

The Indian Hierarchy: Culture, Ideology and Consciousness in Bengali Village Politics

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Introduction¹

The *Subaltern studies* project has been a major contribution towards rethinking the role of groups such as peasants, lower castes, labourers or women in forming the course of Indian history.² The project has also brought the issues of culture, ideology and consciousness to the forefront of Indian history writing. Although the importance of non-elite action on the historical developments of the Indian independence movement has already been noted by more mainstream historians, the concertedness of the project has created a whole new situation in which the subalternist perspective has become a new paradigm for Indian history writing, indeed, the subalternist perspective has increasingly come to dominate the formation of perspectives and concepts. As Masselos points out, the *Subaltern studies* has become the establishment.³

In this essay I wish to offer some ‘resistance’ to this dominance.⁴ I will first outline what I see as an important recent trend within the subalternist school, represented by several contributors to the *Subaltern studies* series plus in particular Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 1989

¹ The primary material presented in this paper was collected in India over the years 1992–94. I am very grateful to Pamela G. Price, Jean-Claude Galey, Elisabet Lund and an anonymous referee for most valuable comments. I also wish to thank Dilip Baruah for much required language editing. All errors are mine.

² In particular Guha (ed) 1982–1989, Chatterjee and Pandey (eds) 1992, and Arnold and Hardiman (eds) 1994. Of the many monographs may be mentioned Guha 1983, Hardiman 1987, Pandey 1985, 1990, Chakrabarty 1989, Prakash 1990, Haynes and Prakash (eds) 1991, and Amin 1995. Although I refer to selected works as specified in the text, I will use the terms *Subaltern studies* or subalternists for convenience.

³ Masselos 1992: 106.

⁴ For other and more elaborate critiques—from within or outside—of the *Subaltern studies*, see Arnold 1984, Spivak 1985, O’Hanlon 1988, Mukherjee 1988, Bayly 1988, and Masselos 1992.

work on the Calcutta mill-workers, *Rethinking Working-class History*. I have selected these because of their explicit endeavour to investigate an *Indian* cultural reality and its implications for historical change. In this they depart somewhat from their inspirator Ranajit Guha's original emphasis on revolt, since their effort is to understand how the subalterns relate to the dominant hierarchical ideology, not in times of revolt but in times of apparent acceptance.⁵ I also discuss the recent and slightly critical *Contesting Power*, edited by Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, because it offers the 'everyday resistance' perspective as an alternative to the subalternist perspective. However, as I shall shortly return to, a common denominator in these various works is the inclination to see 'the subaltern'—that is, the groups under study⁶—in light of overpowering cultural or structural domination that severely reduces the scope for understanding subaltern action. Instead there is a tendency towards an essentialistic interpretation of 'Indian' culture or of 'the subjects' in a power relationship, an essentialization that paradoxically leaves little agency to those the project initially sought to reinstate to the centre of Indian history.

I will next proceed to the case of two ritually low castes (or sub-castes, *jatis*) in two adjacent Bengali villages. Both castes can be found in both villages, and the striking variation in their ability to make an impact on local political behaviour, in their attitudes towards dominant groups and dominant values, and in their response to the mobilization efforts of the Communist Party makes for an interesting comparison and is intriguing when it comes to issues of consciousness and resistance. Although in many respects the subalternist perspective suits these cases beautifully, the strong variation within the same locality still leaves quite a lot unexplained. I will argue that the subalternist perspective(-s) is (or are) unsatisfactory in shedding full light on the complexities of society and history. The main problem arises from the dichotomy basic to the subalternist perspective, the very division of the world into dominated and dominants, a problem even where the aim is to investigate and search for the opposition of the dominated to the dominant. Although conscious and elaborate efforts have been made not to exaggerate the gap and to investigate the interrelation and the reflexivity of the two entities

⁵ In Guha 1983.

⁶ I shall return below to a discussion of who 'the subaltern' might be. For the moment I use the term without quotation marks to indicate non-dominant groups.

rather than their opposition, many of the subalternist contributions still tend to interpret the subaltern in light of his (or her) not being the dominant, rather than in light of wider complexities of social life. The thrust has been to investigate the consciousness of the subaltern from the fact that he is the subordinated, the dominated and not the dominant, 'subaltern' subjected to 'an elite'. In short, the complexity of culture and ideology—varied and contested as such entities are in life—cannot be captured.

Subaltern Autonomy, Resistance and the Dominant Ideology

The *Subaltern studies* school, as was its ambition, has given us a variety of new concepts with which to study Indian society. One crucial concept is 'autonomy'. From investigations of cases of extraordinary resistance—revolts—Guha argued that there exists an 'autonomous domain' of subaltern action and thought outside the reach of the dominant classes and their ideology.⁷ This domain is separate from that of the dominants, independent from them, and constitutes an arena where the subaltern can think about and conceptualize his position as a subordinate. In a critique Mridula Mukherjee regarded Guha's assertion of a subaltern autonomy as something of a '“bravado” attempt'.⁸ She points out the frequent inability of the lower classes to lead insurrections, revolts or even minor cases of resistance themselves; instead they tend to rely on outside leadership. But she ignores an important contribution by the *Subaltern studies*, namely the investigation of how outside 'leaders' could control rebellions only to a very limited degree. Shahid Amin, for instance, shows that though images of 'Gandhiji' were at the forefront of Gorakhpuri peasant perceptions of the ongoing (Non-cooperation) struggle, these images were not controlled by the local Congress leadership (although they sought to exploit the situation).⁹ Symptomatically it was these unauthorized perceptions of Gandhi and of the aim of the struggle which led to the assault on the Chauri Chaura *thana*, and which again prompted Gandhi to call off the whole campaign. Subaltern action is not merely a function of elite leadership, as was Mukherjee's assertion. But nor does it seem wholly autonom-

⁷ Guha 1982: 4.

⁸ Mukherjee 1988: 2115.

⁹ Amin 1984.

ous of it, as was Guha's assertion. Another critic, Rosalind O'Hanlon, suggests that instead of dismissing the notion of autonomy as did Mukherjee, we should accept that there frequently is a lack of control from above. However, she identified as a problem the *Subaltern studies* tendency to take 'autonomy' too far and to understand it as a wholly separate field of knowledge, unrelated to power and to the hegemonic constructs that the subaltern revolts against.¹⁰ There is a word to be said about the non-elite creation of perceptions and action, she acknowledges, but the formation of such a knowledge cannot be understood entirely independent of relations of power and dominant ideologies.

This is the view that is shared by several later subalternists. In what appears as a distinct move away from Guha's 'autonomous domain', we find that some subalternists increasingly come to consider the creation of a subaltern 'domain' within the dominant ideology—not distinct from it, but not entirely controlled either. Particularly in Dipesh Chakrabarty's important and very interesting study, *Rethinking Working-class History*, are the subaltern mill-workers straight out of some obscure village in Bihar portrayed as unable to escape the hierarchical culture that so dominated the village society whence he came and that had been replicated on the factory floor.¹¹ This hierarchical culture prevented the formation of class-based solidarity across social divisions as well as the formation of lasting trade unions under elected leaders. On the brighter side was the workers' ability to use patriarchal elements within the dominant ideology to their own benefit—at least to an extent and within the confines of the hierarchical culture they all shared. They would bow to their superiors, whether a floor-boss or a would-be union-leader, but would demand a certain behaviour on the part of the 'leaders', a certain patriarchal benevolence, a certain match of sentiment. They would demand what they thought of as customarily theirs by right—but within the encompassing hierarchical culture.

In an earlier article Chakrabarty understands 'subalternity' as 'the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of dominance and hierarchy'.¹² Following this we may say that the subalterns are immersed in a culture which is shared by (indigenous) elite and subaltern alike. Subaltern action, perceptions, and consciousness are

¹⁰ O'Hanlon 1988.

¹¹ Chakrabarty 1989.

¹² Chakrabarty 1985: 376.

formed within this culture. It is only within this culture that subaltern autonomy becomes an issue. The subordination of the subaltern to dominance is not necessarily complete or servile, and it may contain elements of assertion, a cognition of social and cultural maladjustments that entail (paternalist) demands on the superior. However, it does not transcend patriarchy. From a study of a village scandal in an otherwise orderly middle-class society, Sumit Sarkar has unearthed the ability of the powerless to know and manipulate the elements of justification embedded in patriarchal cultures. He has called this phenomenon ‘assertion-within-deference’, meaning the way in which the subordinate, by evoking notions of benevolent patriarchy, is able to exploit his own subordination to his benefit by contributing towards the definition of what constitutes the correct understanding of the patron’s role.¹³ Gautam Bhadra shares this view and elaborates on what implications it has for understanding subalternity: ‘First, the idioms of domination, subordination and revolt, I believe, are often inextricably linked together; we separate them here only to facilitate analysis. If this is true, it follows that subordination or domination is seldom complete, if ever.’¹⁴

In Bhadra’s study, the writer of a poetic tribute to a Bengali zamindar-king was able to contribute towards the definition of what constituted *rajdharmā*—the duty of kings—by referring to a higher but just divine authority. This, writes Bhadra, gave the subordinate writer ‘a voice of his own, a certain degree of autonomy even when he is submissive’.¹⁵ This is quite akin to Chakrabarty’s findings, where an ideal of dominance and subordination contained notions of the just or the fair which gave the subalterns room for consciousness and leverage for protest. ‘The worker reacts when he sees himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly his’.¹⁶ But what was ‘just’? Chakrabarty elaborates: ‘The worker’s idea of fairness was related to his idea of what was customary (or *riwaz*)’.¹⁷ And this again was a very fluid category, far from historically fixed. ‘“Custom”, “tradition”, and “legitimacy” were [...] open to interpretation’.¹⁸ The fluidity of these categories left the subaltern a large space for definition of right and wrong in any one situation, a room to pursue

¹³ Sarkar 1989: 6.

¹⁴ Bhadra 1989: 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88–9.

¹⁶ Chakrabarty 1989: 178.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

and defend his own interests, a space for protest and assertion. But this always took place within an acceptance of domination since notions of what is fair, just or customary would refer backwards, to the hierarchically structured order of an ideal society. The pattern of dominance was never challenged, but the relative weight of interests, roles and obligations, and interpretations could be.

