UTOPIA IN CRISIS? AGONISTIC SUBALTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY BIHAR

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Abstract: The Subaltern Studies Collective inaugurated an important point of departure in Indian historiography and social sciences by demanding that attention be directed to subalterns (a term adapted from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* prison notebooks) as makers of their own destinies. Their scholarship raises three issues, which are discussed in this paper. The first of these relates to the empirical observation about subaltern resistance to elites. The second pertains to the analytical dichotomy between elite and subaltern modes of conducting politics. The third centres on the valorisation of a putatively coherent fragment that seeks autonomy from the totality of the state. The fundamental problem with the perspective advanced by the Subaltern Studies Scholars stem from the implicit assumption that utopian ideals centred on reclaiming dignity and asserting social equality are necessarily derivative of European Enlightenment ideals.

The Subaltern Studies Collective (hereafter Subalternists) established an important point of departure in Indian historiography and social sciences by borrowing from Gramsci's prison notebooks and directing attention to "subalterns" as makers of their own destinies. Subalternist scholars represent the first serious attempt, in the Indian context, to document a "history-from-below," thereby questioning the elitist biases of history-writing. These departures are anchored in postcolonial analytical frames, and claim to "undo the Eurocentrism produced by the West's trajectory" (Prakash, 1994: 1475). For Chakrabarty (2000) and Chatterjee (2012ab), writing and talking about the subaltern entails critiquing and interrogating the inevitability, certainty and progressive character of categories such as the European Enlightenment and liberal modernity.

Such writing provides a timely corrective to the triumphalist euphoria often accompanying some contemporary scholarship that seeks closures to the possibilities of political imaginations. To that end, I remain sympathetic to the Subalternist interrogation of the normative superiority often attributed to notions of "progress," "reason" and

"improvement." However, I interrogate the conflation of all transformatory imaginations with European Enlightenment categories and argue that such a conceptual gesture undermines the Subalternists' own premise of taking subaltern histories and politics seriously. I particularly urge analysts to pay closer heed to the collective imagination of subalterns – as makers of their own destinies – that "things can be better," without folding these into teleological narratives of "improvement," "modernisation" and "development."

To be sure, the Subalternist position has not remained static in the three decades since it was first propounded. In the works of the Collective's founder Ranajit Guha (1982: 4), the subaltern refers to the "mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country." Subsequently, Spivak (1992: 45) clarified that "everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern." These insights formed the basis for Chakrabarty (2002: 36) outlining the ideal figure of the subaltern as "the person 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."

Against this normative projection of subaltern subjectivity is Chatterjee's (2012a: 26) "realist" dichotomy between the contrasted modes of politics among elites (civil society) and masses (political society). His approach opens up important avenues that question earlier Subalternist emphasis on the resistant subject by emphasising the way in which subalterns seek to negotiate with rather than oppose the state. If in Guha's work (1983: 75), subaltern resistance is a "fight for prestige … in which the rebel appropriated and/ or destroyed the insignia of his enemy's power," in Chatterjee's analysis (2004: 40), subaltern politics is inextricably entangled with elite politics via the domain of political society. These changes are inevitable given the entrenchment of the state's welfare and developmental practices among the subaltern populations and make them the focus of several popular contentions. Analytically, the domain of political society remains distinct from that of civil society

because of the preponderance of moral claims made by the denizens of the former, as against the juridical-legal claims usually advanced by the latter (Chatterjee, 2011).

In formulating this dichotomy, Chatterjee draws on the insights of other Subalternist scholars to argue that "subaltern politics" inhabits an "autonomous" (sometimes "relatively autonomous") domain organised distinctly from what has been called elite politics. Guha (1988) summarises the alleged distinction succinctly. Elite politics is supposedly organised on the basis of "vertical mobilisation" and tends to be centred on the law and constitution-making. Subaltern politics, on the other hand, is organised on the basis of "horizontal mobilisation" such as traditional modes of caste, kinship and territoriality. These modes, although central to peasant insurgency, are thought to permeate urban struggles as well, as Chakrabarty's (1989) fine-grained work on industrial labour in Kolkata avers. Chatterjee draws on these perspectives to argue that the moral claims advanced by subaltern populations through the terrain of political society envisage a differentiated, rather than egalitarian, conception of citizenship.

A more enduring claim by Subaltern Studies scholars has been to question the appropriateness of allegedly universal European Enlightenment concepts as analytic categories to describe goings-on outside of the continent (and the White settler colonies). Chakrabarty's (2000) account of "historical difference" is the most clearly enunciated statement of this argument from among the Subalternist scholars. It is an important argument because it directs attention to the plurality of the present. The distinction drawn in that work between "History 1" and "History 2" is significant, if somewhat simplistic (Hardiman, 2002). The former denotes the history of modern capital, while the latter refers to the multitude of histories in different countries and societies which resist being subsumed under the former. It is this tension between History 1 and History 2 that allows Chakrabarty to endorse Pandey's (1998) defence of the "fragment" – the fragment which does not, or rather cannot "dream the

whole called the state and must, therefore, be suggestive of knowledge forms that are not tied to the will that produces the state." (Chakrabarty, 2002: 35).

THE ARGUMENT

While it is important to recognise the seminal contribution of the Subaltern Studies Collective to correcting the elitist biases of historiography and social sciences, the normative and analytical approaches advocated by these authors ill-serve a rigorous understanding of subaltern politics. Three issues are at stake here. The first of these relates to the empirical observation about subaltern resistance to elites. The second pertains to the alleged analytical dichotomy between elite and subaltern modes of conducting politics. The third is about the valorisation of a putatively essentialist fragment that insists on maintaining its autonomy in respect of the state.

In the first of these issues, the Subalternist scholarship is correct in pointing to the *political* ways in which subalterns interrupt linear narratives suggesting that they assimilate into elitist projects of domination and control. But they essentialse subaltern and elite subjectivities by suggesting that resistance comprises the sum-total of subaltern practices. This characterisation of the autonomous domain of subaltern politics, always in opposition to elite politics is empirically unsustainable, given the high rates of political participation among the poor (Yadav, 2009). As will argued, subalterns combine opposition and coalitions vis-à-vis elites. Against binaries of assimilation and resistance, more analytical attention is to be directed towards agonistic practices of subalterns vis-à-vis elites, howsoever defined. An examination of these "agonistic" practices, following Mouffe (1992, 2007), allow us to appreciate the dialectical, apparently contradictory trajectories of these practices. Such practices straddle the experiences of co-operation and conflict. While these embody

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occasional struggles by different groups of subalterns against co-optation by different groups of elites, they do not necessarily attempt revolution or the annihilation of the latter. These agonistic exchanges are constituted by a complex of predicaments that sometimes result in servility to vis-à-vis local elites, while on other occasions define active protests against the latter's depredations. Yet at other times, subalterns ignore elite interests altogether in advancing their claims, which may nonetheless draw on the latter's modalities of staging demands. In this article, attention is drawn to the agonistic imbrications of subaltern and elite classes.

