**Emancipation as social equality: Subaltern politics in contemporary India**

*Indrajit Roy*

**Abstract:** The ethnographies presented in this article point to the ways in which members of oppressed communities imagine emancipation. Instead of analyzing emancipation as stemming from statist precepts of citizenship, I want to direct attention - along with other articles in this Special Issue - to the ‘arcadian’ spaces in which exploited, marginalized and discriminated populations forge membership in the political community in contentious engagement with both state and society. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with Musahar landless laborers in the Indian State of Bihar during the winter and spring of 2009-10, with follow-up visits in September 2013 and July 2014. I focus on their engagements with two organizations, one a leftist political party and the other a cultural organization to advance my claims. The ethnography reveals that, for the Musahar laborers, ideas of emancipation are anchored in reclamations of social equality rather than a telos of state-centered citizenship.

*Keywords:* Bihar, caste, class, Dalits, emancipation

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his “own powers” as social powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.

Karl Marx, 1844

[Emancipation] starts when we realise that…“interpreting the world” is already a means of transforming it.

Jacques Ranciére, 2009

**Emancipation beyond the state**

Emancipation is a hotly contested concept. As a political philosopher, Karl Marx distinguishes human emancipation from political emancipation. Whereas political emancipation entails granting formal political equality to individuals as citizens of their states, human emancipation is about the process through which individuals recognize and organize themselves as social beings in their everyday lives. While political emancipation is reached when all people within a state are treated as equals by the law of the land, human emancipation is realized when people treat themselves and others around them as equals (Hudis 2012). The achievement of human emancipation is possible by rupturing prevailing structures of power. While Marx recognizes the liberatory possibilities of political emancipation, it is the achievement of human emancipation that remains of primary interest to him.

Marx’s meditations on human emancipation provide a useful starting point to critically investigate subaltern claims to social equality in contemporary India. Analysts with social-democratic orientations tend to suggest that emancipatory prospects are best realized through the institution of juridical regimes of rights, covenants, and guarantees of legal equality by states (Baviskar 2005; Beteille 2002; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Fuller and Harriss 2001; Gupta 2005; Parry 2000). Their views resonate with Marshall’s (1950) delineation of the political, civil, and social dimensions of citizenship to make their case for the realization of emancipation. On the other hand, applying an anarchist lens, observers with postcolonial and postmodernist orientations offer pessimistic accounts of the state’s interventions in people’s lives (Chakrabarty 2002; Madan 1994; Nandy 1987). Their scholarship resonates with Scott’s (1985) suggestions that the prospects for human emancipation are best realized when people successfully resist statist interference in their lives. Against these dichotomized views, recent ethnographies have taken into account the *intersections* between statist projects of emancipation and popular utopias (Bhatia 2005; Kunnath 2012; Michelutti 2008; Rao 2008; Waghmore 2013; Witsoe 2013). These works suggest that, underpinning the intersections between statist projects and popular utopias, the idiom of social equality animates subaltern political practices. Social equality, as Elizabeth Anderson notes, refers “not so much to the distributions of goods as to relations between superior and inferior persons” (Anderson 1999: 312). However, where inequalities assume "categorical" terms (Tilly 1999) – that is, entire categories of people are deemed unequal, inferior, and imputed negative stereotypes – then social inequality is not only about persons but about groups. Social status and associated notions of prestige, shame, and humiliation are formative contributors to the experience of social inequality, and often concomitant with the experience of poverty. The group-based perpetuation of social inequality has led sensitive scholars to observe that categories such as class and culture “occur together and overlap in various ways” (Wolf 1982: 65). Maintaining social inequality is the key to the politics of the dominant groups. Negating social inequalities - and claiming social equality - is the key to subaltern politics.