This escalation of a manipulation of elements of paternalism by subordinates is very stimulating. It is not the existing cultural categories—dominance, subordination—that are challenged, but perceived non-conformity to ideals. Since ideals by necessity are vague, they are open to manipulation. To some extent the perspective may resemble James Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance', but unlike Scott these subalternists do not regard culture itself as 'an arena for contest' in that hierarchy in itself is not contested.¹⁹ Rather, the contest takes place within culture, within the confines of the hegemony of hierarchy. Expectations, demands, obligations, complaints, all are culturally constituted and formed, according to this line of investigation. It is in this manner that subordination can be understood, they assert, as a real-life experience nonetheless mediated in culture, persuasive and manipulable.

In an alternative to the focus on the extraordinary, Haynes and Prakash seek to draw attention to everyday circumstances.²⁰ Their edited contribution also constitutes a critique of the above perspective, particularly as they explicitly draw sustenance from James Scott. In the Introduction, Haynes and Prakash point out that resistance can be found in almost any situation, even in cases—such as the courtesans of Lucknow—where action on the surface seems only to maintain the ideology of patriarchy. They argue that even in the most ordinary and seemingly placid of social relations we can find expressions of a knowledge not dominated by power, by relations of domination vs. subordination. The conception of 'subaltern autonomy' in this volume is unlike what both Guha and Chakrabarty *et al.* have presented us with. It does not exist outside of, nor is confined within, the dominant ideology. But it is of an everyday character, unassuming and hidden from view, almost invariably stopping short of open confrontation. It is important to understand their interesting conceptualization of autonomy, of its nature. It appears, *pace* Haynes and Prakash, as a realm cleared within the existing relations of

¹⁹ Scott 1985.

²⁰ Haynes and Prakash 1991.

power and dominant ideologies, as a non-public realm. But it is specific to those relations, based in the shared experience of the subalterns, of those who are dominated. Hence, autonomy is confined to a particular context, to a particular relationship and the experiences suffered by those at the receiving end of the relationship. In this we see how the dominants may control their subordinates only to an extent, because the very commonality of being dominated creates a potential for an autonomous discourse specific to that relationship. This insight prompts Haynes and Prakash also to question the concepts of dominance, hegemonic ideology and subaltern autonomy in face of a more complex notion of power. Power, they state, is not complete, it is 'fractured', just as the subaltern domain is not entirely autonomous but derives from an engagement with power, in a waging forth and back with dominance.

Social structure, rather than being a monolithic, autonomous entity, unchallenged except during dramatic instances of revolt, appears more commonly as a constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes. [. . .] In sum, neither domination nor resistance is autonomous; the two are so entangled that it becomes difficult to analyse one without discussing the other.²¹

Unfortunately, after these interesting considerations about the limitations of the concept 'resistance' in face of the hurdles presented by something as problematic as conceptualizing 'power', the term is then used quite undeterred in the slightly modified and seemingly quite unproblematic form of 'everyday resistance' in the remainder of the book. The thrust of the volume is to consider all actions directed against the powers-that-be—even if merely verbal, even if unconsciously executed—as acts of resistance, as expressions of a separate knowledge and identity, as threats against the agenda of power.

Essentialising Culture and Discovering the Obvious

My argument with these otherwise tantalizing studies is with the scope they leave for understanding the complexity of subaltern action and for conceptualizing ideological change. Chakrabarty's main point in his seminal study is to suggest that the cultural world of the jute-mill workers—that is, India's 'prebourgeois' or 'precapit-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

alist' culture—was not conducive to the formation of a working-class solidarity because it did not share important values necessary for such political formations. The Indian industrial worker, as his brothers and parents the rural labourers, lived in and shared a hierarchical culture—a culture which was formed in a violent, inegalitarian and precapitalist society. Chakrabarty is unfortunately not very specific about this culture, except in suggesting what it is not (such as 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois'). Much of his understanding of this culture seems to be based on stereotypes. The 'respect' which the shop-floor boss, the *sardar*, commanded, Chakrabarty asserts, derived from a 'precapitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language, and other similar loyalties'.²² And this culture, he suggests, translated automatically into the 'babu-coolie relationship', that is, to a relationship of distance and hierarchy between workers and would-be union leaders. Hierarchy and distance were integral to a culture shared by leaders and workers alike, a culture so hierarchical and so persuasive that its logic imposed particular roles of superiority and leadership on the union organizers. A certain behaviour on the part of the would-be leaders was required in order to be accepted as leaders, the behaviour of masters, not representatives, of superiors and not equals, because this was a culture so inegalitarian that 'the representative invariably turned out to be a master, since only masters could represent'.²³

It is here we find Chakrabarty and other contributors reduce the historical (cultural) experience of India to one single paradigm, that of hierarchy. Whatever there is of dissonance, of opposition and 'resistance', all takes place within that paradigmatic construct. I will be among the last to suggest that there is not a strong element of hierarchy in Indian culture. But the understanding here is of culture as static and unchangeable, as having an encompassing completeness. To Chakrabarty's chagrin the hierarchical culture prevents the formation of class solidarity; but it is the monolithic quality he bestows on it which causes his main problem in seeing how it could change. In spite of his basic sympathy with the labouring classes, his view of them is still stereotypical, objectifying, and essentializing. This is perhaps best seen in the difference he maintains in his conceptualization of union leaders versus that of workers, in what could have been a mistake had it not resonated with the overall theme of

²² Chakrabarty 1989: 112.

²³ *Ibid.*, 146.

his study. Chakrabarty accepts that there may be a disjuncture between 'culture' and 'ideology', between belief, even commitment, on the one hand, and practice, based in deeper runs of culture, on the other. But he restricts such a disjuncture to the educated union leaders, to the disjuncture between their belief in and commitment to equality and their praxis of distance and hierarchy in their relation to the workers.²⁴ For them, the educated union leaders, 'culture' is multi-layered and complex, giving room to both a desire to mobilize and educate the labourers and to a more unconscious sense of distance and superiority. But Chakrabarty leaves no such scope for ambiguity in the 'culture' of the lower classes, the uneducated. They are slaves of their own culture, indeed they act as a reflex of their culture.²⁵ The subaltern here is viewed as encapsulated in a complete value system, one that may be understood, conceptualized and fixed, one that is solid and unambiguous (except seemingly so in certain manifestations, although such ambiguities only reveal the deeper structures). In all actions by workers, it seems, there are signs reflecting aspects of that ultimate essence of their culture, hierarchy.

Whereas Chakrabarty tends towards the essentializing, Haynes and Prakash seem to be doing the same, only from the opposite vantage point. They find 'resistance' in a whole range of contexts, spanning from Scottian gossip and hidden discourses to threats of economic withdrawal by wealthy Surat merchants dissatisfied with individual state representatives. Although I vote in favour of the need to underline the doublesidedness of power, the application of such an insight in that volume seems rather mechanical, denoting all types of activities and discourses not in favour of the powers-that-be as cases of counter-hegemonic everyday resistance. In doing so, the authors do themselves and their project a disservice. 'Resistance' becomes so watered down and so mechanically applied that it loses its potency. It turns into an uncomplicated ever-present quality that says little if anything about the relationship between master and servant, the way in which the latter enhances or reduces the power of the former (power being a problematic issue, as they outline in their Introduction), about how subordination can be and oftenmost is part of dominance, or about the legitimate position of masters in general, not just the present incumbents. One could

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153-4.

²⁵ Which is ironic, given that Prakash criticizes earlier schools of Indian historiography for having '... attributed rebellions as a reflex action to economic and political oppression'. Prakash 1994: 1478.

argue that instances of ‘everyday resistance’ à la Haynes and Prakash not only derive from power, arising in relations of power, but are part of power, as the necessary self-justifying discourse of those without whom unequal relations would not exist, as that other side of any hegemonic discourse. At the very least one could argue that Haynes and Prakash’s notion of an ever-present counter-hegemonic discourse does not help us understand the ambiguities and the dynamics of non-dominant discourses, the way in which the non-dominant makes sense of his own situation while contributing to his continued subordination. Consciousness seen simply as a function of power, a dependent variable, complicates the scope for conceptualizing change on an ideological level and alterations in people’s perception of their own situation. It also limits the scope for understanding the contribution of the dominated to the cultural legitimacy of the power relationship—not to speak of the scope for understanding, *pace* Chakrabarty and others, how those dominated use legitimizing cultural codes. This mechanical ‘resistance-is-everywhere’ view ignores the gliding interrelatedness of different discourses (not only the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic) and modes of justification, of rationales. A simple dichotomy of discourses fundamentally blurs the relationship of these to each other and to deeper layers of knowledge, the relationship of levels of unconscious thought to the more aware and impressionable levels.

Whereas Chakrabarty essentializes the subaltern as an ‘Indian’, Haynes and Prakash ignore culture and essentialize the (non-elite) Indian as a ‘subaltern’. In both cases the historical actor becomes a subject, his conceptual world derives from his position in a structural relationship only. Should we really be surprised by these discoveries of ‘resistance’ among Lucknow courtesans and Surat merchants, by their ability to think about themselves and their superiors/dominants?²⁶ Do concepts such as ‘resistance’ and other concepts evolving around an oversimplified dominance vs. subordination dichotomy have much explanatory force when employed so liberally? I think not. On the other hand, the practice of subaltern studies as found in Chakrabarty’s writings seems to me premised on a perspective of the world as having near-monolithic ideological structures—with only small chips of something that reveals a deeper more complete

²⁶ This is not to say that the articles in the volume are not good; they are. Particularly Veena Talwar Oldenburg’s contribution on the Lucknow courtesans is a beautiful piece of skilful history writing.

structure. In Chakrabarty's jute-mill study, as well as in the concepts 'assertion-in-deference' and the elaboration of 'rajdharmā', hierarchy comes through as all-dominant, as the only available logic for interaction. Both Chakrabarty's work and that of Haynes and Prakash state that resistance, dispute and autonomy find place within the confines of hierarchy, dominance and patriarchy—or power. Dominance and hierarchy—whether cultural or structural—are seen as ultimately incontestable or unchangeable categories, bringing meaning and order to all situations, whether concerning small-scale disputes or questions of general orientation in life and society, in short, as the only salient aspect of the lived experience of the subjects under study.