Second, Subalternist scholars correctly caution analysts against accepting narratives of assimilation into universalising conceptions of statehood and bourgeois citizenship. But in valorising the fragmentary and episodic dimension of subaltern subjectivity, they are inattentive to the numerous ways in which subalterns seek to inflect the "universal" with their own ideals and horizons. In uncritically accepting Gramsci's (1971) description of subaltern subjectivities as being fragmented and episodic, Subalternist scholars remain inattentive to the ways in which subalterns develop and advance universalist conceptions of social and political life. This approach blinds them to the multifaceted struggles for social equality and dignity that subalterns engage in, drawing upon as well as interrogating inherited beliefs and practices. This article emphasises the ways in which subaltern practices dissolve the boundaries between the totality and the fragment and inflect the totality with their allegedly fragmentary and episodic concerns. This is not to disagree with Chatterjee's (1993), Pandey's (1998) and Chakrabarty's (2002) defence of the particular. Rather, it is to guard against an essentialist analysis of the fragmentary and the episodic that endorses the view of these being static and stable.

Third, by emphasising the ways in which subaltern politics diverges from elite politics, Subalternist scholars compel analysts to take different modalities of politics seriously

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without dismissing these as deviations from the norm or as exceptions to the rule of liberal democracies. Their analytic approach enables social scientists to document the ways in which the exclusionary effects of liberal democracies are contested by subalterns. However, relegating these contestations to the moral realms of political society or episodic defences appealing for exemptions from the norm, does a great disservice to subaltern claims for reconfiguring norms and the rules. The neat analytical mapping of subaltern politics onto differentiated conceptions of citizenship expressed through the moral claims of political society and of elite politics onto egalitarian conceptions of citizenship, voiced in the juridical-legal domain of civil society does not capture the claims of social dignity, justice and equality that subalterns articulate vis-à-vis the elite classes.

The fundamental problem with the perspective advanced by the Subaltern scholars stems from their monochromatic understanding of the Enlightenment and the assumption that political demands centred on reclaiming and asserting social equality are necessarily derivative of European Enlightenment ideals. In doing so, they ignore a rich history of "autochthonous radicalism" that have been pursued by subalterns, rather than elites, in democratising Indian society (Khare, 1979). Subalternist scholars ironically, and tragically, ignore the egalitarian impulses that have been sought to be forged on the anvil of endogenous social transformations. In India, these transformations have sought to *break* with the apparently seamless continuities of tradition (Omvedt, 2008). The valorisation of the fragment, of resistance and of moral communities betrays a teleology which undermines Chakrabarty's otherwise well-considered advice to analysts to "move away from the certitudes that operate within the gesture that the knowing, judging, willing subject always already knows what is good for everybody, ahead of any investigation" (Chakrabarty 2002: 36).

The argument of this article is thus empirical, analytical and normative. Empirically, I argue that subalterns engage in agonistic political practices vis-à-vis elites, deploying an array of strategies and tactics to advance their claims. Analytically, I suggest that analysts need to seriously think about the theorisation of the ways in subalterns rupture socialities based on morality and engage with legal-juridical technologies. Normatively, I question the justification for privileging the fragmentary subjectivity of the subaltern. Above all, my theoretical argument is directed against the ironic Eurocentrism of Subaltern scholars who ignore the ways in which subalterns articulate egalitarian political horizons by interrogating and rupturing their inherited beliefs and practices. By assuming that the universalising values inhered in these egalitarian horizons are always derived from or mimic European Enlightenment categories, Subaltern scholars betray and delegitimise the ideas and aspirations of subalterns. Such assumptions about subaltern subjectivities lead Subalternist scholars to conclusions that obfuscate rather than illuminate a realistic understanding of subaltern political engagements.

THE SCOPE

In this paper, I will elaborate each of these themes and set these in conversation with other criticisms of the Subaltern Studies Collective, some of which present us with even greater *problematiques* than the subject of their study. In the next section, the study locations and the methodology followed in this analysis are introduced. This is followed by a discussion of two organisations that claim to advance the cause of the subaltern and have a considerable following in the study localities. It will be shown that through these organisations, subalterns embrace the modalities of politics associated with what the

Subalternist scholars have called "elite politics," particularly political parties and state legislation.

This is followed by a discussion of the provenance of some of the egalitarian ideas that seem to inflect the political thought and practices of the rural poor. Here, I will argue, with Khare (1984) and Omvedt (2007), for the need to appreciate the egalitarian impulses of autochthonous assertions that inform contemporary political and social struggles. This will enable a clarification of my theoretical stance vis-á-vis the Subalternist privileging of "autonomous" politics and resistant subjectivities. It will also allow me to distinguish my position from that of "critical traditionalists" such as Nandy (1987, 1995) who argue that the seeds of transformation lie in the critical engagement *within* traditions. And finally, it will emphasise why my argument cannot be folded into the Enlightenment-focused teleology advocated by Sarkar (1993) and Chhibber (2013).

METHODS

Given that my framework foregrounds practices of assertions by subalterns, I rely on the qualitative analysis of ethnographic data in Bihar, India. The data comprises notes from observing interpersonal interactions and the recollections among respondents of past and contemporary events. It was collected over five months in two selected Gram Panchayat wards in rural north-eastern Bihar during 2009 and 2010. Much of the material presented in this article draws on my experience with agricultural labourers of the Musahar community. I follow local usage among my Musahar interlocutors in describing them as members of a community (*samaj*) rather than caste (*jaati*).[1] Many were also ambivalent about 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. As a

result, and given the widespread use of the name "Musahar" among activists and academics, it is retained for this article.

Many members of the Musahar community of them are affiliated with supra-local organisations that seek engagement with the state rather than its repudiation. One of these is the Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist-Liberation) or CPI(ML/L), a party espousing militant parliamentary communism since 1992. The other organisation is the Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS), an organisation that styles itself as a "cultural" organisation. Interviews were conducted with key leaders of both organisations, and these interviews form an important source of data for the analysis presented in this article. During fieldwork I was witness to several public exchanges between members of these organisations and their leaders as well as animated conversations among members of the Musahar community about the role and importance of these organisations in their lives. At times I was invited to join some of these conversations; at other times I remained a spectator, awarethat the conversations conducted in my presence may have contained a performative element.