This article is about subaltern claims to social equality. Nevertheless, it also takes seriously Jacques Ranciére’s reminder to students that presuppositions of equality provide the starting point of emancipation (Ranciére 1991). In postulating this, Ranciére interrogates, from within a Marxist analytical perspective, the vanguardist assumption among revolutionary activists that emancipation entails the state uplifting the masses to a pre-defined social and cultural level, a level which the activists claim to already have achieved. Such an assumption among activists leads them to believe that while it is their responsibility to teach the masses, they in turn have little to learn from them. Ranciére’s perspective allows students to question the idea of emancipation as a transition from inequality to equality. On the contrary, Ranciére insists, emancipation starts from the premise of equality, the recognition by revolutionary activists that they have as much to learn from the masses as they have to teach them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this article, I will direct attention to the claims of social equality by agricultural laborers of the Musahar community in the north-eastern districts of Bihar State. As agricultural laborers, they depend on land-owning cultivators for employment, and suffer brutal exploitation (Kunnath 2012). As members of a community stigmatized as an ‘untouchable caste’ by dominant groups, they face widespread discrimination (Jaoul 2011). Against these oppressive social relationships, Musahar agricultural laborers seek to assert claims of social equality against dominant groups in a variety of ways. One of these ways is to affiliate with regional and national organizations and use these as platforms to voice their claims. The Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist - Liberation) - CPI(M/L-L), a political party that espoused parliamentary communism, provided one such platform for agricultural laborers to organize their claims against exploitation by landowning farmers. Another platform was provided by the Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS), an organization that advanced the cultural claims of members of the Musahar community. However, and this is key to the argument I make in the article, members of the community did not quietly acquiesce to the narratives offered by the activists of these organizations. Rather, in voicing their demands of social equality, they often challenged the perspectives of the activists who claimed to speak on their behalf.

Thus, the claims of social equality were directed by members of the Musahar community not only against their oppressors but also against organizational activists. Analyzing these claims provides us with a window into the nuanced ways in which Musahar agricultural labourers envisage emancipation. The material presented in this article draws on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in the northern region of Bihar State[[2]](#footnote-2). After presenting a brief picture of the disparities between Musahar and other communities, I discuss the emancipatory narratives offered by the CPI(M/L-L) and the MSS. I emphasize the importance of the state in these narratives, but also remind readers that ideas of emancipation exceeded the state, rather than being restricted by it. If the activists of the CPI(M/L-L) envisaged emancipation in terms of equitable redistribution of economic resources, the activists of the MSS conceived emancipation as being about the recognition of cultural equality. I then underscore the ways in which the emancipatory narratives offered by the activists are complicated by "ordinary" agricultural laborers of the Musahar community. To adumbrate, Musahar agricultural laborers agree with the activists that ideas of emancipation exceed the state. But they disagree with the monochromatic narratives of emancipation offered by the activists, anchored in either class or culture. Rather, they offered nuanced perspectives which foregrounded their concerns with social equality. During my conversations and interviews with them, they made numerous references to such ideas as “samaj mein barabari” (being equal in society) or “samaj mein unch-neech na ho” (nobody should be high or low in society) to express their aspirations towards social equality.

**Musahar agricultural labourers: Exploitation and discrimination**

Bihar, the State in which the fieldwork site is located, is one of India’s most impoverished. As elsewhere in India, impoverishment is disproportionately concentrated among historically oppressed Dalit communities[[3]](#footnote-3) who continue to be stigmatized as "untouchable castes" by local and regional elites. Concomitant with the fragile livelihoods they confront is the routine experience of social discrimination. Side by side, heterogeneities *within* Dalit communities are impossible to ignore, as some members of the Dalit communities and some Dalit communities, such as the Musahars, more particularly face the brunt of social discrimination compared with others.

The colonial government governed Bihar’s northern regions under the aegis of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. The Permanent Settlement sought to facilitate revenue-collection by creating a class of landlords who were bestowed permanent rights over allocated "estates" so long as they met their revenue obligations. As a result, the Settlement established a hierarchy over the land, with the colonial state at the apex. Below the state were the estate-holders, the *zamindar.* The *zamindars* parceled their estates among "under-tenures", called *raiyats* in Bihar. As tenants, the "under-tenures" further parceled out their holdings to sub-holders of tenurial rights, who held different degrees of rights over the land and its produce. At the base of this hierarchy were a variety of petty peasants and sharecroppers, with limited rights over the land. Although *zamindars* held the tenure of the estate, they were rarely involved in agricultural operations. Agricultural operations were managed by the plethora of the ‘under-tenure’ tenants, especially the small and marginal landowning peasants who hired in labor to complement their own family labor. Outside the pale of the settlement as it were, but central to the production of the agricultural outputs that bolstered land revenue, were a plethora of landless agricultural laborers, who toiled on the land with absolutely no rights whatsoever over it.

The tenurial arrangement of the Permanent Settlement mirrored the patterns of social stratification in the area. Estate owners tended to be dominant caste Hindus and Muslims (Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasths, and Pathan). Their "under-tenures" were also often of the dominant castes, although subordinate holders of tenurial rights typically belonged to ‘intermediate’ caste-communities. Sometimes, estate-holders entered into sharecropping arrangements with tillers who owned no land and compelled them, through beatings, rape, and killings, to share up to two-thirds of the harvest with them, without investing anything at all in the agricultural process. The actual laborers on the land were recruited from Dalit communities such as Musahars. The Musahars were incorporated into the Permanent Settlement via "circuits of labour" recruited by the landowners on their pilgrimages to the Chhota Nagpur region, over 400 kilometers to the south (Prakash 1990; Chakravarti 1986).