Although I have much respect for these approaches and for the studies they have generated, their approach to 'culture' remains simple and gives the impression that the world of signs and symbols, or the world of power relations, is something monolithic, rigid and unbending. This rigidity renders difficult an understanding of ideological changes, of responses to new situations, and of the ability of subordinated groups to conceptualize in more than one way their own subordination. In the present study we shall see how this affects our ability to understand the varied picture of responses within structural and cultural hierarchy. In particular we shall see how this affected various groups' perception of and appropriation of Communist ideology in rural Bengal and caused a transition that was partial, differentiated among groups that shared a socio-cultural environment and economic position, a transition that was a wholehearted embrace on some issues, lukewarm and even chilly on others.

Both the *Subaltern studies* series and the later additions to the body of subalternist literature are dominated by historians focusing on colonial India.²⁷ I hope that by extending the thrust of the subalternist perspective—perhaps better known as 'the view from below'—to near-contemporary society, some more insights may be gained.²⁸ My case is of two ritually low and formerly very poor castes,

²⁷ Only very few contributions draw on post-Independence situations.

²⁸ Village studies in our days are not as popular as they once were (see Fuller and Spencer 1990), and the subalternist perspective has not been applied to contemporary village society to any extent to my knowledge. Village politics studies ceased some two decades ago (with some notable exceptions, such as Chakravarti 1975, Tapper 1987, Robinson 1988, Béteille 1991 and Mendelsohn 1993), and the picture and concepts we have from that time—of factions, caste, patron-client relationships, patronage—is one that has been discarded without being replaced.

the bagdis and the muchis, and their involvement in village politics and with village political leaders and eventually party-affiliates over the last thirty years (approx. 1960–90). Both castes live in the two adjacent villages of Udaynala and Gopinathpur, in Burdwan district (West Bengal).²⁹ I shall not go into any depth of detail here but only give a short and broad outline of the main ingredients of this involvement.

Case I: Lowly, Quarrelsome, and Assertive Bagdis

The first group, the bagdis, is the largest caste in Burdwan district, constituting about 11% of the population according to the 1931 Census.³⁰ The bagdis constituted 12% of Udaynala's total population, and one-third of Gopinathpur's. Thirty years ago in these villages, they were almost all landless, owned few clothes, and had very little food or other resources in storage for the lean seasons. Most of them were economically dependent on patronage from landowning families for survival over the year, for employment, for credit or emergency expenses. Poverty together with a combination of 'un-Hindu' customs, a crowded and filthy hamlet plus heavy liquor consumption made the bagdis appear in local folklore as quarrelsome and drunken, dark, dangerous, wild and uncivilized. They pursued a 'low-caste' or 'tribal' life style³¹ consisting of religious and social practices that were incompatible with many values held by the ritually clean cultivator castes or the high-status Muslims. This included practices such as widow-remarriage, pre- or extramarital sex, spirit beliefs,

²⁹ The two villages, which I have called Udaynala and Gopinathpur, are located in the Dakshin Damodar region of Burdwan district. Udaynala's population is about 50:50 Hindu:Muslim, with the latter as 'the dominant caste', while Gopinathpur is an all-Hindu village, formerly controlled politically by aguris (ritually clean cultivator caste). The aguris still form the economically most important element in the village, but the political positions have been taken by the bagdis, a formerly low caste. In both villages the main occupation is cultivation. I lived in these two villages for some 10 months in 1992–93.

³⁰ If to be counted as a caste, then the Shekh Musalman was larger with its 18% of the total.

³¹ The bagdis have probably entered the Hindu caste system at a rather late period. Some Gazetteers refer to them as 'half-hinduised', with many 'tribal' customs. See Peterson 1910. Although the various lower castes and tribal groups differed much from one another, at least until the turn of the century the major social distinction was between all these groups on the one hand and the landowning clean castes on the other (a third distinct group being the landowning and high caste *bhadralok* gentry). See Ray 1983 and 1987, and Bose 1986.

and a relatively egalitarian social structure. Even some mere thirty years ago, few bagdis in this area of Bengal paid dowry for their daughters' wedding, indeed quite a few marriages were not 'arranged', and some widows remarried. Furthermore, bagdi festivals were famous occasions for great drinking, gambling and fighting, and contrary to the festivals of most other castes, bagdi festivals did not draw outside spectators. People stayed away, fearing the reckless wildness of drunken bagdis. It was bad enough when they were sober, when they were drunk you just kept your distance.

In interaction with their 'superiors'—whether from a general sense of equality or from a lack of reverence—bagdi labourers, as opposed to other low-caste labourers, did not display the customary deference. They would smoke in the presence of an employer, even take a drink if the opportunity arose, or they could disrespectfully pick up a loudmouthed quarrel over wages or other issues. Related to this irreverence and to their poverty was their role in small-scale theft (ripe paddy, chickens, straw, fish, etc.) in the villages. Whether true or not, bagdis were more often than not the primary suspects in cases of theft, and elderly bagdis admitted in interviews that it was not wholly without reason. Until the mid-1980s bagdis were also excluded from the all-village teams that guarded the ripe paddy fields from theft.

More grand-scale thieving was found in gang-raiding by night—dacoity. This was quite a common occurrence until the late 1970s. A list of twelve local (*thana*) but well-known dacoit leaders, all of whom were active after Independence, included eight bagdis. Apart from the leaders, the more ordinary participants were also very often bagdis. The point here is not that bagdis constituted the only community engaged in dacoity, but that there were commonly more bagdis in dacoity gangs than members of other castes,³² and that dacoity was more commonly associated with bagdis than with any other caste. This is an interesting point, and not as simple as it may at first appear. Firstly, most non-bagdis more readily associated dacoity with bagdis than with any other community (the 'bagdi-dacoit' is a standard figure in rustic drama-performances, just as are 'the poor Muslim', 'the stupid brahmin', and 'the bad father-in-law'), thus fortifying the stereotype of bagdis as uncontrolled outsiders with a streak of cruelty. But secondly, this was an image the bagdis them-

³² See also McLane 1985. The impression of bagdis in dacoity is not corroborated by all evidence: see Mukherjee 1984.

selves took pride in. They delighted in Robin Hood-type stories about the poor wronged bagdi who took his revenge by robbing at night, or the clever dacoit who fooled the police or humiliated cruel moneylenders or landlords, or gained riches and distributed these among his kin, friends and brethren, giving lavishly to festivals and weddings. These were stories told and retold at night in the *bagdi-paras* (hamlets), cherished and honoured for the daring, the physical prowess, the cunning. The dacoits were not dissimilar to how bagdis (perhaps wishfully) saw themselves, as daring, strong and wild. The bagdis were proud of being bagdi in spite of the negative stereotypes nourished about them by dominant groups. They would say ‘We are bagdis!’ not with shy embarrassment derived from the poverty or un-Hindu practices, but as a challenge. Their ‘bagdiness’ was a source of identity, assertion and pride. Stories about both dacoits and about bagdis in general³³ suggest they saw themselves as potentially dangerous and destructive but at the same time their uninhibited and daring nature gave them identity and a sense of worth. The female bagdi, for instance, is in one story portrayed as ‘short, dark with curly hair, and has big breasts’, she is violent, destructive and unreliable—and these qualities, following the story, are irresistibly attractive even to gods. This is quite the opposite of how high-caste women were supposed to be or be referred to—tall and fair-skinned, straight hair, demure and restrained. In spite of being the opposite, the female bagdi still appeared as sensual and attractive. Other stories again, about dacoits who get their revenge on unjust landlords or the representatives of an erratic state, introduce the themes of cunning and daring, lavish spending, physical and sexual prowess, and an uninhibited life style. A beautiful but wild and uncontrollable people, the stories seem to say, the very opposite of the refined and civilized, restrained and thrifty life style of the clean-caste Hindus (or other high-status groups) with their elaborate and intricate rules and rituals, and their frugal and respectable lives.

Case I (cont’d): From Landlords’ Fighters to Communist ‘Masses’

We now turn to how this stereotype was worked out in village politics. I restrict myself to Udaynala for the sake of space. In Gopinathpur

³³ A few such stories are given in Ruud 1995, Chapter 6.

the situation was somewhat different (see below), although the Udaynala picture did fit the practice of perhaps the majority of the bagdi community in Gopinathpur in the 1960s. The bagdis of Udaynala were settled on a piece of land owned by the richest and most powerful family in Udaynala. The bagdis functioned as labourers but in particular as fighters (*lathials*) for this family and constituted a valuable core in the family's political position. The bagdis were used to intimidate opponents and to force other poor into submission. They were good fighters, taking great pride in their ability to use the *lathi*, the fighting stick. The asset they represented for village leaders and the indirect leverage they gained from that relationship became evident when a dispute over village leadership arose in the late 1950s and the bagdis' support became the main asset to be gained or lost. In the dispute, drawn out over many years, the first family almost ruined itself financially on extensive patronage forwarded to bagdis for their continued support. The dispute eventually cost this family almost a third of its land—including the land on which the bagdis lived. The family soon lost its prominence in village affairs, and village leadership lapsed, together with bagdi-support, to more energetic villagers, who increasingly enjoyed various party affiliations.

In everyday affairs the bagdis constituted a behind-the-scene support that was always there, that everybody knew of, but that was not necessarily employed. For instance, in 1967 the main village leader—a Congress-activist who had bagdi support—was accused of misappropriating rationed sugar from the village cooperative. A village meeting was held to decide on an appropriate punishment but had only started when loud drunken noises, shouting, and the beating with sticks were heard from behind a building. Everybody immediately knew that the bagdis had come, ready to fight, in support of the accused leader. The meeting dissolved, and the question of the misappropriation was never raised again. Of this kind there were several cases. In other cases the bagdis turned against the village leader they otherwise supported, but were paid off, with contributions to their festivals for instance, and continued to support him afterwards.