In this study, my discussion on subaltern political practices is situated in the concrete socio-economic reality of the study locality. To that end, a census was conducted of the locality in order to develop a sense of the prevailing patterns of occupations, schooling attainments and land holdings among members of different communities. Detailed results are reported in Roy (forthcoming).

INEQUALITIES

The survey clarified that members of the Musahar community suffer systematically exclusion from any of the more remunerative and secure livelihood opportunities available to others. At 18% of the population, they are completely unrepresented among the owner-

cultivators and retailers of the locality. Indeed, all but 20 of the locality's 400-odd Musahar households depend on agricultural labour and other casual work for their household income. Their systemic exclusion from ownership over productive resources as well as from well-remunerated livelihood options is stark.

The study region is situated in the fringe of the erstwhile *Zamindari* estate of the Darbhanga Raj. Its location on the Kosi floodplain makes it extremely fertile, but also prone to devastating floods. Through the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the colonial government declared its chosen estate-owners (known as *jamindars*) as exclusive owners of private property. They were granted the privilege of levying revenues on the rural population. Unprecedentedly for the Indian countryside, customary authority and revenue-extracting prerogatives were fused in the person of the estate-holder (or his lessees). The material, political and social resources of the *jamindar* was bolstered by the tenurial arrangement, under which they paid a fixed sum of money to the colonial government each year, and retained the bulk of their levies for their personal consumption. So long as these revenue-targets were met, the *jamindars* were free to manage their properties as they pleased. In practice, this led to a widespread and unprecedented degree of subinfeudation of property (Guha, 1963).[2] As lynchpins of the system of "indirect rule" established by the colonial government, they ruled with impunity, invented traditions and titles as they pleased, dispensed with many of the customary obligations of their precursors, and imposed all kinds of conventional and innovative levies (Frankel, 1989).

Darbhanga Raj was among the largest estates. In north Bihar, where the estate was located, the tenurial arrangement mirrored the patterns of social stratification in the area. Estate owners tended to be drawn from the privileged communities (Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasths and Pathan), while their lessees typically belonged to so-called Shudra communities such as Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris (although it was not uncommon for members of the

"upper" caste communities to take on the roles of lessees). The actual toilers on the land were often either landless agricultural laborers or sharecroppers, almost always drawn from communities stigmatised as 'low' caste (Kevats), 'untouchable' (Musahar) and 'primitive' (Santhal).

Guha and his colleagues were of course correct in suggesting that this hierarchy was not "feudal." Being a product of colonial governance, it was not a relic of the past. Furthermore, as Frankel (1989) notes, several of the customary obligations owed by "higher-ups" towards their subordinates in feudal hierarchies, were done away with by the *maliks* and replaced by a litany of claims and cesses – often invented and then masked under the garb of "tradition" – that further broke the back of those at or near the bottom of the pyramid. These claims and cesses were reproduced at each level of the hierarchy, buttressed by recourse to caste hierarchies. Bayly (2001) observes that the sedenterisation of agriculture during the eighteenth and nineteenth century made it imperative for cultivators to deploy idioms of tradition that made settled labour available for use in the cultivation process. This settled peasantry was not therefore a repository of an unadulterated past, but was the product of contemporary developments in the nineteenth century.

DEPARTURES FROM RESISTANCE, FRAGMENTS AND MORAL COMMUNITIES

Subalternist scholars privilege "resistance," "fragment" and "moral community" as analytic spaces. assume privileged analytic spaces for preservation for Subalternist scholars. However, the material presented in this section urges scholars to consider the heterogeneity of subaltern subjectivities. In what follows, two cases are presented to problematise the

Subalternist characterisations of subjectivities. One of these pertains to the experiences of subalterns who affiliate with the CPI(ML/L). Another relates to the experiences of subalterns who are members of with the MSS.

Three points will be signposted. The first is the reiteration of the argument that subaltern political subjectivities are agonistic: they combine contest and collaboration, resistance and negotiation, defence and offence. I will emphasise subaltern attempts to forge vertical linkages and complement their horizontal affiliations. The second is to highlight the ways in which these encounters call into question the dichotomous frames of subaltern politics as distinct from elite politics. The third is to call attention to the way in which these encounters lead to alternative universalistic imaginations rather than the preservation of the fragment. I find it intellectually impairing to analytically preclude any notion of popular utopia. Subalternist scholars are hampered in their appreciation of subalterns' popular utopias because of their uncritical acceptance, I believe, of Gramsci's idea that "even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves" (as cited by Chakrabarty, 2002: 34).

Encroachments into property: Militant parliamentary communism of the poor

After Independence in 1947, under the threat of insurrections by marginal farmers, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers, the Bihar State Government introduced a series of legislations in order to bring about tenancy reforms and the redistribution of land. However, the tardy implementation of these legislations as well as concerted resistance by landlords led to continued assertions by sharecroppers and other landless agricultural laborers to occupy the land that they had been personally tilling for generations. These occupations

continued well into the middle of the 2000s. Vinay Vishwas, a CPI(ML/L) activist of the Kevat community and now a marginal farmer, recounted:

> The police would routinely harass us. They took away many of our people without any warrants and labeled us Naxalites for breaking the law. But we did not want to fight. We were no match for them and held no weapons. So, [senior CPI(ML/L) activist, a marginal farmer] and we would tell the police, "How dare you call us Naxalite. We have broken no law. The government has a land ceiling legislation in place, but it does not have the guts to implement it. So, we are making its work easy. How dare you say we are breaking the law? You are the ones breaking the law. You are the Naxalite…."

Vishwas' recounting of the exchange with police is fascinating because of the manner in which he disavows any "insurgency" on the part of the CPI(ML/L) cadre their part. He takes great care to distance himself, the others involved in the occupation and the leaders of the CPI(ML/L) from the activities of "Naxalites," a term used to describe various groups of activists who seek to violently overthrow the government and establish a communist state. The term is frequently deployed by state functionaries to denounce attempts by people to enforce the spirit of the government's own legislation, as in the above case. The CPI(ML/L) is a political party committed to combining parliamentary communism with mass mobilisation, having shed its underground activities in 1989. Since then, it has successfully contested elections in different parts of the State, and in 2014 sent six members to the 243-strong Bihar Legislative Assembly.