Although the postcolonial state abolished the Permanent Settlement and the institution of the revenue-farming *zamindars*, the Congress Party scuttled its own legislation on land redistribution, perpetuating gross inequalities in asset-holdings. Caste-based discrimination remained rampant. Although the political situation has undergone some change since 1990, with the emergence of the Janata Dal regime headed by the charismatic Lalu Prasad Yadav, the situation of the agricultural laborers, especially Musahars, remains precarious.

Data from the Indian census suggests that 39 percent of the population of the State cultivates their own land. For Dalits, this proportion is considerably lower than for the general population- only 9 percent. Among the Dalits, the condition of the Musahars is even more appalling, as only 3 percent of all Musahar households are cultivators. Likewise, 64 percent of the State’s population is enumerated as agricultural laborers, an occupational group that is assumed to hold little or no land. For Dalits, this figure increases to 75 percent. Within Dalits, the Musahars are verily at the bottom of the economic heap, with agricultural laborers comprising as much as 93 precent of the Musahar population[[4]](#footnote-4).

Not only do the overwhelming majority of Musahars face precarious livelihoods, they are stigmatized and discriminated against. Privileged communities, such as Rajputs and Kayasths stereotype Musahars in derogatory ways by claiming that Musahar women are promiscuous (Mukul 1999). Bureaucrats and other influential people in local society hold their alleged “culture of poverty” (Kumar 2006) responsible for their impoverishment, arguing that they waste their time and money on supposedly profligate cultural observances. Farmers discriminate against agricultural laborers of these communities by serving them food in "segregated" utensils separate from agricultural laborers of other communities. Musahar agricultural laborers work longer hours than other agricultural laborers, receive less food than others and are often addressed - in a derogatory manner - by their caste names. Although the wages they receive are the same as others, they are often delayed. Musahar women agricultural laborers are molested with impudence. It is not unknown for agricultural laborers of other communities to discriminate against them as well as squeal on them to their employers.

In short, Bihar’s Musahar population confronts both exploitation and discrimination.

**Two routes to emancipation: intersections of statist projects and popular utopias**

In this section, I want to discuss briefly the emancipatory narratives offered by the activists of the two organizations most popular among Musahar agricultural laborers in northern Bihar. The Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist-Liberation), or the CPI(M/L-L), is the older, and national in scope. The Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS) is more recent in its origin, and concentrates its work with Musahars in northern Bihar. Unlike the CPI(M/L-L), which maintains a sustained, if low-key, cyber presence and appears in the news from time to time for its political activities, the MSS presence on such forums is negligible. CPI(M/L-L) functionaries draw on a widely shared vast corpus of writings penned down by their predecessors in the party. On the other hand, MSS functionaries rely on oral records and a relatively flexible approach to organizing their activities.

The CPI(M/L-L) states as its ultimate aim “the abolition of all kinds of exploitation of humans by humans”[[5]](#footnote-5). It proposes to do this by effecting socialist transformation and communism in India. To that end, the party works closely among the poorest rural Indians, the agricultural laborers. The fragility of agricultural laborers’ livelihoods, combined with the dispersed nature of agricultural labor, renders them particularly dependent on the goodwill of their employers for such things as fair wages and decent conditions of work. It is to reduce this dependence and concomitant vulnerabilities that the CPI(ML-L) began organizing the agricultural laborers under the aegis of its affiliate the All India Agricultural Laborers Association (AIALA) [[6]](#footnote-6).

The AIALA focuses on demanding improvements in the living and working conditions of agricultural laborers. Among its demands are a comprehensive legislation on working conditions and social rights as well as insisting that existing social protection schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is implemented. Engagement with the state, via the institutions of parliamentary democracy and the apparatus of its social protection schemes is central to the new legalist strategy pursued by the CPI(M/L-L). But such engagement is not all-encompassing. At the core of their project lies the construction of a class subjectivity that unites agricultural laborers irrespective of their caste and religious backgrounds.

