi broke with them and was one of the first persons in his neighbourhood, he said, chest puffing with pride, to shift his electoral choice away from the Congress and towards the Janata party.

In 1990, Rishi and Mandal convinced large numbers of their family members, friends and neighbours to cast their vote for Lalu Prasad Yadav's Janata Dal, a party that canvassed support on the promise that it would ensure that the privileged castes respected the dignity of the oppressed and the marginalised communities. Rishi recalled the jubilations that erupted in their Musahar hamlet when Yadav won a decisive victory over his privileged caste adversaries of the Congress party. Yadav was explicitly antagonistic to Bihar's privileged caste landlords and their sympathisers, and made much of his own humble origins. Unlike his mentor Karpuri Thakur, Yadav unabashedly espoused a folk persona that irrevocably transformed what Shaibal Gupta (1999) calls the 'grammar of politics' in the state. Yadav did not assimilate into the extant vocabularies of political discourse. Rather, he embraced idioms that bore little resemblance to the past. The language of dignity and honour of the oppressed was now bestowed with official legitimacy. One of the slogans propagated by Yadav at that time, which my interlocutors recalled to this day, was: 'Vikas nahin samman chahiye' [We want honour, not development] (personal communication, School Tola Machan, 3 February 2010).

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[6] The original Hindi rendition of the taunt was: *Karpuri Thakur tum Dilli jao. Dilli jaakar salon chalao*.

Domi Rishi told me this slogan spoke to their hearts. In his words:

> We did not understand or know what development was. We had never seen it. But samman. That meant a lot. We had never experienced it. But we knew what it was. [Repeats] That meant a lot. It was the first time anyone talked about it (personal communication, School Tola Machan, 3 February 2010).

Bihar's land question, however, remained intractable. Yadav proved incapable of implementing land redistribution. However, while he did not introduce any legislation on land reforms, Hauser (1993) reports that Yadav did not oppose the occupation of private properties that the state's landless resorted to. Rishi reported that he and his comrades in the party experienced an unprecedented confidence after Yadav's accession to power in Patna.

> Over there, in Sahibganj, 1000 acres were occupied by Dusadhs, Chamars and Santals. In Lagrahi, 300 acres belonging to a Yadav landlord were occupied by 150 Musahars, 36 Santals and a few Muslims and redistributed among the landless. In Kupari Pramanpur, 600 acres were occupied by nearly 1500 Musahars and a few Santals…. The man (referring to Yadav) did nothing to help, but he did nothing to hinder us either (personal communication, Chandi Temple Machan, 11 April 2010).

Jeffrey Witsoe's (2013) riveting account of Yadav's accession to power and efforts at consolidating his position in Patna offers a view of the manifold pressures to which he was subjected by bureaucracy, judiciary and police that continued to be dominated by the privileged castes with connections to the land. Yadav's approach was to emaciate the administrative services so that the privileged caste landlords would lose access to the levers of state power. Rishi's account of their enhanced confidence in occupying landlord properties after Yadav's accession does seem to corroborate Witsoe's narrative. Yadav tacitly, if somewhat ambivalently, supported the occupations so long as they were not directed towards his own supporters. Since the richest landlords in Sargana and elsewhere, mostly of the privileged castes, remained hostile towards Lalu Yadav because of his 'backward caste' antecedents, he had little compunctions in allowing their lands to be occupied. Despite electoral hostilities between Lalu Yadav and the CPI(M/L-L), activists such as Rishi realised that local Janata Dal leaders were sympathetic to their assertion and that they could be relied upon to keep the police at bay.

Rishi's and Mandal's accounts of the justifications, trials and hopes that attend to the process of occupying the illegally held properties of the landlords take us through a supposedly primordial equality that traces to Brahma, the egalitarian messages of Kabir Saheb, the impassioned pleas against injustice by a physician from Begusarai, the support of the network of CPI(M/L-L) activists, the taunts against Karpuri Thakur and the idiom of dignity propagated by Lalu Yadav's Janata Dal. The account is anchored in the aspiration that the progeny of today's landless peasants and agricultural labourers might live lives of dignity. Mandal's endorsement of Lalu Yadav, despite his incapability in implementing land reforms, stems from his perspective that the chief minister reined in the forces inimical to their dignity, even if he did not help them advance their assertions. The theme of equality, conjoined with the idea of dignity, bears little resemblance to the constitutional provision of liberal equality between individuals. Although the assertions by Mandal and his colleagues refer to the law and its violation by the privileged castes, they are anchored in egalitarian interpretations of myths as well as invocations of messages popularised by such 16th century saints as Kabir and Ravidas. Mandal's filtering of more contemporary discourses of justice and dignity through such messages emphasises the incubation among his friends, neighbours and comrades of egalitarian ideals that interrogate the hierarchical presumptions of the privileged castes.