While Vishwas emphasised the role of party leaders in keeping the police at bay, his *saathis* (comrades, sometimes locally called "partners," in English) in the CPI(ML/L) told of

the fundamental political changes in Bihar from 1989. The State's polity witnessed sweeping changes. The charismatic politician Lalu Prasad Yadav was elected as the Chief Minister in 1990. He and his Janata Dal Party had canvassed support on the grounds that they would restore the dignity (*samman*) of the communities stigmatised as "untouchable" and ridiculed as "backward." The landlords reviled Lalu Yadav's own "backward" caste origins. In turn, he was openly antagonistic towards them, thereby adding to his popularity. Domi Rishi, a CPI(ML/L) activist explained how they rejoiced when Lalu Yadav was sworn in as Chief Minister even though they had never met him, and did not belong to the same caste as him.

Although Lalu Yadav and Janata Dal studiously refused to implement land redistribution, Rishi commended him for not actively opposing their occupation of private properties. Rishi's account resonates with that of Hauser (1993) and Witsoe (2013) who describe the manner in which the Chief Minister 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 political hostilities between Lalu Yadav and the CPI(M/L-L), activists such as Vishwas and Rishi realised that local Janata Dal leaders were sympathetic to their assertions against the landlords. These leaders often pressured the police to stay away from the occupations. Thus, the actions of the landless agricultural labourers and the sharecroppers were buttressed by a variety of intermeshed networks and relationships.

When I asked what impelled them to occupy the land, Vishwas and Rishi looked puzzled. After a brief pause, their friend Abhay Das asked me for my opinion. I suggested that perhaps they did so because the land was productive and it would feed them. They

exchanged glances with one another before Rishi clarified: "We undertook all these difficulties so that our children could lead dignified lives (*ijjat ke saath jee sake*)"

Rishi's explanation that that the struggles for land were so that their children could lead dignified lives directs attention to poor people's imaginations of change. For him, dignified living was about being treated with respect and as equals by others in society. Vishwas, Rishi and their senior CPI(ML/L) comrade assert such ideas when they reject accusations of being law-breakers and instead accuse the police of breaking the law. Their account bears striking similarity to Das' (1983) account of a Bhojpuri widow he interviewed. During their interview, she tells him that for her the struggle against landlords and the police is a matter of dignity and honor.. Such imaginations are not predicated on a revolutionary overthrow of the Indian state (as Naxalites would have it), or quiet assimilation into it (as voters do) either. Rather, they seek to advance quite specific notions of collective life whereby they live honourably.

Cultural encroachments on public spaces

Land occupations were not the only collective actions by members of the Musahar community. A major point of contention was the commemoration of two key figures in their tradition, the heroic brothers Dina and Bhadri. The festival is observed during the months of March-April (Phagun-Chaitra), in memory of the battle between the two landless brothers and a rapacious landlord and his several feudatories.[3] To many Musahars, the brothers are heroes to be emulated, because of their valour in battle and principled stand against an oppressor. Some believe they possessed supernatural powers. Folk tales play an important role in the repertoire of struggle (Yankah, 2001: 230). The teller weaves the plot and characterisation to reflect society's values, but also ridicules social excesses and foibles

within the political hierarchy.[4] As with so many folk tales, there is no one plot to which the narrators of this ballad adhere. Not only do the names of the landlords vary, but also his specific indulgences and atrocities as well as the stories of what happen to the two brothers at the end. The apparent absence of a coherent plot is marginal to the symbolic value of the tale, which provides an opportunity for recalling deeds of valor, pay respect to one's ancestors and have some entertainment.

Public performances of the festival by Musahars were, by norm, frowned upon by local elites. They were to be limited to the Musahar *tola* by the fiat of the local elites. A particularly contentious issue was the use of microphones during the festivities. When the Musahars organising the festivities began to use microphones during the 1990s, the local elites viewed the "noise" as a nuisance, and ordered them to stop. Recalling the arguments over the objections to the use of microphones, a couple of my interlocutors said,

> The *dabang jatis* (oppressor castes) first said it would disturb everyone. What did they mean by "everyone," we asked? There were over a thousand of "us" here, compared to less than a couple of hundred of them. 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. Nevertheless, we agreed to use microphones only during the day.

The demand among the locality's Musahars for the use of the microphone represents an active assertion on the public space. Its focus was to do what everyone else has been doing; that is, using microphones during festivities. It was also to secure recognition from the wider community for their observances and festivities, thereby unhinging these from

particularistic associations with a specific community. It was a manifestation of a positive power, to borrow from CP White (1986: 50), intended as a deliberate infringement on a public space hitherto dominated by privileged communities, rather than a defensive tactic to preserve a relic of the past. Although their cultural identity formed the centrepiece of their actions, the organisers of the festival clearly did not subscribe to a preservationist approach to culture, tradition and festival. Rather than attempting to keep their traditions away from the gaze of the general public sphere, they were intent on making the Dina Bhadri festival a truly "public" event.

The organisers of the festival gradually began to flout the "daytime only" rule. In retaliation, the elites called for the police to silence the festivities. With the threat of the police looming, the organisers approached local Janata Dal leaders for help. The MSS also got involved and intensified the pressure on block and district-level leaders of the Janata Dal to ensure that the police was reigned in. The local elites were sullenly resigned to the "solution." There were to be no encumbrances from them on the organisation of the festivals thereafter.

The Musahars who approached block- and district-level Janata Dal politicians showed no inhibitions from engaging with the "vertical" institutions of political parties. They sought intervention from one arm of the state to keep away another. They did so in order to be able to celebrate their observances, just as everyone else was doing without having to retreat into their hamlets whenever they did so.

BEYOND RESISTANCE, FRAGMENTS AND MORAL COMMUNITIES

Scrutiny of the above narratives reveals the heterogeneous and multi-faceted ways in which subalterns exert their political agency vis-à-vis local elites, compelling a

reconsideration of flattened narratives of binaries between resistance and co-option, fragments and totalities, and moral communities and juridical-legal ones. These encounters were not unique to the region of my fieldwork: Witsoe (2012) and Moore and Matthew (2010) draw attention to the manner in which Lalu Yadav and his subordinate leaders shackled the operation of the various apparatus of the state in Bihar in order to prevent them from intervening in favour of the privileged castes. To be sure, Chatterjee has signalled some of the conceptual moves by introducing discussions of political society. But this notion, too, does not do justice to capture the dynamism of subaltern political engagements.

Resistance?