The chief purpose of the Musahar Sevak Sangh (MSS) is, in the words of its block-level Secretary, to “liberate Musahars and other stigmatized people from the cultural domination they face in their daily lives[[7]](#footnote-7)” The MSS was convened by a Janata Dal-affiliated legislator in the 1990s. The MSS Secretary described their core strategy as one of building collective confidence among the Musahars. This, they believed would allow them to confront the instances of social discrimination they faced on a daily basis. In order to do this, the MSS campaigns from time to time against the practice of caste discrimination. They also organize rallies to generate awareness among the Musahars about the different social policies to which they were entitled on account of the collective deprivations they faced. Between 2008 and 2014, the Bihar State Government classified Musahars as Mahadalits, making them and members of select other communities eligible for special subsidies and provision of social entitlements: the MSS used this opportunity to build a shared solidarity among the Musahars and other "untouchable" communities in demanding their social entitlements. But perhaps the most important contribution of the MSS has been the institutionalized observance of Musahar festivals which had historically been circumscribed by the privileged castes. The institutionalization of these cultural observances has been critical to challenge the cultural domination to which the Musahars have been historically subjected. Thus, while engagement with the state is crucial, the MSS also seeks to forge a cultural subjectivity that opposes the imposition of the culture of the dominant groups upon subalterns.

Both the CPI(M/L-L) and the MSS espouse a dual approach to emancipation. On the one hand, they both seek to deepen the connections between impoverished people and the state. On the other hand, they are both interested in forging political subjectivities through which the rural poor can imagine, and effect, social transformation. The support of the state is central to their project, but neither is it all-encompassing nor is it an end in itself. Rather, it is the means to an end, which is the achievement of social equality. The substantive content of such transformation differs, to be sure. The CPI(M/L-L) envisages a world where economic exploitation is eliminated. The MSS aspires to a world where cultural discrimination is annihilated. Despite these differences, both organisations foreground social equality as the most important axis of their struggle.

**Claims of social equality: Class mobilization and cultural assertion**

The CPI(M/L-L) project of constructing a unified class subjectivity among agricultural laborers confronts the concrete reality that a quarter of this occupational group is drawn from Dalit communities[[8]](#footnote-8). Reaching out to the Musahars with their pedagogic project of forging a unified class subjectivity with the ultimate aim of achieving their emancipation is, unsurprisingly then, a crucial objective of the CPI(M/L-L). In elucidating their emancipatory project, the CPI(M/L-L) explicitly recognizes the reality of caste-based discrimination. For party ideologues, the construction of class subjectivities is crucial to the eventual annihilation of the caste distinctions that, in their opinion, prevent the unification of agricultural laborers. Their approach is explicitly enunciated in the party’s mouthpiece *Liberation*:

Marxists stand for the annihilation of caste through scientific analysis and through abolition of its material basis, the capitalist system, and by mobilizing various sections of people along class lines against the exploitative social system*[[9]](#footnote-9).*

In the context of northern Bihar, where members of the Musahar community predominate numerically and comprise large segments of the agricultural labor population, party functionaries have taken care to follow this injunction. Their efforts have entailed close interactions between the party cadres and functionaries with the agricultural laborers and allowed the former to gain an appreciation of the concrete experiences of the latter. Against prevailing practices of explicit discrimination, party cadres explicitly recognized all members of the party as equals. Activists such as Domi Rishi, with whom I was privileged to spend several afternoons over four months, particularly valued the practice of social equality in the party. Association with the party allows him and other members of the Musahar community to forge friendships and collegialities across different communities. Moreover, no one claims - at least publicly - superiority over others on grounds of their social status. Party members treat everyone else as equals and that is what mattered. The Hindi equivalent of the term ‘comrade’ (*saathi*) effaces all hierarchies during political meetings, although outside of these forums, activists resorted to fictive kinship terms to refer to elders as ‘uncles’ (*cha*) or ‘older brother’ (*bhaiji*). There are slight differences between the quantities of land that activists were allowed to keep and what is distributed among actual occupiers, but among the activists themselves there is parity, irrespective of their caste and class backgrounds. Domi Rishi notes, for instance, and praises, the fact that party functionaries do not hesitate to roll out and fold up seating mats before and after party meetings, willingly serve food and water to all delegates and embraced one another without any misgivings whatsoever.