Subaltern claims 2: Encroachments on cultural spaces

The assertion of egalitarian ideals was radicalised by Rishi's neighbours through their attempt to establish their presence in the locality's public space. Their agitations over the question of land provided them with the opportunity to collectively reflect on the meanings and practices of equality. Such reflections led them to begin organising public commemorations of their legendary heroes Dina and Bhadri using loudspeakers, against the established practice of quiet collective worship. However, their early attempts to do so, during the 1980s, met with vociferous resistance by members of the privileged communities. The use of loudspeakers meant that the commemorations were no longer limited to their hamlet. Even if the actual festivities continued to be physically performed here, loudspeakers carried the festivities into the neighbourhoods and homes of the privileged communities. The privileged communities retaliated by trying to prevent the Musahars from using loudspeakers, using their control over the police to enforce a ban on their use. Recalling the arguments over the objections, Tilya Rishi and Jamuni Rishi, both 60-plus female activists of the CPI(M/L-L), told me:

> Tilya Rishi: The dabang jatis (oppressor castes) first said it would disturb everyone. What did they mean by 'everyone', we asked.
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> Jamuni Rishi: There were over a thousand of 'us' here, compared to less than a couple of hundred of them.
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> Tilya Rishi: Then they said we could use the microphone during the day but not during the night, as the children needed to sleep. That was *anyay* (unjust), since their *pravachans* (collective hymns) lasted for several days and nights without a break.
>
> Jamuni Rishi: Did not their children need to sleep then? (personal communication, School Tola Machan, 13 April 2010).

The account provided by the two women reveals their refusal to accept the privileged communities' assumption that only their opinion mattered. In advancing the logic of their own numerical superiority, Tilya and Jamuni Rishi were emphasising democratic practice. But theirs was not brute majoritarianism, as their justifications were based on establishing parity with the religious practices of the privileged classes. They interpreted the privileged classes' resistance as a symbol of their oppression. My interlocutors reminded me that twice a year, the members of the privileged communities frequently used loudspeakers during the nine-day commemorations of their deities Ram and Durga. In addition, they frequently organised devotional meetings where saints from far and near chanted hymns for days on end using loudspeakers. The privileged communities' selective opposition to the Musahars' commemorations appeared to them as evidence of discrimination against their cultural practices. To such discrimination, the women refused to be cowed.

Jamuni Rishi's husband joined our conversation and reported that the privileged classes detested the commemoration of Dina–Bhadri festivities just as they looked down upon all the cultural practices of the 'untouchable' communities. He recalled the ways in which the Rajputs and the Kayasthas scorned his own affiliation with the Kabir panthi sect as an act of weakness:

> They think we Kabir panthis are weaklings. But that is not true, you know. Some of the most powerful Yadavs in this village are also Kabir panthis. The Rajputs and the Kayasthas are actually scared of them, but dare not say anything to them. So, they only taunt us.

I had the occasion to converse with a wealthy Rajput man about the Kabir panthi sect. Although he was careful not to say anything demeaning about the members of the sect in my presence, he did make a derogatory comment about the similarities between Kabir panthis and Muslims in their funerary practices. Both communities buried their dead, instead of cremating them, as is common practice among 'upper caste' Hindus. A few days later, we met again at the funeral of the mother of a leading Yadav politician of the area, a Kabir panthi. In the light of our earlier conversation, I could not help notice that the Rajputs and Kayasthas of my acquaintance remained aloof from the actual burial ceremony. When the coffin was lowered into the pit, everyone present was expected to offer grains of soil to cover the coffin. Whereas I observed everyone else doing so, members of their communities watched from a distance. For Jamuni Rishi's husband, my report was merely an affirmation of what he had told me a few weeks prior.