During the peasant mobilization led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM for short) in 1969 and 1970,³⁴ the bagdis

³⁴ The CPM came to power in West Bengal in a coalition with other centrist and leftist parties in 1967 and again in 1969. Widespread unrest, mobilization and

of Udaynala (but not Gopinathpur) came out in support of the party. To an extent they could be seen as only following the same village leader they had supported earlier, through the 1960s; he was a Congress-supporter but belonged to its left faction and was initially not adverse to land occupations initiated by the CPM-supporting middle-class peasants in the village. The bagdis constituted the core group in these activities, contributing the 'masses' of the local mobilization. Not much land was ever occupied or redistributed, but the few acres that were, were given to those active in the movement, including a number of bagdis. Given their poverty, land was naturally a great attraction. These 'masses', however, occasionally also participated in less ideologically pure acts of looting, arson and simple theft, although very often shouting CPM-slogans while doing so (again, mostly under the leadership of middle-class peasants). From 1971–72 onwards, when the then Congress Government in the state repressed Communist activities and reversed the land occupations, both the Udaynala village leader and the bagdis in his following came out in support of the Government and introduced a period of repression of opposition, beating of those non-bagdis that had been given redistributed land, and maltreatment of the village Communists.

In 1977, when the CPM was back in power,³⁵ the Udaynala CPM-activists sought to incorporate this group of poor but recalcitrant erstwhile Congress-supporters into the new order. After some initial resistance (throwing of mud at village notables) the bagdis were enticed over to the CPM-camp in exchange for a CPM-ticket for the upcoming 1978 panchayat ('village council') elections. That candidate was elected, and the bagdis, despite their mere 12% of the total village population, came to hold one of the two village seats in the statutory village council until 1993. Thus brought back, the bagdis again contributed the 'masses' over the next few years, the core group of militant CPM-supporters through the early period of demonstrations, wage strikes, and some land redistribution.

land-occupations took place, but this movement was suppressed from 1971–72 onwards by a Delhi-supported Government under President's Rule. See Sen Gupta 1979, Nossiter 1988, Kohli 1990, and Ruud 1994.

³⁵ In the elections held after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi lifted Emergency Rule in 1977 the CPM emerged as the largest party in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly. The party has been in power ever since in that state as the dominant partner of the Left Front coalition.

After initiating a close relationship with the CPM, the Udaynala bagdis have seen important social and economic changes.³⁶ Their drinking is curbed and their rituals and festivals are visited by members of other castes, they have gained political representation, and above all increased their landholdings. Although most are still poor, only a few are now entirely landless and some even qualify as rich peasants (one bagdi family owns one of the village's two tractors). On average they have increased their land-per-capita ratio while all other castes have seen a decrease.³⁷ Important reasons for the improved economic situation include the sinking of a mini deep-tubewell near the bagdi hamlet by the village cooperative (a political decision, no doubt, to the disappointment of other castes of poor), and the disproportionate allotment of redistributed land and subsidized loans (the IRDPs) to bagdis.³⁸

The new wealth has resulted in a number of social and cultural changes. The bagdis have built a new brick temple where they sacrifice up to 30 goats during the annual festival, instead of the 3-4 goats previously offered to the goddess. Their main festival is adorned by two plays staged by professional troupes (even the high-status groups stage their own plays) and several hired-in video shows. Bagdis nowadays attend all-village festivals, where they approach the images to give their offerings along with other Hindus (the *muchis*, to be met below, are still not permitted too close). Bagdi children (as children from every community in the villages except the 'tribal' Santals) invariably go to school, and a number of grown-ups attend the literacy campaign centres run by volunteers. 'The bagdis', I was once informed, 'are neither poor nor untouchable any more'.

Case II: Reformed Bagdis

Before considering the bagdi case in detail we turn to another strand within the same bagdi community, represented twenty to thirty years

³⁶ A study of the social and economic changes of the lower castes and the cultural particularities of the relationship between the CPM and the lower castes in Bengal can be found in Ruud (forthcoming).

³⁷ The reason for the general decrease is increases in population, but the bagdis have experienced a population increase at the same rate as the rest while still increasing their land-per-head ratio.

³⁸ Figures for the Udaynala distribution of land and IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme) loans are: recipients of redistributed land 23.7% bagdi and 7.2% *muchi* (the *jati* we shall meet below): and of IRDPs: 21.3% bagdi and

ago by one family in Udaynala and two in Gopinathpur—one large and one small. The one in Udaynala and the large one in Gopinathpur had ‘sanskritised’ their ways and led the life of well-off cultivators: the men wore immaculate white *dhotis* while supervising their labourers, the womenfolk stayed inside, the children went to school, all assembled at nights for readings from the epics. Both these two families had gained land through moneylending (and acting as middle-man for dacoits, it was rumoured in the case of the Udaynala family) but also by hard work and thrift together with careful investment in land and a curb on excesses and liquor consumption. The elder son of the Gopinathpur family was also the local guru of the Satsangha sect, a Hindu reformist sect emphasizing thrift, cleanliness, community work and individual devotion. The last ‘reformed’ family in Gopinathpur followed a somewhat different model, one that emphasized modern education and secular values. The head of the family had worked for many years as a school teacher in a neighbouring state. After returning to his village he sought to enlist bagdi support to challenge the dominant aguris in the election for the village school board, but found himself marginalized in village affairs by a combination of two other bagdi leaders and another major village leader. That combination, which included the Satsangha guru and another bagdi leader more in the mode found in Udaynala, then the main village leader, an aguri, plus a number of lesser individuals from among the dominant castes, ensured political order in Gopinathpur for more than a decade. In return for their loyalty, both these bagdi leaders were included into the increasing number of formal institutions established in the village in the 1960s—the school board, the cooperative society’s board, the panchayat (but notably excluding the committee in charge of ritual functions)—inclusions that would vastly increase the personal status of the individuals concerned. The Satsangha guru switched sides in the early 1970s, to side with a fellow Satsanghi and a Congress-activist, but the other bagdi leader, representing a majority of the village bagdis, continued his support of the main village leader.

This meant that during the CPM mobilization and land occupations the situation in Gopinathpur was very different from that in Udaynala: neither the main village leaders nor the bagdi leaders were in favour of the leftist Government or land occupations. No

4.7% muchī. The communities constitute 12% and 4% of the village population respectively.

one in Gopinathpur participated in any CPM-initiated activity during the late 1960s, nor was there any repression afterwards. What they did gain in return for their loyalty was employment, occasional credit, support and patronage, in short quite a well-known patron-client pattern. Above all, the mutual support between the village leader and the bagdi leader ensured their authority and position in their respective realms, so that the bagdi leader would enjoy the implicit backing of the main village leader and the main village leader would maintain his position with the implicit, and only occasional explicit, man-support of potentially militant bagdis.

With the coming of the CPM-raj in 1977 the situation changed radically. None of the bagdi leaders were acceptable to the new village leadership (middle-class peasants from the dominant castes), tainted as they were by their former alliances. Instead, the sons of the lone 'modernized' bagdi household were brought into the party. One was made secretary of the cooperative society while the other attended party affairs, later to become a panchayat member and lately elected to the Jela Parishad.³⁹ The political reconfigurations have caused a marginalization of the two erstwhile bagdi leaders, while at the same time ensuring that the bagdi community as a whole continued to enjoy the fruits of being intimately allied to the dominant political actors (and lately gaining direct political positions). The benefits from this are clearly evident, here as in Udaynala. The bagdis are still poorer than most members of the dominant castes, but for many only barely so. There is no discrimination any more, and the bagdis appear as respectable if still relatively poor mainstream Hindus: their festivals are celebrated in a grand style, involving goat sacrifices and a hired-in brahmin priest, they have built a new, quite large brick temple to which they have contracted the daily services of another brahmin priest. And they are admitted onto the temple ground as any other Hindu (again except the muchis). The ultimate sign of their ritual elevation is their inclusion into the committee in charge of village ritual functions.

In many respects, both these stories, of the 'asserting' and the 'reforming' bagdis, could be read as a story of quite successful 'resistance' based on a sense of autonomy. The strong caste identity seems to hover on the brink of class consciousness. Previously, their poor economic position restrained them from fully asserting themselves. The village leaders' dependence on them notwithstanding, the bagdis

³⁹ The highest, district-level of the three tiers of the panchayat system.

still relied on employment on land they themselves did not own. But they exploited the relationship for what it was worth. Over the period under study a differentiation took place, in which a section broke with the previous pattern of life and increasingly followed a 'reformed' model. But by the 1980s and 1990s the two paths again converged, crowning what appears as quite a successful effort to reach certain aims (social and ritual status, economic security) by exploiting the opportunities that came their way (political rivalry, Communist mobilization). I shall soon return to the implications of such an interpretation, but before doing so, however, we turn to how other groups within the same locality acted under apparently the same circumstances.

Case III: Subservient Muchis

The *muchi jati* constituted about 4% of the total population in Udaynala, and 15% in Gopinathpur. Their proportion of the population in both the *thana* area and in Burdwan district was about 4% according to the Censuses. Their caste occupation is the removal of carrion, the manufacture and repair of shoes and drums from the hides, and drumming at Hindu festivals. For these services they have been accorded the lowest position in the ritual hierarchy, as the most polluted and polluting of all Hindu castes. Their services, however, are vital to the ritual cleanliness of others, a fact that makes their position 'ambiguous' in that they are indispensable for Hindu society but shunned, drummers whose presence is required yet dangerous and polluting.⁴⁰ They are classified as Scheduled Caste, but more evocative of their socio-ritual position is the term 'untouchable', which they literally were some thirty years ago. Touching a *muchi* was considered ritually very polluting, and one should immediately take a cleansing bath. This may not have been a very common occurrence, partly because of the many efforts made to avoid such polluting touches. Employers who required *muchi* labourers or had other business with them would not enter their neighbourhood but remain standing outside and shout in; payment in kind or cash was either dropped into their hands or left on the ground for themselves to pick up; *muchi* labourers were not seated on the porch of the employer's house for the midday meal, but were required to sit on the ground,

⁴⁰ For the 'ambiguous position' of Harijans in rituals see Fuller 1992, Ch. 6.

at a distance, where they were not served on plates as other labourers, but on leaves; and muchis were not allowed near the village temples but required to give their offerings and do their drumming from a distance. There are many more ways in which untouchability was expressed, but this need not detain us here. This picture may be exaggerated, and I came across few or only very old stories where transgressors had actually been punished. However, even in the absence of immediate repercussions, there may well have been hidden ways of punishing transgressors (for instance by not rehiring the labourer), and anyway, social norms were probably strongly felt even if not publicly expressed. Nimai Das (muchis by caste) told me how, in the late 1960s, he always washed the plate himself (by this time they were served on plates) when served at his employer's household. This not because it was dictated but because it was 'customary'.