The subaltern subjects in the afore-mentioned cases compel analysts to think beyond "resistance to elites" in two important senses: first, by transgressing and advancing their views of the world through practical and public affirmation of *their* claims rather than a reaction to elite claims; and second, by negotiating and engaging with supra-local elites in a bid to undermine local elites. The sharecroppers and agricultural labourers who planned and enacted the occupation of the agricultural properties held by the *jamindars* in flagrant violation of the spirit of land redistribution legislations were not only resisting or defending the little they had; they sought to make public their claims on the land. In this, they were explicitly supported by their comrades from privileged classes and implicitly (after 1989) by actors in the state (what Chatterjee would call "political society"). Likewise, those who used microphones against the *fiat* of local elites were not trying to preserve their culture, but to make it part of the public domain. They too were supported by supra-local politicians. In both cases, the subalterns sought the support of supra-local elites in order to undermine the debilitating influence of local elites.

Rather than referring to the subaltern as the "resistant" subject then, it might be useful to follow the leads provided by Mignolo (2005: 404) to think about the category of the popular, and in particular his reminder to "look at social action and movements from the perspective of the people rather than from the perspective of the (s)tate." Indeed, as reported above, my interlocutors scarcely invoked the notion that they were "resisting" anybody or any institution. Rather, they were asserting their social equality in a bid to advance their view of a better world where they and their descendants would be able to lead lives of dignity.

Fragments?

The subaltern protagonists in both cases sought to inflect the totality with their episodic and fragmentary experiences. They refuse to constrict their views on economic and cultural matters to the private sphere but sought instead to publicise and politicise these. The sharecroppers and landless labourers who were supported by the CPI(M/L-L) or the organisers of the festival whom the MSS supported did not appear to merely defend their fragmentary and episodic claims. After all, the elites did not restrict them from remaining landless or from organising their observances quietly in their hamlets. Rather, they sought to assert their social equality and reclaim their dignity vis-à-vis local elites. Thereby, they attempted to reconstitute the "totality" and make their experiences and worldviews integral to this totality.

This is an important point that helps us think about the relationship between the fragment and the totality. Laclau (1996) reminds us that apparent contradictions between totalities and fragments – or "universals" and "particulars" – are really conflicts over the terms on which totalities and universals are constituted. In this vein, the world that my interlocutors envisaged entailed an idea of what they would like the totality to be. They interrogated the

manner in which the elites had hitherto constituted the totality by insisting that their particular practices and aspirations be recognised and respected by those who had hitherto scorned them. Their interrogations did not mean that they were assimilated into the universal. By insisting that their experiences be recognised and respected, they were reconfiguring the nature of the totality. Their insistence on commemorating their heroes in public demonstrated that they were unwilling to align their cultural practices to more acceptable ones that could potentially help them blend in. Not only did they did not hesitate to affirm their difference, they were insistent on making it a constitutive part of the totality.

Differentiated citizenship?

Much of this discussion appears to resonate with Chatterjee's (2004, 2011, 2012b) accounts of the ways in which political society provides the space for subalterns to practice politics. Chatterjee draws an analytic distinction between political society and civil society. By drawing this distinction, he encourages social scientists to think about the ways in which subalterns actually do negotiate with elites and inflect their views of the world upon the totalities encompassed by the state as "concrete selves necessarily acting within networks of collective obligations and solidarities to work out strategies of coping with, resisting, or using to their advantages the vast array of technologies of power deployed by the modern state" (Chatterjee, 2012b: 207). Chatterjee apparently takes into account the growing governmentalisation of Indian society and reveals the disjuncture between democracy and modernity. In order to make sense of subaltern politics in the era of increased governmentalisation, Chatterjee urges analysts to rethink of subaltern politics as the "politics of the governed." However, there are two major points of dissonance between my analysis and the perspective of political society offered by Chatterjee.

The way in which Chatterjee imbues subaltern politics with a moral substance contrasts with the manner in which subalterns themselves invoke their intersectional identities to frame their claims. This is the first point of dissonance. For Chatterjee (2004: 57), a crucial part of subaltern politics, or the politics of the governed as he calls them in his recent work, is "*to give to the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community*." (emphasis in original). As he elaborates through the case of squatters encroaching upon the property of the Indian Railways, subaltern politics is characterised by metaphors of shared kinship and familial terms. It is these metaphors, rather than notions of shared membership in associations or prior cultural affinities, that determine subaltern political engagement. On the other hand, through the two cases discussed in this paper, it is clear that there are heterogeneous imageries invoked by subalterns in their collective struggles against elites. The landless sharecroppers and agricultural workers who occupied agricultural properties of local *jamindars* referred to each other as comrades (*saathis*). They invoked memories of shared oppression and exploitation rather than either Liberal notions of shared affiliations or communitarian notions of cultural affinity. The Musahars who insisted on using loudspeakers undoubtedly shared the same cultural affinities but these were not imbued with moral attributes. In enacting their political performances, the Musahars and the landless sharecroppers and agricultural workers invoked overlapping and intersectional identities of caste and class, as well as gender and generation.

The second point of dissonance stems from Chatterjee's claim that subalterns endorse a differentiated citizenship (Chatterjee, 2012: XX). In fact, my interlocutors appear to want to *rupture* these. They are vocal about the ideas of social equality. In both cases, the protagonists justified their actions in the name of universal values such as social equality, justice and dignity, rather than to defend the moral habitus they inhabited. The invocation of these values does not detract the attention of these protagonists from the contingencies of

negotiating with the government and other political actors to access targeted welfare programmes and social protection schemes. Rather, it serves to express their political horizons that represent a firmament that allows them to imagine alternative possibilities and other ways of being. Such horizons evade attainment for they are ever receding. But these recessions incite the imaginations of further possibilities. Far from wanting to preserve or defend the moral habitus they inhabit, subalterns imagine what they consider to be a better world.

A major contribution of the Subaltern scholars has been to direct attention to the political nature of the assertions and claims made by subalterns, against the then-prevailing notion that subaltern engagements were somehow "pre-political" (Hobsbawm, 1960). However, in analysing the political nature of these assertions, they over-emphasise subaltern difference. There is no doubt that the state and associated elites have sought to replicate the "rule of colonial difference" in post-colonial India. But to deduce from these elitist projects that subalterns have fallen in line contradicts their own ideas about the nature of resistance. While the state and associated elites have sought to perpetuate difference, there is no reason to believe that the subalterns are so completely hegemonised that they consent and contribute to sustaining this difference.