When I asked my interlocutor how he reconciled his affiliation with the Kabir panthi sect and its emphasis on formless worship with his endorsement of Dina–Bhadri festival, he looked puzzled. He clarified that he did not worship Dina and Bhadri, but took part in it as a member of the Musahar community. Moreover, he reminded me, 'Saheb's message is that everyone is equal. Dina and Bhadri sacrificed their lives for equality. Do you see a contradiction?' Some of the younger men who gathered around us, including Jamuni Rishi's son, worship Dina and Bhadri as deities for their valour and bravery. Although their religious beliefs differed from his, they nodded vigorously in agreement when Jamuni Rishi's husband highlighted the commonalities between Dina and Bhadri's actions and Kabir's teachings.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for the hatred of the privileged classes towards the commemorations of Dina and Bhadri. Legend has it that they were two landless brothers, agricultural labourers, who took a heroic stand against oppressive landlords of the region. The brothers were Musahar and the landlords Rajput.[7] Eventually, the brothers were killed. Ballads celebrating their heroism are aplenty in the region of northern Bihar and the eastern region of the bordering state of Uttar Pradesh. To many Musahars as well as significantly poorer members of other underprivileged communities, the brothers are heroes to be emulated because of their valiance in battle and principled stand against an oppressor. Some believe they possess supernatural powers. Renditions of the ballad often differ on issues of detail, including the events in the brothers' lives, the specific atrocities perpetrated upon them and even the names of the landlords. The circumstances leading to their murder vary in different renditions. Nevertheless, the apparent absence of a coherent plot is marginal to the symbolic value of the tale, which recalls the brave, if ultimately unsuccessful, contestation of oppression by the poor (Narayan 2009).

I found it impossible to establish a date that accounts for the two brothers. Narayan (2009) refers to the legend as myth. A few among my interlocutors appeared to concur with this suggestion. Others disagreed and insisted that they were historical characters. Many among them claimed that the brothers lived hundreds of years ago. But some believed that the heroism of the brothers took place more recently, perhaps a century ago. Notwithstanding such differences of opinion, the legend of the two brothers is kept alive by members of the Musahar community in rather banal ways. In each one of the three Musahar hamlets I visited during my fieldwork, my interlocutors pointed out to me a raised square cement platform, about 4 feet wide. Two bamboo pole sticks, approximately 20–25 feet high, were erected on each of these platforms, symbolising the memory of the brothers who, it was said, kept watch over the hamlet and its denizens. These places were the site of the annual commemorations of the iconic brothers. I could not help noting that there was no single date for the commemorations. In the month of March 2009, I witnessed at least three different observances. About 200 m to the east of where I lived, the festival was observed from 5 to 8 March and 2 km to its east, it was held from 12 to 17 March and a kilometre to its south, it was organised from 24 to 30 March. The commemorations typically comprised the singing of ballads by singers who trained for this purpose. Accompanying them were artistes playing percussion instruments such as the tambourine and drum. An array of actors, dressed up in period costumes, enacted the ballad as the singers performed. Audiences frequently participated in the enactments, children teased the actors and grown-ups offered continuous suggestions to performers.

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[7] There is some controversy over the identity of the brothers, with activists affiliated with the CPI(ML-L) and the RSS claiming that the brothers were Rajput.

As Yankah (2001: 230) reminds us, folk tales play an important role in the repertoire of struggle. The teller weaves the plot and characterisation to reflect society's values but also ridicules social excesses and failings within the political hierarchy. In this case, the public performance of the ballad calls into question the extant distribution of power in society. The central characters in the ballad interrogate social inequality by battling landlords who exploited agricultural labourers with whom the characters shared the same socio-economic position. The caste identity of the labourers they defended is unimportant in the narration, indicating that Dina and Bhadri sacrificed their lives for exploited people in general, rather than for members of this or that community. The cross-caste solidarities promoted by the heroism of the brothers are implicit in the narrations. At the same time, such solidarities are made explicit by highlighting the view that the last rites of the two brothers were performed by Yadav cowherds. The sentiment that members of different castes were involved in shared struggles against the exploiting classes, whose self-abrogated superiority they refused to recognise, expresses a very powerful vision of the struggle for justice.