As village servants in the Hindu religious order, muchis had been given some land to cultivate against performing their caste occupation in village festivals (in Udaynala altogether 6.5 *bighas* was allotted for two different festivals and in Gopinathpur 7 *bighas*⁴¹). In Udaynala, that land was given and held by two once-wealthy families, and in Gopinathpur it was allotted by the village festival committee. Although it belongs, by custom, to muchis, it belongs to individual muchis families only by the will of the official owners. It can be taken away and given to another Muchi family if the owner so wishes. This is rarely done, but the option is well known and the exact nature of obligations and rights of such endowments are vague and occasionally disputed in villages. Other caste-occupation-based incomes—the income from the hides, the discretionary patronage at times of festivals, or drumming at festivals other than those for which land has been donated—contribute important additional livelihood. Apart from this they depend on employment as day labourers or occasionally on longer contracts. A few owned some marginal plots of land in their own name thirty years ago, but even this was often soon enough lost to moneylenders. They were poor, as the bagdis, poorly clothed and housed, and often starved.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that muchis never made any fuss in village meetings, if they were present at all, and avoided getting involved in factional strife. In Gopinathpur there is no case of muchis involvement in village politics or in public life in general, although

⁴¹ About three *bighas* to one acre.

two muchis for a short period were members of the Satsangha which became the hub of village Congress support, and one was later member of a cultural society, which was apolitical but membered mainly by CPM-supporters. In the political confusion and the land-occupations of the late 1960s in Udaynala only one muchi is reported to have participated, and only in one incident. Unusually, as a group they did take part in the CPM-led demonstrations against recalcitrant landowners in the late 1970s. But they were also the first group to drop out. This was the first time muchis had actively been part of political activities in the village. They did not take part in the clearly partisan (and bagdi-supported) pro-CPM demonstrations in the early 1980s, nor in the wage-dispute demonstrations of the late 1980s. It should be noted that these demonstrations were headed by village middle class peasants—major employers—although they had an obvious class-tinge to them.⁴²

It is worth keeping in mind that the muchis of Gopinathpur constitute as large a proportion of the population there as the bagdis do in Udaynala and that they had no less reason to feel dissatisfied with their poverty and political subordination. In spite of this they played no significant role in village politics prior to the CPM-led mobilizations, nor in the politics under the more mature CPM raj. Their political involvement in these villages was characterized by restraint. For most of the thirty-year history of village politics the muchis of both villages have been 'known' to support the most prominent village leader, but this support differed strongly from that of the bagdis. The muchis were 'known' to be so in the sense that they could always be counted on not to support opponents, to turn to the major village leader first for loans, patronage, employment, and never openly oppose his decisions or spread rumours about him.

Case III (cont'd): 'We made ourselves low'

This awkward subservience is reflected in the fact that their myths of origin live in an uneasy ambivalence with each other. As all castes, so the muchis have stories of their origin, in particular stories that explain and to an extent excuse how they became so low. These

⁴² As noted above, the bagdis were far more active, contributing the largest number of demonstrators, but even their numbers declined with the maturing of the CPM raj. For 'phases' of conflict and class-cooperation in under the Left Front Government, see Bhattacharyya 1993.

stories are often found among lower castes, stories of the accidents and foolishness that caused such dire consequences.⁴³ One typical story holds that the ancestors of present-day muchis were cowherdsmen—a quite respectable profession. The cows in those days, the story goes, carried small marks in ink to identify their owners. Someone fooled one of the ignorant herdsmen into cutting off that mark of ink so that the cow could be stolen and sold. Over some time, the ink marks became larger, and so the hide that had to be cut off left increasingly larger wounds, and finally a cow died. For their sins, the herdsmen became untouchable muchis. The story rationalizes and legitimizes a degraded position while blaming the muchis themselves. One muchi informant said ‘We made ourselves low’. To say the least, such stories do not prepare the ground for opposition against the ritual hierarchy but on the contrary accept as correct the punishment for such an act. In general the ritual hierarchy that put them at the despised bottom was considered legitimate by muchis.

Curiously enough, though, there are also much grander stories available to the muchis—stories not dissimilar to those of the bagdis—about how the muchis were once kings of the area, before the brahmins and the other high-caste Hindus came. But that story I learnt only from one Muslim village historian, and had it only reluctantly corroborated by the muchis themselves. One of them even belonged to the ‘royal lineage’, but he was rather embarrassed to tell me. Apart from the village historian, no one else in the village knew this story, nor found it credible when told. This fact goes a long way to suggest the importance of social surroundings in the formation and maintenance of myths and identities. One major reason for not disclosing their royal stories seems to have been that they would be ridiculed by other villagers, because they have no means by which to stand by such a myth. This was shown in the early 1970s, when a section of muchis sought to ‘reform’ their customs in accordance with perceived clean-caste ideals. They curbed drinking of alcohol and spent the money on the festival instead, publicly denounced eating of beef, changed their surnames, and declared that they would keep their women at home. They also carefully vented their protest against dominant caste males sexually exploiting their women. Except for the latter aspect, these reforms were not dissimilar to those engaged in by a section of the bagdis somewhat earlier and

⁴³ The stories here are not dissimilar to the ones found by Prakash 1990.

that most bagdis were to embrace about a decade later. The muchis effort, however, was a complete failure. Other villagers had only ridicule and scorn for 'the muchis who wants to be big'. The efforts were soon abandoned for a watered-down version of no beef-eating and less drinking.

The muchis strategy of subservience may not have been particularly successful, although perhaps the only realistic alternative. They received distinctly less patronage than the bagdis under the old regime, and the same, albeit less marked, is the case under the present regime. They have received land and subsidized loans and their present-day economic situation is far from what it was. They have also greatly benefitted from the general rise in daily wages. But in both villages the muchis have received less land and IRDP-loans than the bagdis, as noted above. Also they have no direct political representation.⁴⁴ Similarly, their social reform efforts have not been recognized to the same extent. They are still considered polluting (now even by bagdis) and they are not allowed near the temple. Their strategy failed to grasp the new opportunities, and the failure stands in stark contrast to the success of the bagdis. But their strategy was part and parcel of larger constructs, including their own myths of origin, their social and ritual role, and social stereotypes that restricted their alternatives.

But the point here is that their enacted role of the meek village servant at one point gave them some leverage. By fully enacting that role they could more efficiently and legitimately evoke the rajdharma norm, the norm of kingly duty. The norm reflected important elements of Hindu (Indian) cosmology and existed in daily life as a strong and persuasive norm of social interaction, practised by most in their relations with superiors. By enacting the subservient role with the required deferential manners they could to an extent assert their interests. As opposed to the bagdis, the muchis were expected to be deferential, and they were, much as a son would be deferential to his father or an elder relative, or a student to his teacher. Muchis would not smoke in front of superiors, never argue, or do anything similarly disrespectful. If they had a disagreement with an employer over wages or a moneylender over interest, their tone was deferential, pleading, emphasizing their weakness and dependence, always

⁴⁴ The picture may be changing. In 1996 a muchis was elected chairman of the Gram Committee in Udaynala—although this was 19 years after the coming of the CPM raj and that too to a rather insignificant body recognized by the party only.

addressing superiors using the kinship terms that indicate intimacy but their own inferiority (elder brother, uncle, father). They would also involve the village leaders in their family and caste affairs, ask for permission to marry their daughters, inviting major villagers to festivals or life-cycle rituals, and ask for advice in major transactions.

Bagdis and Muchis as Subalterns?

Both bagdi and muchi behaviour in the village history outlined above could be interpreted and made sense of within the subalternist perspective. Both groups could be seen as manipulating, after a fashion and according to ability, either seeking an opening in the political set-up of the village, or invoking the patriarchal ideology of protection. In the case of the 'asserting' bagdis we find clearly what we may interpret as resistance—quite successful resistance as well—plus the skeleton of what we may interpret as an autonomous domain not controlled by the dominant ideologies. They showed remarkable ingenuity and quite a degree of daring in using their 'weapons of the weak'. Without really challenging hierarchy they still squeezed concessions out of village leaders, turning a weakness into strength. They pursued their own interests as far as possible within the existing politico-economic structure of village society, where landowning leaders rivalled one another and depended on willing man-support for factionalist disputes, but where the bagdis themselves were not in an economic position to discharge of landowners' patronage.

The muchi course of (in-)action could well be described as a case of 'assertion in deference', playing out the meek role of the subdued village servant, not causing trouble, always deferential but in the process always emphasizing the obligation of the patron to protect those dependent on him. They were economically utterly dependent—for ordinary employment and emergency relief. Where they could not straightforwardly demand, their subservient behaviour amounted to a manipulation of the *rajdharmā* norm, of the obligation of the superior to protect and nourish his subordinates, his dependants. Appeals to the norm are more effective if done in a social setting, and this is how the village leaders were important to the muchis. Ambitious landowners and actual or would-be village leaders, would seek to portray themselves—to enhance or legitimize their position or desired position—as proper, good village leaders

who are mindful of all subordinates' well-being. As such they would also have to take care of the *muchis*, who in addition to being subordinates were also village servants and supplied crucial ritual services indispensable to village well-being. In other words, the implicit if pleading support from the *muchis* could become the distinctive mark of a village leader. It did not make anyone a village leader; for that one would require other means such as the support of *bagdis*, but it portrayed him as the patron of ordered life, the upholder of *dharma*, the hub of village life. It follows that the *muchis* could not be fighters as this would have jeopardized their position as village servants with the notions of harmony and inclusion of the whole society that go with religious rituals. Instead, subtle suggestions, the ever-present possibility of a tainted reputation, the importance of the service castes' allegiance for a patron's appearance as a good village leader, the satisfaction and symbolic importance of having *muchis* come to him rather than someone else—these were 'weapons' the *muchis* could use. They could not elevate someone to village leadership but they could give him that important symbolic anointment as a righteous ruler. In practice they may not have been able to withdraw their symbolic support, but they could use the constitutive elements of the ideology within which their ritual role was formed.