For Domi Rishi, association with the party offered Musahar agricultural laborers such as himself the opportunity to assert their dignity. The struggles for the occupation of agricultural properties controlled by landlords of the privileged communities in flagrant violation of the spirit of the Indian constitution provided occasions for them to convey to the elite classes that they were no longer willing to tolerate the socio-economic injustice to which they had been subjected. Permitting me a glimpse of his perspective, he told me that when he and his friends joined the party nearly two decades ago, they were motivated by a desire to “look the landlords in the eye while speaking with them”. The perspectives offered by Domi Rishi and his associates resonate with the views of the Dalits with whom other scholars have interacted over the last three decades in Bihar. The accounts of these scholars remind us that the struggles for the occupation of land were, more importantly, struggles over the assertion of dignity, *ijjat ki ladai[[10]](#footnote-10).*

Domi Rishi’s motivation to “look the landlord in the eye” reveals the ways in which subaltern ideas about reclaiming their dignity map onto their assertions of social equality. By “looking the landlord in the eye”, Domi Rishi sought to compel the “landlord” to recognize him (Rishi) and others like him as equals. Within the party, the egalitarian practices of party functionaries convinced Domi Rishi that the CPI(ML/L) was the best organizational platform for him and others like him to assert their claims of social equality. Party functionaries, through such everyday practices as addressing one another as *saathis* and by rolling up seating mats after meetings, explicitly recognized men and women such as Domi Rishi as equals.

The question of social equality was further radicalized by the efforts among the locality’s Musahars to establish their presence in the public space. Their attempts to popularize, through the use of loudspeakers, the public commemorations of their legendary heroes Dina and Bhadri, triggered virulent opposition from members of the locality’s privileged communities, especially the landlords. Not only did members of such communities consider the commemorations a public nuisance, they perceived the content of the commemorations to be a threat to area’s peace and tranquility.

That this be so is perhaps unsurprising. The ballad celebrates the heroics of two landless brothers of the Musahar community, agricultural laborers, who take a stand against oppressive landlords of the region, members of the privileged Rajput community. Eventually they are killed. Ballads celebrating their heroism are aplenty in the regions of northern Bihar and the eastern regions of the bordering State of Uttar Pradesh. For many Musahars, as well as poorer members of other underprivileged communities (see endnote 4), the brothers are heroes to be emulated, because of their valiance in battle and principled stand against an oppressor. Some believe they possess supernatural powers. Renditions of the ballad often differ on issues of detail, including the events in the brothers’ lives, the specific atrocities perpetrated upon them, and even the names of the landlords. The circumstances leading to their murder vary in different renditions. Nevertheless, the apparent absence of a coherent plot is marginal to the symbolic value of the tale, which recalls the brave, if ultimately unsuccessful, contestation of oppression by the poor (Narayan 2009).

I also could not help noting that there was no single date for the commemorations. In the single month of March 2009, I witnessed at least three different observances. About 200 meters to the east of where I lived, the festival was observed from March 5th to 8th. Two kilometers to its east, it was held from March 12th to 17th. And a kilometer to its south, it was organized from March 24th to 30th. The commemorations typically comprise the singing of ballads by singers who had trained for this purpose. Accompanying them were artistes playing percussion instruments such as the tambourine and drum. An array of actors, dressed up in period costumes enacted the ballad as the singers performed. Audiences frequently participated in the enactments, children teased the actors and grown-ups offered continuous suggestions to performers.

Some two decades ago, members of the Musahar community began using loudspeakers during the commemorations. The use of loudspeakers meant that the commemorations were no longer limited to their hamlet. Even if the actual festivities continued to be physically performed here, loudspeakers carried the festivities into the neighborhoods and homes of the privileged communities whose rapaciousness was the subject of ridicule and chastisement in the performances. To this, the privileged communities objected, and sought to prevent the Musahars from using loudspeakers. They went to the extent of trying to use their control over the police to enforce a ban on the use of loudspeakers, describing them a nuisance.

The Musahars justifiably viewed these tactics as efforts to undermine their claims of social equality. As far as they could see, their attempts to assert their presence in the public space on an equal footing with the privileged communities were thwarted. During my interviews with them, they reported that the members of the dominant groups frequently used loudspeakers during *their* nine-day commemorations of their deities Ram and Durga twice a year. In addition, they regularly organized devotional meetings where saints from far and near chanted hymns for days on end, using loudspeakers. The privileged communities’ selective opposition to the Musahars’ commemorations appeared to them as evidence of discrimination against their cultural practices.