The privileged communities' resistance to the Musahars' use of loudspeakers threatened to turn violent. Elderly members of the Musahar community, some of whom, like Domi Rishi, were active participants of the land occupation movements supported by the CPI(M/L-L), recalled that they approached a block-level functionary of the Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS) with whom they were acquainted. They apprised this functionary of the threats to which they were being subjected and appealed to him for help. The MSS functionary obliged. He and his colleagues mobilised the support from Yadav politicians affiliated with the Janata Dal to rein in the police. The use of loudspeakers in the commemorations has remained unchallenged since then. The MSS has since provided logistics support to the commemorations in the locality. It contributed to hiring the costumes and the audio devices. The concrete platforms I observed were also constructed with its assistance; they had been no more than mud platforms till just a few years ago.

III

Advancing egalitarian ideals, instituting egalitarian protocols

Baviskar and Sundar (2008) argue that subaltern groups often make claims on the state and deploy the language of civil society. Even when people protest the actions of actors in the state, they appeal to its 'universalising vocabulary' (Corrigan and Sayer 1985: 7). The Musahar agricultural labourers, whose political actions are discussed earlier, actively engaged with the political–economic sphere. By occupying the excess properties claimed by landlords as their own, they sought the enforcement of the legal and constitutional provisions instituted by the state. Their insistence on using microphones was bolstered by the support extended to them by Janata Dal politicians who were able to use their own control over the state in Bihar to prevent members of the Musahar community from being bullied.

However, the resonance of my ethnographic material with the arguments advanced by Baviskar and Sundar (2008) is only partial. A careful consideration compels me to be sceptical of the claims that egalitarian impulses are only ever inculcated by taking recourse to the universalising vocabulary of the state or depends upon the diffusion and percolation of modern ideals encapsulated in the political–economic sphere. This becomes clearer when we begin to appreciate the claims in which these practices were anchored.

I have pointed to the ways in which my interlocutors invoked notions of *izzat* (dignity) and *samman* (honour) to justify the land occupations. Although my interlocutors were confident that they were well within the law while undertaking these activities, they did not invoke the language of the law or of the constitution while recalling the motivations for making their claims. The notions of *nyay* (justice), izzat, *barabari* (equality) and samman were more prominent. Not once during my frequent conversations was the language of *adhikar* or *haq* (rights) used by my interlocutors to justify their actions or to anchor their claims. In invoking the language of justice, dignity, equality and honour, my interlocutors appeared to be emphasising the importance of reordering social relationships rather than seeking access to their legal or constitutional rights.

Rather, it appears that the humanist tradition of the radical poet-saints of the 16th century and collective memories of folk heroes who battled oppression and inequality provide the incubators for ideas of social equality, justice and dignity. The teachings of such saints are conventionally analysed as constituents of the Bhakti movement, thereby emphasising their spiritual contributions. Breaking from this convention, Gokhale-Turner (1981) makes a case for examining these movements as *vidroha* (revolts) rather than *bhakti* (devotion). Notwithstanding attempts at elite appropriations, the manner in which these poet-saints imagine earthly utopias is fascinating. In the study region of north Bihar, the legacy of Kabir appears to be of primary importance. In this vein, Omvedt (2008) identifies the egalitarian teachings of Kabir, Ravidas and other popular saints as marking significant *interruptions* vis-à-vis India's dominant hierarchical traditions.

Gopal Guru reminds us that the inscriptions of 'egalitarian protocols' (2009: 222) by subaltern classes of the Indian society are among the most far-reaching achievements of the Indian democracy. Through such protocols, subaltern classes convey their expectation of being treated as social equals by people who possess greater wealth and social status. Even though they may not be treated as such, the subaltern classes' belief that they are of equal worth as the dominant classes makes the imagination of equality central to their social practice. The discussion of the ethnographic material earlier shows that such imaginations of equality were not mere abstractions for the Musahar landless agricultural labourers but they informed their political practice. The assertions on land and on public spaces reflected the subaltern classes' attempt to institute egalitarian protocols vis-à-vis local elites. As becomes clear from an analysis of my interlocutors' commentaries, the teachings of Kabir and the heroism of the legendary brothers Dina and Bhadri appear to provide enduring inspiration for their egalitarian assertions.

It is tempting to fold discussions about subaltern classes' attempts to institute 'egalitarian protocols' within a history of the European Enlightenment and its attendant practices of humanistic individualism. The account presented above does not anticipate such teleology. For instance, in describing the land occupations, subalterns were not referring to participants as aggregates of individuals or as members of a certain class, but by the communal identities, such as Dusadhs, Kevats and Musahars. Although they avoided the use of the word 'caste' to describe themselves, the way in which their collective identity was anchored in a communal identity is unmistakable.[8] However, their invocations point to their espousal of egalitarian ideals, although not in the ways anticipated by European Enlightenment. Such espousals resonate with the perspectives that underscore the endogenous potentialities for the emergence of ideals that are mistakenly folded into the narratives of the Enlightenment (Bayly 2004; Buck-Morss 2009; Bulag 1998; Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998; Trouillot 1995; Washbrook 2009).