We have seen, however, that one group evoked norms of dominance, that is the norms of the hegemonic ideology, while the other group, within the same villages, ignored it, dismissed it, neglected the same rules of interaction, and showed slight respect for employers and village leaders. All this while a third group, ritually part of the second group, endorsed the dominant values, partly proselytizing and seeking to reform their brethren to conform to dominant values. The one ideology, which demanded submission under righteous dominance, cannot have been 'dominant' in any hegemonic sense because it was breached in innumerable activities by another group in the same locality. Hence I find it difficult to interpret these two strategies as (everyday forms of) resistance in Haynes and Prakash's sense, that is, as 'those behaviours and cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations, that threaten to unravel the strategies of domination'.⁴⁵ Moreover, the two strategies were not mutually reinforcing but rather mutually

⁴⁵ And they add, departing from Scott, that '“unconsciousness” need not be essential to this constitution'; I shall return to this below. Haynes and Prakash 1991: 3.

destructive. Throughout most of the thirty years covered in the above village histories, both bagdi and muchis strategies maintained rather than challenged the existing social structure, strengthened rather than disentangled relations of power and subordination. The contestation and threat to 'unravel the strategies of domination' were limited to strategies within domination, or, as in the case of Communist mobilization, the 'unravelling' strategies were followed by individuals that belonged to the dominant social groups. According to Haynes and Prakash, 'unconscious' everyday resistance should lead to disruptions in the agendas of domination and transfigure social structures. It is not clear to me that this would be an accurate description of what we have seen in the histories presented here. Although individual dominated groups eased out some concessions, they reinforced in the process a hierarchy to the detriment of other dominated groups, and thus also to themselves in the long run. The bagdis contributed towards the making of village leaders and maintained a highly hierarchical political system. The top of the political system was again anointed by muchis, and the net effect for the village polity was a reinforced political system within the frame of dominance. The combined effect of their strategies was not radical, it was conservative. So the most we can say is that there was no single subaltern autonomy, only the 'autonomies' of different groups.

There are few clues in the subalternist writings addressing the issues of three entirely different strategies followed by two ritual groups of initially equal economic and near-equal social position within the same village, but where one group (the 'assertive' bagdis) 'unravelling' the ideology but sustained the political order which suppressed the other groups, and one group (the muchis), in its turn, lent legitimacy to the ideological order in order to manipulate it, all while a third group (the 'reformed' bagdis) endorsed dominant values and acknowledged the socio-cultural justification for the present backwardness. In the process all three groups mutually reinforced their respective subordination, whether political, socio-cultural or ritual.

Particularly with the 'assertive' bagdi strategy there would be several qualifications in a subalternist interpretation. Because of a simple in-power/out-of-power dichotomy, the subalternist perspective does not open for how the subaltern can be part of power, that is, not merely an innocent accomplice but an active part in its exercise. What we have in the bagdis of both Gopinathpur and Udaynala are groups that took active part in the recreation of a political order.

They got their share of the proceedings in the process but in effect actively upheld an unequal political and economic system. To focus only on their 'autonomy' is a rather benevolent angle ignoring their active role in repression of other subordinate groups. Such scholarly benevolence belittles their role as accomplices in a political order. As subalterns, they come closer to the original English application of the term, namely a subaltern officer, than the new resisting subaltern. True, the bagdis have every sign of a separate discourse, of an autonomous identity, but it is not employed to challenge dominance but to be part of it.

There is, however, reason to consider more closely the obvious sense of separateness among bagdis, of distinction, their unwillingness to submit to the hegemonic rules of interaction and order, their practices of widow remarriage and liberal views on premarital sexual relations. These practices and values appear as expressions of an independent and articulated identity—if still occasionally somewhat shamefaced—which would come close to 'autonomy'. But if this is so, and we consider the case of the 'reformed' bagdis, not to speak of the situation today, in which the bagdis are struggling to appear as standard Hindus—practising bans on widow remarriage, paying excessive dowry, reading the epics, and worshipping the Hindu gods with standard practices, spending lavishly on rituals (and perhaps overdoing their case)—then we find a case of autonomy lost rather than of enhanced consciousness. In becoming mainstream Hindus the bagdis have distanced themselves from their separateness, if anything their 'autonomy' has been forfeited; their 'resistance' has ended in an adoption of the values of the hegemonic groups. The slow 'conversion' from a quasi-tribal and autonomous identity to their warm embrace of perceived 'standard' Hindu values amounts to an appropriation by formerly dominated groups of characterizing elements of the culture of the dominants. And this becomes problematic within a subalternist interpretation because of an oversimplification of a complex social reality. This simple focus on an elite–subaltern dichotomy causes a conflation of the complexity of roles in a village polity, where no group can clearly be pinpointed as 'subaltern' or 'elite' because even groups of poor (and I have not touched on groups of poor among the dominant castes, for instance) contribute in various ways towards the maintenance of the existing order—while also contributing towards its change.

‘Autonomy’ and ‘Consciousness’: Whole or Partial?

In order to gain a better grip on this, we need to investigate closer what autonomy and consciousness may mean. Haynes and Prakash write that ‘“consciousness” need not be essential’ to the constitution of everyday resistance.⁴⁶ This understanding of resistance, then, becomes rather unclear and ultimately leads to the proposition that even unsuccessful actions on the part of the dominated to sustain a social structure (say, save a king) would have to be interpreted as acts of resistance if those acts were instrumental in bringing down the king (say through a bourgeois reaction). This was of course not their point. Their point was rather to argue against Scott, and position themselves closer to re-readings of Gramsci. Scott holds that Gramsci was wrong in suggesting that hegemony was hegemonic, i.e. not permitting any independent thought, and advocates the view of a consciously autonomous subaltern. Haynes and Prakash dismiss Scott’s dismissal of Gramsci as problematic, arguing that hegemony may be hegemonic—not allowing other ideologies—but not totalizing, i.e. allowing oppositional discursive strands and accidental reconfiguration. Some years earlier the same issue was vented by the historian David Arnold, who found support in the writings of E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and James Scott for the Guhan view of an autonomous domain—although Arnold qualifies his understanding of autonomy by holding it as not unconnected to power.⁴⁷

This forth-and-back debate with a number of in-between positions makes me want to discard the concept of (subaltern) autonomy altogether, but we cannot well do that without qualifications as there are too many evidences of practices and bodies of thought outside the confines of hegemony. The problem, I believe, lies in a presumption of both dominance and dominant ideology on the one hand, and the counter-hegemonic discourse of the dominated classes on the other, as internally unitary, complete and discrete. This is a problematic field and in order to sort it out we have to return to the question of the formation of consciousness, in particular to non-dominant consciousness. And what better place to start than with Gramsci. Recent re-readings of Gramsci suggest that to him conflict may be a constant feature of any hegemony, and that ‘contradictory consciousness’ may

⁴⁶ Haynes and Prakash 1991: 3.

⁴⁷ Arnold 1984.

exist alongside a hegemonic order while not supporting it.⁴⁸ Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is based in ‘historical blocs’, groups with a particular set of values, an ideology, based in their practice. When a section of one such bloc comes to power, to hegemony, then it will rely on allies or large sections of the population already sharing the same ideology—that is, it will not stay in power unless it has allies. The dominant ideology always relies to an extent on some form of consensus. From this follows that already at the outset any hegemonic ideology will consist of values shared by relatively broad social groups.⁴⁹

Sharing the values notwithstanding, some will be dominant and others not. These latter have a distinct experience from being in a subordinate position in a power relationship and from practice. In this they have a separate existence. Their experience will tend to contradict the claims of the hegemonic ideology. Experience may not articulate into a separate ideology, the practical experience of subordination rarely formulates into opposition or resistance, but it is there, giving rise to uneasiness, hesitation, ambiguity. That is, even if originating from a social group with a common historical experience, no would-be hegemonic ideology will be able to cover all changing experiences in perpetuity. Raymond Williams suggests exactly this when stating that ‘. . . no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention’.⁵⁰ ‘Dominant cultures’ cannot manage to put all our experiences into a system, although they do try. In Ernest Gellner’s words, ideologies are ‘wider than the world’, they seek to embrace more than words can cover. The thing is that they fail. Ideologies, writes Gellner, ‘do not really have the conceptual power to make rival positions *unthinkable*’.⁵¹ Alternative readings are always possible because there will always be many different experiences, various and potentially rival interpretations of messages of the dominant ideology, or simply conflicting messages,⁵² and more or less overtly political applications—uses—of the messages.

⁴⁸ See, in particular, Femia 1975 and Lears 1985.

⁴⁹ See ‘The study of philosophy’ in Gramsci 1973 [1971], pp. 323–77.

⁵⁰ Williams 1980: 43.

⁵¹ Gellner 1979: 123 (italics in original).

⁵² Conflicting messages from the same dominant to the same dominated are shown by Turton (1984) with reference to the wide range of different meanings—from praise to contempt—embedded in various terms used by the dominant classes to denote the cultivating classes in Thailand.