EQUALITY BEYOND LIBERALISM: EXCEEDING ENLIGHTENMENT TELEOLOGY

My discontent with the Subaltern scholars perspective does not necessarily mean an endorsement of the teleological claims made by Liberal scholars in the name of "modernisation," "improvement" and "development." While Subalternist scholarship should be criticised for essentialising the fragment as an immutable entity worthy of preservation,

their break with liberal teleologies is an important contribution, and needs to be deepened. However, this break is neither an innovation of Subalternist scholarship nor unique to it. It characterises the work of many post-structuralist authors who, incidentally, take pains to distance themselves from the post-colonial *oeuvre* with which Subalternist scholars unabashedly associate their intellectual project (Marie-Smith, 1996). Authors, such as Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière have been trenchant critics of a linear teleological approach in Marxism; at the same time, their work is anchored in the notion of a radical and pluralist democracy, the approach to which is "contingent" and "undecidable," and forged through the articulation of distinct political struggles. Their commitment to a non-teleological approach pits them, alongside the Subalternist scholars, against social scientists who argue that assimilation into Liberal modernity is both pre-ordained and desirable. However, unlike Subalternist scholars, they are open to the possibilities of popular utopias that do not always converge on a fixed end-point, a teleology that entails limiting the political imagination to narratives of modernisation.

Against the Subalternist scholars who suggest that resistance, fragments and differentiated conceptions of citizenship constitute the political imagination of subalterns, the agonistic perspective is an instructive one for this purpose. Of particular interest is Mouffe's (1992, 2007) formulation. She advances a notion of politics that espouses difference so long as it does not violate emancipatory claims. Drawing on Schmitt's "friend/enemy" distinction, she urges us to recognise the impossibility of eliminating conflict. Instead of wishing it away, or striving to contain it within electoral institutions, Mouffe's agonistic account enables us to think about democratic processes as spaces which supply an arena for conflict. Proponents of an agonistic account of politics simultaneously criticise the Liberal model of democracy associated with the writings of Rawls as well as the communitarian approach of Sandel. On the one hand, they find the Rawlsian approach to be inattentive to different and often

conflicting ideas of political life. On the other hand, they assess the communitarian approach to be insufficiently sensitive to the ethical and political commitments that people share. Subscribing to an agonistic account of politics entails perceiving democracy as a space where differences are not only tolerated but actively encouraged.

Proponents of the agonistic view distinguish their understanding of conflict from antagonism. While antagonism is violent and involves physical liquidation of adversaries, agonistic conflict pertains to contests over identities and subjectivities that shape individuals and collective selves. Such contests are conceptually distinct from the strategic bargains that political entrepreneurs strike with each other in order to maximise electoral gains. We might follow Foucault (1982: 790) in thinking about agonism as "a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation." Analysing people's negotiations through an agonistic optic enables us to extend our understanding of politics to interrogate dichotomous views of proceduralised competition between rivals and unmitigated conflict between antagonists. It helps us to understand politics as a multifaceted contest over material, social and symbolic resources.

An agonistic perspective is also valuable in overcoming the binary between universalistic and particularistic approaches to studying subaltern engagements with elites. It allows us to examine the ambivalence, heterogeneity and multi-dimensionality of these engagements without pigeon-holing these under the rubric of either assimilation or difference. Deploying an agonistic lens helps to understand the *grounds* on which they make claims on their elected representatives, politicians and bureaucrats, as well as upon others in society. Unlike the "deliberative" lens of Cohen (2000), an agonistic optic enables observers to simultaneously examine the power relationships that both anchor and shape poor people's negotiations and the ways in which these relationships are altered through their negotiations.

Where a pluralist lens associated with Dahl (1971) allows the analysis of the the roles of political mediators and other politicians in the study areas, it does not provide the perspectives needed to foreground the imaginations and practices of the poor, which led them to approach these mediators in the first place. The "electoral" lens of Schumpeter (1947) helps even less in a study of politics beyond voting behaviour. An agonistic perspective is also productive in comparison with "postmodern" lenses such as Rorty's (1979) because it does not valorise unmitigated difference and, in fact, seeks to uncover contests over common ground. It helps think about people's negotiations over the terms on which they assert their membership in the political community.

In a trenchant early criticism of the Subaltern Studies Collective, O'Hanlon (1988) asks, "If we accept, as we should, that no hegemony can be so penetrative and pervasive as to eliminate all ground for contestation or resistance, then how are we to configure their presence, if not through liberal humanist notions of subjectivity and agency." She further asserts that the Subaltern scholars appear driven by the "siren attractions of the idea of self-constituting human subject, in a political culture in which free and autonomous individuals represent the highest value."

O'Hanlon's assumption that liberal humanist notions of agency and subjectivity are the only ways through which domination and subordination may be challenged is unfortunate. Such a suggestion undermines the countless struggles against domination, subjugation and subordination waged in India prior to the advent of Liberal modernity under the aegis of colonial rule. Guha's adaptation of the Gramscian insight that hegemony is inherently unstable and precarious has surprisingly been under-used in Subalternist scholarship to reflect on the indigenous origins of these notions. Omvedt (2008) tells us the struggles forged under the Bhakti movements across different parts of South Asia through the seventeenth centuries provided the incubators for ideas of social equality, justice and dignity. The torch-bearers of

these movements included radical thinkers such as Ravidas of northwestern India, Kabir of Gangetic north India and Tukaram of Maharashtra. Interpreting the role of the protagonists of the movements as more social than spiritual, Omvedt makes the convincing case that they anticipated and inspired the thought and practice of anti-caste intellectuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Jotiba Phule, Achhutanand, Ram Manohar Lohia, Bhim Rao Ambedkar and Jogendra Nath Mandal.

Khare (1984) calls attention to the legacy of such "autochtonous radicalism" through an analysis of the ideology espoused by Swami Acchutanand, an anti-caste ascetic whose Adi-Hindu movement took Gangetic north India by storm in the later years of the first quarter of the twentieth century (see also Jurgensmeyer, 1987; Gooptu, 2001). Describing the beliefs of the chief protagonists of the Bhakti movement as "being full of humanism," Swami Acchutanand argued that "all human beings are equal … the feeling of high and low is an illusion" (cited in Khare, 1984: 84). The political content of his messages is evident from his proclamation of the antagonism between Hindus and Untouchables. This antagonism, he contended, was historically provoked by the conquest and the subjugation of the latter by the former. The Adi-Hindu movement refused to toe the Congress line during the anti-colonial struggle, and insisted on negotiating with the colonial regime directly. Although its success was limited, it did succeed in offering political alternatives to northern India's Dalits and resisted their co-option into the Congress.