IV

Recovering the legacy of 'autochthonous radicalism'

An analytical approach that foregrounds the egalitarian claims made by subalterns might be taken to imply an affinity with Subaltern Studies scholars and other postcolonial theorists who seek to 'undo the Eurocentrism produced by the West's trajectory' (Prakash 1994: 1475; also see Chatterjee 1993; De Kock 1992). In thinking about the ways in which subaltern groups inhabiting the 'traditional' space of the socio-cultural sphere respond to the 'modern' impulses of the political–economic sphere, Dipesh Chakrabarty invites us to think about the ideal subaltern as one who survives 'actively, even joyously, on the assumption that the statist instruments of domination will always belong to somebody else and never aspires to them' (2002: 36). Indeed, in the hands of the scholars affiliated with and inspired by the Subaltern Studies Collective, the figure of the 'subaltern' provides the analytic space from where the Eurocentric tropes of modernity, progress and others such as 'universal' ideas are challenged. Against Guha's initial exposition of the subaltern as the 'mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country' (1982: 4), Gayatri Spivak subsequently clarified that 'everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern' (see De Kock 1992: 45). It is based on her remarks that Chakrabarty locates the subaltern as one that resists 'our own conceptions of totalities' (2002: 36). Building on the work of Gyanendra Pandey (1998), Chakrabarty affirms that the 'ideal' subaltern seeks autonomy from totalising values of modernity, rationality and universality and aims to preserve the fragment that constitutes the essence of their existence.

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[8] This observation resonates with the perspective that the hierarchical aspect of caste is dissolving into ethnic-like identities (Bayly 2001; Fuller 1996; Gupta 2005a; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994).

However, subalterns do not only seek to defend their autonomy or preserve the fragment. The two cases outlined above indicate subaltern assertions—the assertions they make on public spaces and private properties. In advancing their claims, subalterns do not shy away from negotiating with representatives of the state or local elites. Indeed, they want to inflect the universal discourses with notions of justice, equality and dignity.

An approach outlining subaltern negotiations with elites appears to resonate with Partha Chatterjee's (2004, 2012) formulation of political society. Partha Chatterjee (2004) argues that the zone of political society is marked by particularistic claims anchored in notions of generosity, kindness and paternalism of specific politicians and identified bureaucrats. He provides the example of squatters seeking to negotiate with state authorities who want to evict them from land on which they have illegally settled. Chatterjee emphasises their demand to be exempted from the application of the law, rather than to change it. In the cases he describes, the state authorities do indeed agree to these particularistic claims and the suggested improvisations. Generalising this insight, he suggests that 'it is the theorisation of these improvisations that has become the task of postcolonial political theory' (ibid.: 19).

However, unlike the logic of particularistic claims made by the denizens of political society, the notions of justice, dignity and honour discussed by the participants of the cases above refer to universalistic claims. They insist on appealing to a universalistic framework that signals a re-imagination of social relationships away from the hierarchies that members of the 'oppressor castes' seek to perpetuate in the name of tradition. In imagining a society where 'no question of high or low would arise', they articulate a political horizon.[9] The notion of a horizon offers analysts the possibility to reflect on the unpredictable and contingent ways in which social relationships are re-imagined. Just as the horizon is ever-shifting, so is the change associated with political imagination. Such processes of political imagination signal subaltern populations' endogenous interrogation of the hierarchical society.

While outlining the endogenous provenance of egalitarian ideals, I am wary of approaches that valourise 'critical traditionalism'. Proponents of a 'critical traditionalist' approach argue that Indian traditions are inherently dynamic and contain the seeds of transformation. For instance, Ashis Nandy calls for a 'creative, critical use of modernity within traditions' (1987: 121). Such an approach finds favour with Chakrabarty because it is 'critical of post-Enlightenment rationalism as an overall guide to living' (2002: 40). However, in presenting an impression of unbroken continuity in Indian traditions, these scholars elide over the interrogations, disjunctures and conflicts that mark its socio-cultural sphere.