What is then the relationship between alternative interpretations and the hegemonic ideology? This realm for alternative interpretations, however potent, does not lend itself easily to postulations of 'autonomous subaltern consciousness'. Even in such a stark case as American slavery, Eugene Genovese found but 'pre-political' forms of protest, where the slaves directed their protest against individual representatives of an oppressive system, not the system itself.⁵³ The same limitations in the consciousness of the dominated—or 'subaltern autonomy'—were found in Chakrabarty's study of the Calcutta mill-workers, and we find it in the bagdis' participation in Udaynala's political system. The limits of resistance—if it is resistance—were constituted by what was customarily right within the ideology of patriarchy and patronage, that is, a 'good patron' would be legitimate. In this, resistance reflected the patriarchal values of hierarchy. However, to acknowledge that there are limits to resistance does not mean necessarily that we also buy the notion of a wholesale subaltern acceptance of a hegemonic ideology. It is just that the alternative readings—those thinkable positions—appear quite unorganized, not systematized. As de Certeau points out, 'the practice of everyday life' is not about grand alternatives to elaborate hegemonic ideologies but about fragmentary manipulation and accidental transformation of the discourses that seek to be hegemonic. It is about the efforts to duck, to avoid the full impact, to 'use' a system that one has to accept because of its power. It is about 'poaching'.⁵⁴

De Certeau has rightfully been criticized for entertaining an oversimplified notion of power, one which privileges resistance but does not consider the complexity, diversity and ambiguity of the struggle for social power.⁵⁵ In a survey reading of recent American history writing, the historian T. J. Jackson Lears finds ample evidence for the proposition that subordinate groups may contribute to their own victimization, believing that their own subordinate position is their own fault. But again, the self-victimization is seldom, if ever, complete. The term 'self-contradictory consciousness' seems to apply to some of the cases in which labourers blame first themselves, then the system, for their lack of success in life.⁵⁶ Here, the simultaneous

⁵³ Genovese 1976 [1972].

⁵⁴ de Certeau 1984: xiii.

⁵⁵ Frow 1991.

⁵⁶ One paragraph is so good that it deserves to be quoted in extenso: '[In spite of awareness of class inequalities in America, the respondents] could not escape the effect of dominant values: they deemed their class inferiority a sign of personal

existence of and the contradictions between the worker's interpretations of an experienced reality and the largely internalized dominant ideology (the individualistic make-your-own-success) graphically describe how consciousness is not constituted by one body of thought, one single set of values, or one internally consistent set of guidelines for behaviour or for interpretations of social reality. Hegemonic ideology may be so hegemonic as to prevent the formulation of complete sets of alternative values, systems of thought, but never so hegemonic as to preclude alternative if unconnected values. 'Culture' appears as many-voiced, open to other alternative impulses, to the restructuring of symbolic elements that derive from praxis.

This becomes even more complex if we investigate the various positions individuals and groups may have in a hierarchy of power. Also following subalternist writings, the pinpointing of the 'elite' or 'subaltern' is highly complicated.⁵⁷ Whereas the *pater familias* of an Indian village family may well be considered the hub of patriarchal power in a household and the object of resistance for the household's women or younger brothers, he is more often than not subordinated to a landowner, a caste leader, a moneylender or a village leader, who again may find himself in subordinated opposition to the bureaucracy or the local police, who again were colonial subjects, or nowadays subjects of a dominant political party whose ideology or practice they may or may not agree with. We find both an elite and a subaltern in all these positions. In other words, there is no singular 'elite', no social group or group of individuals with whom all power is located. Power is diffused, fragmented, dispersed, distributed among a large number of actors. If we grant that all those positions can be read as subalterns potentially contesting the powers of those above, then we also have to acknowledge that they are dominants themselves. In such a case, to understand the constitution of ideology

failure, even as many realized they had been constrained by class origins that they could not control. In one breath, a garbage collector told the interviewer: "Never learning to read good . . . it was out of my hands . . . I mean I wanted to, but I got bad breaks." In the next breath, the same man said: "Look, I know it's nobody's fault but mine that I got stuck here where I am, I mean . . . if I wasn't such a dumb shit . . . no, it ain't that neither . . . if I'd applied myself, I know I got it in me to be different, can't say anyone did it to me". (Lears 1985: 577–8, summarizing and quoting from Sennett and Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, New York, 1972.)

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Guha's notoriously unclear definition in the first *Subaltern studies* volume: 'The social groups and elements included in this category [people, or subaltern classes] represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "elite".' Guha 1982: 8, italics in original.

formation and maintenance we need to investigate the world of each of the 'subaltern/elite', each of these subordinated practitioners of dominance. A complex social reality should give rise to not one contradictory consciousness but several.⁵⁸

Another element we need to investigate here is the importance of social identities such as caste, ripe as those stereotyped entities are with parameters for action. The importance of distinct social identities was acknowledged by Guha in his 1983 study of tribal uprisings. Distinct tribal identities could both hamper and smooth solidarity with other social groups as well as furnish internal solidarity. Caste, on the other hand, is perhaps not as significant a marker of social distinction as tribal identity. But, as the case I have presented here shows, caste (in the form of a rural *jati*) created for the individual groups very distinct experiences of their subordination. Many of the contributions to the *Subaltern studies* volumes and to Haynes and Prakash's book also testify to this, how the exact nature of the contestation is always based in local circumstance, in shared experience, and in local practice—which can be very local indeed.

Complex Cultures, Myriad of Ideologies

With these problems in mind—'self-contradictory consciousness', the 'subaltern/elite' and a multitude of identities—we may feel the need to go beyond Gramsci. India represents a society more conducive to an elaboration of the concept of culture than Italy. Applying Gramsci to India we soon find that the varied social system gives rise to a wide variety of 'contradictory consciousnesses', which by necessity must exist side by side and possibly in contradiction to each other.⁵⁹ The same would apply to the multi-layered social structure, where one is subaltern in one context but dominant in another. Gramsci's concept of hegemony becomes inflexible in face of Indian social reality. This single concept refers to ideas controlled by power or sup-

⁵⁸ Anita Chakravarty's (1995) defence of the subaltern perspective that 'subalternity' is about this intermediate position—both dominated and dominant at the same time—rather seems to render the project even more intangible. It gives the impression that we are all subalterns, only varying with the situation we find ourselves for the moment.

⁵⁹ This is perhaps also conceivable within Gramsci's thought. The conception of the peasantry as sharing one culture (i.e. excluding the gentry) would perhaps had been entirely different had he written on India.

porting power—but at what level? Does hegemony refer to the position enjoyed by a village leader, that is to the realm of the discussed and potentially challenged, or to patriarchy, or the realm of the undiscussed, Bourdieu's 'taken-for-granted'?

To come to terms with how people can think about and contest some aspects of life but not all, Jean and John Comaroff recently argued that culture cannot be seen as a given whole. Rather '... the meaningful world always presents itself as a fluid, often contested, and only partially integrated mosaic'.⁶⁰ However, the mosaic is not entirely fluid; some of the world looks permanent and stable, some of it lasts for so long that it appears as unavoidable and true. Following wide readings, the Comaroffs therefore discriminate analytically between culture, hegemony and ideology. The term 'culture' they employ to denote simply the entire sign system ('the very big thing, namely our total vision of reality' in Gellner's words⁶¹. 'Hegemony', on the other hand, is given a more restrictive understanding, as the realm of ideas that are controlled by power and that sustain power. However, the more interesting conceptualization is of 'ideology', which they see as a system of relatively well-known norms, as 'an articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] "worldview" of any social grouping'.⁶² Norms that you can talk about and discuss. This implies that we are moving at a level where other value systems can be visualized by the individual. An ideology is a system of norms that does not exclude the existence of other comparative systems (ideologies). And in most societies there will be several such systems. '[A]ny social grouping' may have its own distinct set of values, norms, its own ideology. Apart from the dominant group 'other, subordinate populations, at least those with communal identities, also have ideologies'.⁶³

And then, in another interesting addition, the Comaroffs turn this somewhat standard view into one most original by pointing out that the conscious/unconscious opposition (or the distinctions between 'culture', 'hegemony' and 'ideology') is not a dichotomy but the ends of a continuum, 'a chain of consciousness',⁶⁴ in between which lies the most fascinating realm, namely

⁶⁰ Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 27.

⁶¹ Gellner 1979: 130.

⁶² Following in part Raymond Williams's definition of ideology in *Marxism and Literature*, 1977; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 24.

⁶³ Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

... the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and, sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even articulate conceptions of the world [...] It is from this realm, we suggest, that silent signifiers and unmarked practices may rise to the level of explicit consciousness, of ideological assertion, and become the subject of overt political and social contestation.⁶⁵

This reading allows for a flexible understanding of action, one where there is scope for more than grudging acceptance and open revolt. This liminal field is a potentially dynamic field, where seeds of alternative interpretations may slowly be born into awareness and where, equally, signs and symbols may recede into the unremarked taken-for-granted. Here, the Comaroffs refer the graduation of protest to practice, and to the response of the dominant, which may lead in the end to the production of a will to protest. Consciousness is thus not a prior but grows out of practice and recognition—‘with varying degrees of inchoateness and clarity’.⁶⁶ Similarly, this liminal field can be understood as the realm to which other (previous) ideologies go when overtaken, where values that do not fit the presently dominant ideology exist, a field of more or less powerful value-systems and possibly counter-ideologies.⁶⁷ It is the field from which resistance may arise because no power can command all signs and symbols. Thus the hegemony that power seeks to establish is never entirely dominant. It will seek to dominate rival norm sets and press these away, with sometimes less, sometimes more success, but never complete success. Hegemony itself is equally fluid and unstable. It is made and remade, constantly under pressure and challenge, requiring maintenance and under the operation of a large number of actors, not all of whom are concerted.

Using this understanding of the ‘cultural field’ as a myriad of signs and norms—not all immediately available for justification of action but giving rise to a certain uneasiness, unwillingness, reluctance, or ambiguity, inconsistency, multiplicity of motives—we can come closer to understanding the differences in the appropriation of new ideologies and political opportunities displayed by groups of villagers, including the differences in response by groups of poor to a changing political environment. Recognizing ‘rajdharmā’ and hierarchy as sug-

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–6.

gestive of the dominant but complex theme of rank and mutuality in Indian culture should not mean ignoring alternative norm systems, deviant practices or the possibility of alternative interpretations of any one situation. Equally, questions of autonomy or lack of autonomy, of just how hegemonic ideology is, become too simple, too inflexible for the complex contestation that takes place in society.