Examples of such autochtonous radicalism abound. Agrarian struggles in rural Bihar bear testimony. Although scholars remain divided as to whether mobilisation was primarily one of farmers (*kisans*) against estate-owners (*jamindars*), or of sharecroppers/ agricultural labourers (*bataidars/ kamias*) against their immediate owners (*maliks*), there is some agreement that Bihar's countryside was in ferment from the 1920s. The farmers, under the leadership of the militant ascetic Swami Sahajanand eventually aligned with the Congress

Socialists, the Communist Party of India and the All India Forward Block (Das, 1982).

During a brief period of collaboration, in 1936 the joint Peasants' Manifesto demanded the abolition of the Zamindari system and the cancellation of rural debts. Contests between the farmers and the estate-holders were only one axis of the conflict in the countryside. Agricultural labourers and sharecroppers frequently protested their *maliks*' imposition of levies. One such was the celebrated Santhal Uprising that rocked northeastern Bihar's Purnea district from 1938 to 1942, although it was incorporated into the Congress-led Quit India Movement at the later date. Official sources remain divided as to whether the movement was led by the Congress Party, the communists, or other Leftists. Against these reports, Chakravarti (1986) points to at least one instance of the movement being led by a leader of the Santhal community, who collaborated with (rather than followed) the Congress Party. As much as threatening the *Zamindari* system, this movement interrogated the putative unity of the peasants: in negating the marks of their subalternity, the sharecroppers had no option but to question the very basis of a putative rural community. The Kisan Sabhas had meanwhile been firmly anchored in the Congress Party. Characteristically, the Congress Party actively discouraged the sharecroppers from pursuing their demands, as did the organised Communist Party (see Frankel, 1989; Hauser, 1993). The result was that much of the agrarian unrest in the region dissipated within a few years. Nonetheless, the Santhal Uprising was notable for the manner in which it sought to build supra-local alliances with political organisations that were hitherto alien to their political landscape. It was not limited to the horizontal patterns of mobilisation that apparently characterised uprisings of an earlier era when political parties had not yet been instituted, but were characterised by a combination of both horizontal and vertical patterns of mobilisation that marked out their social and political vision for change in the region. That they were consistently betrayed by the political parties and by other

"peasant" organisations – the elites in this case – is another matter, and certainly should not deflect attention from *their intention* to advance their political demands.

Post-Independence, the authority and influence of the estate-holders were successfully challenged by owner-cultivators who began to organise politically under the banner of the OBCs demanding that affirmative action benefits in educational institutions and public sector employment be extended to them. The coalescence of socially heterogeneous communities constituting the OBCs into a relatively coherent political bloc represented the intention – and in this case the ability – of once-subaltern groups to appropriate, occupy and negotiate institutions of the state as well as the hitherto-dominant elites, rather than resist them or seek to retain their autonomy vis-à-vis them. The Farmers' Movements, which erupted throughout the country during the 1970s and in which members of the OBC communities played prominent roles, were yet another decisive indication of the extent to which hitherto-subaltern communities were willing and eager to engage with the institutions of the state and the market. They demanded input subsidies and minimum support prices for their commodities on the one hand and abrogation of cesses and waiver of loans on the other.

The protagonists of these movements emphasised their cultural difference from the urban professionals, industrialists and retailers. They proudly asserted what were believed to be their cultural symbolisms and did not shy away from asserting their "rural" and "rustic" selves. Their styles of mobilisation inaugurated new modes of staging demands that proudly challenged the primacy accorded to parliamentary procedures. Both groups emphasised, as Subalternist scholars would have it, their exploitation by the Congress-inspired "Brahmanic Socialism" encapsulated by the farmers' leader Sharad Joshi's slogan of urban India colonising rural Bharat (see Omvedt, 1993, who is not a Subaltern scholar). However, instead of seeking autonomy from the state, they sought to appropriate it, extending their support to non-Congress political formations, leading to the electoral rout of the Congress Party in

States such as Bihar. They introduced questions of social justice and dignity into mainstream politics, questions that had been subsumed by the Nehruvian developmental state.

A trenchant critic of the post-Independence Congress Party was Ram Manohar Lohia. Lohia's political mantle is claimed by Lalu Yadav and by his successor Nitish Kumar in Bihar. Lohia attained notoriety among Nehru's acolytes for publicly questioning the then prime minister on the incidence of poverty, and embarrassing him for his luxurious lifestyle (Yadav, 2010). Lohia's interpretation of Indian history convinced him that there were two mutually antagonistic traditions herein. One was orthodox and sought to sustain the caste system, while the other was more liberal and rejected it (see Kumar, 2010). While Lohia's reading may be contested on several grounds, what concerns us here is the analytical emphasis on the disruptions and discontinuities of Indian traditions with one another. Lohia's ideas influenced a generation of politicians, many of whom did not entirely do justice to his ideals, who spearheaded the social justice movements in northern India through the 1970s and 1980s.

These ideas found particular resonance in Bihar under the short-lived tenure of Chief Minister Karpuri Thakur who sought to initiate affirmative action for OBCs, a policy move favouring subalterns and staunchly opposed by the elites. By 1990, this conjuncture of political mobilisations gave the State the government of Lalu Yadav, who combined his "rural" and "rustic" self with promises – not always in vain – to restore the dignity (*samman/ ijjat*) of the subalterns (see Witsoe, 2011a; Gupta, 2002; Roy, 2013; Corbridge et al, 2005). His political slogans explicitly repudiated developmental goals and emphasised dignity: among the most well-known was "*vikas nahin, samman chahiye*" (we want dignity, not development).

Side by side, by the mid-1970s, the spectre of conflict between sharecroppers and agricultural labourers on the one hand and owner-cultivators on the other had emerged. This

was the result of owner-cultivators facing an agrarian crisis on the one hand and rising

demands for fair wages from their agricultural labourers on the other. The conflict started

with vicious attacks on Dalit villages in 1974, followed by many more massacres perpetrated

on Dalit agricultural labourers by farmers over the following two decades (Mendelsohn and

Vicziany, 1998: 57). The agricultural labourers retaliated, often with the support of Naxalites

(Bhatia, 2006; Teltumbde, 2010; Wilson, 1999). In and around my study area in north-eastern

Bihar too, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers began to organise through political

parties, movements and other networks, demanding land redistribution from the state and

market-rate wages from their employers. Their assertions were met by brutal repression by

the *maliks* and their sympathisers in the bureaucracy and the police. Even as late as 2009 and

2010, the study region and its environs were awash with stories of pitched battles between

sharecroppers and their *maliks* and their henchmen. Participation in the Naxalite movement

allowed Dalit sharecroppers to reclaim some sense of dignity (Bhatia, 2005).