A potentially interesting formulation to think about the egalitarian assertions by subalterns has recently been advanced by Akio Tanabe (2007). Tanabe refers to a 'post-postcolonial transformation' in contemporary India to analyse the endogenous potentialities for building local democracy. He argues that subalterns are reinterpreting community 'from one based on hegemonic values of hierarchy and domination to one based on the subalternate value of ontological equality' (ibid.: 569). The post-postcolonial transformation is the erasure of the disjuncture between the 'traditional' society and the 'modern' state as the values associated with the latter develop endogenously within the former. Tanabe locates the source of this transformation at the conjunction of institutional reformation of local self-government undertaken in 1992 and a reinterpretation of the sacrificial ethic pertaining to caste to downplay hierarchy and emphasise equality.

The discussion of the ethnographic material presented above speaks partially[10] to the perspective offered by Tanabe (2007). The account presented in this article cautions scholars from assuming that modernist values stem solely from the political–economic sphere. Egalitarian impulses are not entirely exogenous to the socio-cultural sphere, which is a terrain of conflict and contest. In their assertions and contentions vis-à-vis elites, subalterns make frequent efforts to appropriate the instruments of the political–economic sphere rather than retreating into the socio-cultural sphere. In advancing their assertions, they take recourse to egalitarian ideals invoking the notion of justice, honour, dignity and equality.

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[9] I borrow the notion of 'political horizon' from Aletta Norval (2007) to highlight the aspiration for social change. In doing so, I follow an expansive definition of the 'political' to refer to the collective, if somewhat contentious, processes of self-making and subject-making (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

[10] I offer a critical engagement with Tanabe's fascinating formulation in Roy (2016).

Distinct from the perspectives offered by Subaltern Studies, political society, 'critical traditionalism' and 'post-postcolonialism', I find Omvedt's (2008) attention relevant to the legacy of 'autochthonous radicalism' (Khare 1984). An appreciation of such legacy encourages social analysts to take seriously the endogenous interrogations to which subalterns subject hierarchical assumptions of the privileged classes in the Indian society. Not only have they sought to defend themselves from the depredations of the elites, they have also imagined political horizons that anticipate a just and fair world. Their interrogations of hierarchy and assertion of egalitarian ideals make them incubators of modernity.

Dipesh Chakrabarty is correct in noting that the phenomenon of modernity 'is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe' (2000: 4). The solution to this problem appears to me to discard the notion that the route to modernity lies via Europe, rather than, as Chakrabarty proposes, to discard the notion of modernity itself. If we consider the assertion of egalitarian ideals in society to be the centrepiece of modernity, then we have to take seriously the quotidian ways in which subaltern classes forge and uphold such ideals. A more serious consideration of the popular utopias that inform 'autochthonous radicalism' alerts us to endogenous provenance of modernity not only in India but elsewhere in the world.

V

Conclusion

Scholars have generally assumed that the impetus for democratisation and diffusion of egalitarian ideals stem from the modernising efforts of the political–economic sphere in India. This assumption has been critiqued as misplaced by a range of critical commentators who remain wary of the ‘modern’ state intruding into ‘traditional’ domains. Against both these strands of the literature, I have argued that the lens of ‘autochthonous radicalism’ enables analysts to consider the ways in which subalterns incubate egalitarian ideals and anticipate modernity.

What does this argument mean for the ongoing processes of democratisation in India? An emphasis on the dynamism of the socio-cultural sphere compels analysts to be attentive to the endogenous assertions that are waged by subaltern populations. Political theory in ‘postcolonial’ societies cannot be restricted to a theory of improvisation. It has to take into account the political horizons of subaltern populations and the continued ways in which they imagine that ‘things can be better’.

Inaugurating the Constituent Assembly in 1950, Dr Ambedkar reminded his countrymen that they would soon be entering a world of contradictions where political equality would co-exist with social inequality. It would appear from his address that he privileged the political sphere as the zone of modernity and condemned the socio-cultural sphere as one of darkness. However, less than a decade later, he led nearly half a million people to Buddhism, reaffirming the dynamism of the socio-cultural sphere and marking a decisive break with the past (Zelliott 1996). The father of the Indian Constitution—the originary document from which the modernity of the contemporary political–economic sphere emanates—was clearly alive to the endogenous potentialities of societal transformation. Political sociologists of democratisation in contemporary India should be as well.

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