Bagdis and Muchis (and Women) in a Complex Social Reality

Let me then return to the story about the bagdis and the muchis. I have found it difficult to term their practices ‘resistance’, to term them ‘subaltern’ or to accord them ‘autonomy’ without damaging qualifications. They protected their own interests, as they saw them (which included land, status, patronage, etc.), but this did not amount to a conceptualization, however unarticulated, of a singular dominant ideology as oppressive because there was no single way—even for the scholar—of conceptualizing power or sharply identifying the dominants. Both bagdis and muchis were dissatisfied—and strongly so—with their poverty and low place in society. But their identities should be seen as composite, not merely referring to the dominant ideology or hegemonic groups. Such a reference, implicit in the term autonomy, conflates a heterogeneous social and historical experience to one’s position in a power-relationship. A consciousness-quest will find it difficult to deal with the case where the bagdis exposed themselves to a potential wrath of landlords by participating in Communist activities, but ten years later spend the gains in building a brick temple and sacrificing goats in order to appear as ritually near-equals to their landlords. In the presentation made above of the two communities the importance of other types of experiences, including older ideologies or value-systems, has been emphasized. These existed alongside an everyday experience of subordination and poverty. Both were parts of their experienced identity, but only parts. The whole story consisted of both, and more. It was composite.

With the Comaroffs’ conception of culture as complex and of ideologies as vacillating in the broad liminal space between the unarticulated taken-for-granted and the aware, action-inciting, it becomes possible to discard the stale autonomous/not autonomous debate with its a-bit-autonomous-after-all hybrid. Instead we can see how the different group identities did not harbour unified bodies of norms

and values, but were repositories of a wide variety of experiences that together contributed to a large unformed body of partly articulated partly inchoate and often contradictory values and norms. In the case of the bagdis and their 'consciousness', the experience of poverty and oppression existed alongside the pride they attached to physical prowess, daring and untamed beauty. The negative caste stereotypes and low ritual position existed together with the official 'positive discrimination' status of Scheduled Caste. The egalitarian and non-authoritarian norms and values of their distant tribal origin conflicted with the scorn that such 'low' origin was subject to from clean-caste Hindus. But this scorn was again mitigated by their own disdain for the frugal life-style of mainstream Hindus. The ambiguous warmth of patronage existed uneasily with the profound desire to become patrons. On top of all this there were the gains from the game of village politics and the thrill and enhanced sense of worth that stemmed from their association with dacoity. All these elements combine to form their experience, and any one, given the right circumstances, could come to the forefront of attention and create impetus for action, although never entirely freed from the other elements, some of which contradict the one at forefront. Action is rarely unambiguous and participation in land occupations was never freed from the knowledge that land can bring higher ritual status, or even from the thrill and meaningfulness of being a bagdi engaged in reckless coveted actions.

Again, when we compare with the muchis, we find a different constellation of experiences giving rise to different strategies, other concerns, despite a common economic experience. Dissatisfaction with their lowly ritual position conflicted with the logic of the religious system to which they adhered and in which their low position was given honourable justification in a holistic view of the universe, just as their economic poverty was mediated by the persuasive arguments of patriarchy and occasional patronage. And the myths about how they became lowly coexist in contradiction with the myths of a royal origin—the acquiescence with a muted and hurt grand past. Their subordination was of a different kind from that of the bagdis and by terming both groups 'subalterns' in a reference only to a position in a power-relationship, important insights are lost. Instead of respect won through fear, muchis were exposed to ridicule and scorn, arrogance and humiliation—even from the bagdis—that made caution their primary strategy (but not their only concern). This caution and the little but vital patronage that came with it prevented them from

availing themselves of the CPM's mobilization call—even in face of their obvious dissatisfaction and poverty.

That subordinate groups themselves participate in the creation of their own environment and to an extent both create and recreate the values of their own subordination, should not surprise us. But such a process should always be seen as a process, as dynamic and open to contestation and change. Take the case of women. Ask any grown-up man in a Bengali village, and he will inform you that (married) women are gossipy, nagging, above all, scheming in ways men never fathom. 'You never know' what women talk about around the water-pumps, or what rumours they pass on. But the rumours are rarely unsubstantiated and very often have a bearing on someone's social standing. Particularly in situations of conflict does this 'semi-public' discourse become important, and even men tend to turn to intelligent and knowledgeable women for reliable information about village politics, the kind of information men cannot give because they are too involved themselves to divulge anything not already publicly known. Furthermore, women do not participate in village meetings, but if they yell angrily or in distress from the fringes of the meeting place, their words will of course be heard and their arguments indirectly carry weight (although not as easily as in case of even less important men). Their distress will carry weight because of the implicit obligation of protection of women, and of course because their shouting makes things known—although not 'public' in the same sense—it relays information that can have an important bearing.

Where men define women, there also women will define women (and men). Not in the same terms but contesting the application of norms and values to particular situations and forwarding the 'right' of women to protection and to be heard. These 'inchoate' notions of 'women's rights' to protection etc. within patriarchy, have been strengthened with the influence of outside discourses on women's equality, women's rights, right to education, to freedom of movement. These are values that as yet have not sunk into the dominant political party's local apparition or the prevailing village environment. However, although such notions still have to compete—in the minds of both men and women—with other norms, of family unity, caste honour and solidarity, patron-client hierarchy, etc., there is an increased tendency to argue, whether by men or women, that women have equal rights (not just rights, as in right to protection). The slow introduction of this discourse constitutes a practice with tangible

consequences; *pardah* has long been abolished (it was practised among the high-status Muslims of Udaynala and other villages until the 1960s), young girls are increasingly allowed to attend colleges and even the university, they may socialize with others, some even—stealthily, but known—with boys, and a small but increasing number of women have regular jobs and incomes of their own.

As an example of an ambiguous discourse, or perhaps uneasy coexistence of different discourses, let me briefly narrate the following case. In Gopinathpur, one young educated and politically active kayastha woman used the discourse of modernity to argue against her own father and to legitimize having a meal of rice and even drinking water in the house of Muslims. Her father was furious and denied her entry to his house. But he was supported in this drastic measure only by a few elderly kayasthas (among whom quite a few were women). Other kayasthas subjected him to some pressure, arguing that punishment is only useful in small doses and only as a means of fatherly guidance towards the final goal of making the erring young understand. This line of argument was based in the broad and multi-layered values surrounding father-child relationships.⁶⁸ It was also argued that eating cooked rice in a Muslim household does not amount to defiling one's caste, only water does so. The daughter accepted this distinction, and her father eventually relinquished, readmitting her into his household. As a married woman, she still conforms to the picture of a placid Bengali housewife—she cooks, rears children, washes, keeps the house, etc.—but she retains her outgoing life style, working now as a primary school teacher, which has accorded her a voice at village meetings in cases of particular interest to women or schooling.

Ideological change can be brought about from outside and from inside a dominant ideology—and most often in a combination of forces both within and outside. In the hegemonic ideology's stereotypes of dominated groups lies ample room for manoeuvring, manipulation and the eventual formation of rival or occasionally even counter-hegemonic discourses. Within or in the fringes of a dominant ideology lie other values and norms, potentially contradicting the dominant values when these latter are applied to particular cases of conflict. These contradictory values are embedded in the ideologies or experienced reality of other, subordinated groups—elements that

⁶⁸ For the parent-child relationship in Bengali cosmology, see Inden and Nicholas 1977.

may be used in everyday conflict, as justification for action, and that may be strengthened, surface, form connections with other, rival values or ideologies emerging outside, arise from practice, through processes of interaction. Hegemony or dominance now appears as permeated, divided among different groups, fractured and open to contest in different spheres. The totalizing nature of hegemony has to be nuanced, realizing that there will always be weak sides to it, soft spots of benevolence or contradiction, openings for contestation. Above all, 'hegemony' has to be elaborated, so as not to range from the general to the particular, encompassing both the norms of patriarchy and the stingy logic of a moneylender or the particularistic here-and-now arguments that are adapted to a particular conflict. The first type, patriarchy, is almost absolutely hegemonic—and pass for what the Comaroffs call 'hegemony', encompassing most signs, normally uncontested—while here-and-now arguments by a dominant caste, a landlord or a domineering village leader would imply the application of norms to contested situations, where even members of the dominant group may differ. Such a situation, where values and norms are concretely applied, appealed to, and ultimately laid open to contestation, is fundamentally different from the hegemony of patriarchy and the distinction has to be made.

Final Remarks

If in the course of this essay I have grossly essentialized 'the bagdis' and 'the muchis' then I must beg the reader's kind indulgence. Except for one brief reference to women, there is hardly any reference to how individuals or groups other than village jatis are constituted and reconstituted in a local system of relationships. But my endeavour has primarily been to question the conceptualization of the 'peasant-subaltern' in terms of a position in a power relationship only, whether cultural or structural. To achieve what I hope has been a more nuanced portrayal of village politics, I have focused on the construction of one type of social identity but I am aware of having excluded many others.

There is no conclusion to this essay, only the caution not to oversimplify the lives of the 'uneducated', 'unsophisticated' 'masses', the 'rural folk' or 'toiling classes' that we have much sympathy with but really do not know too well, especially not if our sources for information about their 'consciousness' and 'culture' are second-hand at best.

This essay argues that such an oversimplification can readily be detected in otherwise sympathetic and important studies, a tendency which hampers an understanding of change, whether cultural change or an only half-baked political conversion. The world of signs and symbols is complex and multi-layered. This complexity and by necessity vagueness—in which ‘dominance’ is constructed and maintained—open for constant contestations and contested interpretations, and lay it open to (re-)evaluation. This complexity is missed by a conceptualization of the cultural world as either supporting or denouncing the existing social structure, with little or nothing in between.

It is not the existence of modes of ‘subalternity’—this sense of dominance as legitimate although we contest its everyday apparition—that we should be looking for, but their constructions, their creations and re-creations. In particular, we need more sensitivity in investigations of how values and norms change, how half-forgotten values or identity markers again may rise to gain new prominence, or how sets of values become amalgamated in new constellations to instigate action. A potent field for investigation would be the crucial modes of interaction of older norm systems with other strands of thought, new ideologies, modernization, calls for mobilization, nationalism—and in particular how these contribute towards real social or political change, however slow, to challenges, and to a perception of the world and one’s own position in it that are rarely clear-cut, rarely based in one concern only. By acknowledging that culture is complex and composite we also must acknowledge that action and the consciousness that gives rise to action are also so, ambiguous, inconsistent, harbouring a variety of motives.

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