To advance their struggles, Dalit agricultural labourers drew on the teachings of

philosophers such as Ravidas and Kabir whose social ideas incited their followers to imagine

earthly utopias since at least the sixteenth century (Kunnath, 2012). Ravidas' ode to the

fictitious city of Begumpura invites his audience to think about "a regal realm with

sorrowless name" not in an afterlife, but in the secular domain (cited in Omvedt, 2008). That

it provided inspiration to later generations of political activists such as Achhutanand should

come as little surprise. Acchutanand also liberally cited Kabir's couplets declaring that "the

Brahman's scriptures are based on selfishness, falsehood, and injustice… I will [therefore]

never have our rites of birth, tonsure ceremony, marriage, and death performed by a Brahman

[priest]" (cited Khare, 1984: 84).

The subjectivity of the subalterns described in Khare (1984) and in my own above

account imbibe egalitarian ideals quite independently of Liberal notions of modernity, even

as they seek to access and occupy the institutions provided by the post-colonial state. It is tempting to subsume this argument under the approach advanced by critical traditionalists such as Ashis Nandy who argue that Indian traditions are inherently dynamic and contain the seeds of transformation. Nandy (1987: 121) calls for a "creative, critical use of modernity within traditions." Chakrabarty (2002: 40) states that this approach is "critical of post-Enlightenment rationalism as an overall guide to living," although he disagrees eventually because "it overstates the autonomy that we have with respect to the past" (Chakrabarty, 2002: 47). However, both Nandy and Chakrabarty are unable or unwilling to recognise the legacy of tortuous, messy and disjunctive breaks that mark the relationship between the past and the present.

By contrast, Omvedt identifies the egalitarian impulses of the Bhakti movements as a significant *break* from dominant hierarchical traditions. These impulses set the stage for early reclamations of social equality. Their inscriptions of "egalitarian protocols," following Guru (2009: 222), in Indian society have been indelible and crucial in the forging of political imaginaries, especially by the subordinated and discriminated. Conceptually, the notion of social equality can be unhinged from a Eurocentric Enlightenment project. Such an approach encourages scholars to take a modest view of the legacy of the Enlightenment rather than expecting gratitude for it. However, even the Subalternist critics of the legacy of the Enlightenment have tended to ignore the indigenous provenance of subaltern assertions of egalitarian ideals.

Although it is important to recognise the major contribution of the Subaltern scholars in directing attention to the fact that subalterns were not merely helpless spectators consigned to the waiting room – if not the dustbin – of history, there remains little to distinguish their *essentialisation* of subaltern collective engagements from the perspectives offered by the Indian nationalists, Marxists and Cambridge School Liberals they so vehemently criticised.

The Subalternists justifiably targeted those scholars who refused to recognise the agency and voice of subaltern groups: however, like them, and like critical traditionalists such as Nandy, they too failed to recognise the dynamism in their collective engagements and political socialities. Like the scholars they criticised, Subalternists refused to recognise the quotidian ways in which subalterns imagined a "better world." In doing so, subalterns seek to not only to defend their culture, their fragmentary and episodic experiences and their moral habitus, but also to interrogate, challenge, rupture and eventually *break* with these. By refusing to appreciate these egalitarian impulses, Subalternist scholars perpetuate the myth, as do nationalists, Marxists, liberals and traditionalists, that these populations tenaciously cling to their traditions, cultures and moral values. Together, scholars affiliated with all these schools, despite their sophisticated accounts and sometimes vitriolic debates with one another have contributed to analytically and theoretically marginalising the ways in which members of subaltern communities imagine a better world. Against these marginalisations, the accounts presented by scholars such as Omvedt and Khare provide more realistic leads to understand and theorise subaltern assertions.

In closing

The discussions in this article have reported the manner in which social equality is continually asserted and demonstrated in contemporary India. These assertions and demonstrations compel us to depart from the analytical frameworks introduced by Subalternist scholarship in their consideration of social and political change during and after colonial rule. This departure is motivated by the conceptual difficulties in sustaining a dichotomy between elite and subaltern politics, the Subalternists' privileging of the defence and preservation of the putative fragment, and, paradoxical as it may appear, continuing to

over-emphasise the role of the Enlightenment tradition on the manner in which social equality in India is being asserted and reclaimed by different communities. It has been shown that subaltern populations do embrace vertical mobilisations in staging their demands, and have been doing so since at least the late colonial period. It has been argued that the defensiveness of the fragment detracts attention from its assertion in the universal public domain and insertion of its values thereon.

Chatterjee (2012b) recently claimed that Subaltern Studies was a project of its time, forged through a collective analysis of the situation facing India during the period preceding the 1980s. Chatterjee seems to suggest that this was not merely a project in historiography, but one that tried to come to terms with the political changes confronting India. If that were the case, it is intriguing that so little of Subalternist scholarship has had anything to say about the movements and claims of farmers, OBCs and Dalits – three sections of the Indian population that left a lasting imprint on the politics of the country during and since that period. All three sections were subaltern in either Guha's or Spivak's sense: one of them has suffered severe reverses, the second won significant electoral and economic gains, while the third has seen mixed fortunes. As a project seeking to document history from below, the Subalternist contribution has been seminal. As a project claiming to contribute to understanding the manner in which subaltern populations assert their social equality and reclaim dignity, however, the Subalternists' inattention to subaltern utopias is unconscionable. Therefore, calls for "after Subaltern Studies" that accord an originary or foundational status to Subaltern Studies in the examination of contemporary India need to be staunchly contested.

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NOTES

1 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.

2 Sub-infeudation referred to the practice of estate-holders leasing their estates to lesser proprietors. This arrangement was replicated the same arrangements all the way down to the actual cultivator of the land. The actual cultivator of the land was thus bound to a small-scale proprietor by means of tenuous sharecropping or casual tenancy arrangements: they were either sharecroppers or agricultural labourers paid in arbitrary combinations of cash and kind.

3 Some observers have suggested that this was organised in June (see Mukul, 1999: 3470).

4 Incidentally, for Gramsci, on whose writings most Subalternist scholars uncritically draw, folklores were the stuff of superstitions that needed to be uprooted and replaced with more modern views. See criticisms of Gramsci's vanguardism in Rabasa (2006), Lloyd (1993) and Beverley (19XX). For more nuanced critiques, see Gencarella (2010) and Anderson (????)