Elderly members of the Musahar community, some of whom - like Domi Rishi - were active participants of the land occupation movements supported by the CPI(M/L-L), recalled that they approached a block-level functionary of the MSS with whom they were acquainted. They appraised this functionary of the threats to which they were being subjected and appealed to him for help. The MSS functionary obliged. He and his organized mobilized the support from Yadav (a politically influential middle-ranking caste) politicians affiliated with the Janata Dal to rein in the police. The use of loudspeakers in the commemorations has remained unchallenged since then. The MSS has since provided logistical support to the commemorations in the locality. They contributed to hiring the costumes and the audio devices. The concrete platforms I observed were also constructed by assistance from them: they had been no more than mud-plastered platforms till just a few years ago.

The occupations of land and the use of audio devices represent Musahar agricultural laborers’ attempts to assert their equality in the public space. Through their assertions, they indicate that the *premise* of equality provides a point of departure for them, a starting point, through which they emphasize their being at par with others, even if their material lives are marked by deprivation and precariousness.

**Contradictory meanings of emancipation**

CPI(M/L-L) functionaries deeply appreciated the contribution of Musahar agricultural laborers to their political tactics, whether the land occupation movements of the 1990s or the campaigns for the implementation of social protection programs more recently. Conveying such appreciation to me was Parsvnath Jha, a 32-year old functionary of the AIALA responsible for coordinating the body’s activities in the fieldwork locality. A farmer who owned about a hectare of arable land, he was of the Brahman community, one of the locality’s privileged communities. Parsvnath Jha had received a university education. Eyes gleaming with admiration for his Musahar comrades, he told me:

The Musahars [here] are our strongest supporters. They are very brave and very hardworking. They can do anything. The party would be nothing without them. Struggle is part of their DNA [in English]. Their legends of Dina and Bhadri [two legendary brothers] encourage them to fight against oppression….[Description of the legends].

We learn a lot from them. [faraway expression]. …We learn how to be hard-working and brave from them. They are very impulsive. Their impulsiveness is good for the party. If I was even a little as brave as them, I could do anything….

Parsvnath Jha’s account capsizes the vanguardist view that is commonly associated with the functioning of Marxist political formations, including India’s various communist parties. Indeed, his accounts resonate with Jaoul’s (2011) careful ethnography from south Bihar, which alerts us to the ways in which the party and the people inspire one another, rather than suggesting a unilaterally pedagogical relationship between the party cadre and the people. Jaoul’s account of the discussions and deliberations among the party cadre around the installation of martyrs’ statues provides us with an account of the complex ways through which the party leadership responds to popular appeals. Like Jaoul’s interlocutors from the party cadre, Parsvnath Jha recognized the centrality of the Musahar agricultural laborers to the party’s work and thinking. He moreover indicated an openness about the ways in which the party could learn from the people whom it counted as its supporters.

Parsvnath Jha admitted the importance of such legends to poor people’s collective mobilization against oppression. Such admission indicates his appreciation of the manner in which community-specific legends and memories of struggles sustain popular mobilization against oppression. However, my interlocutor was quite clear about the limits of such openness. Apparently contradicting the admiration with which he perceived his Musahar comrades, he told me one evening a few weeks later:

The bravery and strength of the Musahars is useless until they can think scientifically. They don’t understand that their Dina and Bhadri will not bring revolution to Bihar… Only a class struggle will. When they invoke Dina and Bhadri, they think of their caste. But if you want to imagine people’s emancipation, you have to think of class. Class consciousness is the basis of revolution.

Erratic as my Parsvnath Jha’s views might appear, they are quite consistent with one another as well as with the vanguardist approach to emancipation favored by Marxist political formations elsewhere. What the party could learn from the Musahar agricultural laborers was the value of hard work, strength and courage. Their experience of popular struggle could potentially fuel the party’s tactics of mass mobilization. Parsvnath Jha was willing to admit that even the people’s impulsiveness was good for the party. It was not a threat to be contained, but in fact a source of energy to be channeled towards the ends of a socialist revolution. These concessions notwithstanding, the functionary was clear that the party’s vision of popular mobilization along class lines must prevail. While the cultural observances of the Musahar agricultural laborers could be counted on for political mobilization, they were dismissed as beliefs with little or no relevance to the process of social transformation which the CPI(M/L-L) party ideologues envisaged. Only a class-centered mobilization could bring about such a transformation. As long as the Musahars embraced their cultural practices, they remained imperfect political subjects who could not be counted upon to usher in this transformation.

When I enquired of him if the CPI(M/L-L) had a role at all in organizing the Dina-Bhadri commemorations, Parsvnath Jha looked bemused. He wondered why I thought the party should be getting involved in supporting sectarian beliefs that, according to him, bordered on superstitions. As I observed during my stay in the fieldwork locality, the CPI(M/L-L) did indeed distance itself from the Dina Bhadri celebrations. Although individual CPI(M/L-L) functionaries did attend the commemorations, there was no institutional support whatsoever from the party. The commemorations were entirely convened and managed by the MSS.

My interlocutors from the Musahar community attributed the party’s aloofness to their struggles around the commemorations to the specific caste profile of the party’s leadership. Savri Rishi, one of Domi Rishi’s nephews, noted that Musahars were conspicuous by their absence in leadership positions. While Savri Rishi sympathized with the personal sacrifices made by the party leaders, he could not help but remark that he found it surprising that they were almost always from dominant caste backgrounds, either Brahman or Kayasth. Nevan Rishi, another agricultural laborer who vouched for the personal integrity of the party functionaries, went on to suggest that the leaders only considered Musahars good enough to shout slogans, but not good enough to lead the party. Party functionaries valued them for their numbers but not for their leadership. At the most, they were asked to provide advice into *tactics* of local mobilization. But never were they consulted on matters of strategy, much less party vision.

Indeed, the overwhelming preponderance of Musahar and other underprivileged communities among the grassroots activists of the CPI(M/L-L) in the locality sits somewhat oddly with the caste profile of the party’s leadership. The functionary whose perspective I introduced earlier on in this section is Brahman. Another senior functionary, Manoj Srivastav, with whom I had the privilege of knowing is Kayasth. During our discussions, both acknowledged this situation upfront, and reminded me that this was true of the national level of the party as well. They explained this situation in terms of the need for the party to field "educated" people in its leadership positions. In referring to educated people, they invoked the Hindi term *shikshit* . While the English equivalent of the term refers to ‘being educated’, my interlocutors used it to refer - crucially - to an immersion in the Marxist analytical framework[[11]](#footnote-11). An immersion in this framework required an appreciation of class as a founding block of Indian society. Only those people who could appreciate the foundational role of class were considered appropriate to take on leadership roles. The two functionaries did not think that any of the members of the Musahar (or other communities, such as Kevat or Santhal) communities they knew were capable of taking on this mantle. They earnestly clarified that such inability was not because of any inherent limitations among them. Rather, it was because Musahars (and Kevats and Santhals) continued to focus on the directly observable aspects of the oppression they faced. Such a focus led Musahars to believe that the caste discrimination, to which they were subjected, was responsible for their exploitation. However, the CPI(M/L-L) functionaries helpfully suggested, the situation was in fact the opposite. It was their exploitation as agricultural laborers which led to them being discriminated against.

Bela Bhatia (2005) has drawn a distinction between "informed revolutionaries" and "instinctual revolutionaries" in her ethnography of Maoist activists in south Bihar. "Informed revolutionaries" join the party with full knowledge of the party’s agenda and ideology whereas "instinctual revolutionaries" are the ones with a generic urge to fight injustice. While leaders at the block level and above tend to be "informed revolutionaries", the overwhelming majority of the cadres, the ones who constitute the backbone of the movement are "instinctual revolutionaries". While the distinction Bhatia draws between "informed" and "instinctual" revolutionaries is not unproblematic (Chitralekha 2010), it is nonetheless a useful insight into the way party functionaries think of themselves and their cadre. Party functionaries valued the urge to combat injustice that they attributed to Domi Rishi, Sevri Rishi, Nevan Rishi and millions of other Musahars in Bihar. Like Jaoul’s (2011) interlocutors elsewhere in Bihar, they were open to the possibilities of learning from the people. However, the lessons they were willing to learn were of a tactical and immediate nature. Such lessons included: the location of a specific rally, the number of people to select for this or that protest march, the households that had been excluded from receiving their entitlements under one of the government’s many social protection schemes. Meanwhile, party functionaries desisted from involving grassroots cadres such as Domi Rishi in formulating strategies that would influence the party program. So, while they trusted the instincts of the activists, rooted as they were in the specific culture and place, they insisted on privileging the information they themselves generated. The information of the functionaries and the instincts of the activists were seen as complementary to the task of achieving revolutionary transformation.

For Domi Rishi and others who bore the brunt of caste discrimination in the locality, the party functionaries’ analysis that their vulnerabilities stemmed from their class position was fundamentally flawed. During the time I spent with them, they wondered why members of specific communities - Musahars, Kevats, Santhals - dominated the ranks of agricultural laborers and the rural poor. Why, among agricultural laborers, were they - the Musahars - particularly ill-treated? Their analysis suggested that it was their caste, rather than their class, which was responsible for their oppressive conditions. The exploitation to which they were subjected stemmed from the social discrimination they confronted, contrary to what the party functionaries suggested. The party functionaries’ perspective, Domi Rishi argued, stemmed from their own privileged caste position, a position which limited their understanding of the vulnerabilities and violence which agricultural laborers faced in their everyday lives.

MSS functionaries endorsed these perspectives. In their analysis, the privileged castes repeatedly denigrated Musahars’ cultural practices. Kancha Ilaiah (2010) reminds us that the caste inequalities rest on the supremacist practices of the dominant castes, or the imposition of their beliefs and practices upon subaltern castes. Noting the tensions between their thought and action processes,[[12]](#footnote-12) Ilaiah presciently concludes that the assimilation of the practices of the subaltern castes into those of the dominant castes represents the eventual victory of the cultural worldview of the latter. Ilaiah’s reminders are pertinent to understanding the perspectives of the MSS functionaries. Although I have little evidence that MSS functionaries were reading Ilaiah, their interpretations of caste bear remarkable similarity. The stance of the MSS functionaries emanates from their analysis of caste as a discriminatory system that privileges the cultural and social practices of the privileged communities while devaluing those of others.

Gyandev Rishi, an MSS functionary, reported to me that the MSS was beginning to understand the value of forging a cultural unity among members of the Musahar community. Even as he celebrated the courage and valor associated with the locality’s Musahar agricultural laborers - many of whom were his relatives, friends and neighbors - he mourned what he called the lack of unity among them. With a melancholic expression, he elaborated this theme:

We are a brave people. We have fought many battles, faced several injustices. But we go our own ways. We don’t coordinate [in English]….We can’t agree with each other. Not even something so basic as to organize the festival on a single date. My hamlet says - we will do it this way. His hamlet [pointing to an elderly gentleman, with whom were both acquainted] says - we will do it on that date. How will anyone ever take us seriously if we can’t agree on a single date for our bravest heroes? How can we be treated as equals if we are so divided?

Gyandev Rishi then turned to address Domi Rishi and another companion of his, Sapuri Rishi, who were sitting across the aisle from us as we had gathered for our evening gossip at the *chai* kiosk outside the Block Development Office. This particular kiosk was a favorite among activists, politicians, and political fixers and brokers because of its location in the bazaar outside the Block Development Office, the representative of the development bureaucracy of the Indian state. He made an impassioned plea for the standardization of dates.

MSS functionary: Look *baba*, one date [for Dina and Bhadri] will help us to convince the Government to grant a holiday, to recognize it as a festival like Chhat Puja and Id. Why don’t you understand how important this is?

DR: I understand how important it is. But you have to understand that different people have different beliefs. How can we have one date when so many people have different dates? Who will choose?

SR (concurring): Yes, yes, he is right. Who will choose?

MSS (Turning to me, and looks exasperated): We have to be united. But our people are so disparate they all think differently. They do not understand. They do not want to change….

SR (interrupting): Look at this lad talking. We will commemorate the observances when it is convenient to us. Not when *you* want it.

DR: Nobody will honor us for trying to be like them. They will honor us for being us.

I find these exchanges fascinating because of the manner in which the MSS functionary pegs the achievement of social equality for members of the Musahar community on their cultural unity. He hopes for the Musahars to erase the different dates that prevailed in different hamlets so that they might present a unified force in demanding a recognition of their cultural distinctiveness from the State Government. Such a recognition from the state enables members of the Musahar community to assert their equality against members of the privileged communities who have hitherto denigrated and devalued their commemoration of their legendary heroes. That the forging of such distinctiveness might come at the price of flattening out of internal diversity is not lost on MSS functionaries. But it is a small price to pay, he assured me and his interlocutors, for the Musahars to claim their space as equals.

His interlocutors are critical of his exhortations. Both Domi Rishi and Sapuri Rishi interrogate his assumption that forging a cultural unity around the issue of dates is necessary for them to be treated with "honor" by others. Their invocation of honor was conveyed by the use of the term *samman*, a term that often refers to feelings of respect. The term is also often used interchangeably with the term *ijjat*, a derivation of the Urdu term *izzat*, which means honor. Whereas for the MSS functionary, social equality hinged on the attainment of cultural unity, his interlocutors disagree. As far as they could see, social equality is predicated on them being treated with respect for their *existent* practices. They refused to consider that the multiple dates for the most important festival of their community was a problem to be resolved. The problem is not that they have several dates for their observances. Rather, the problem is that the dominant castes denigrate their cultural practices. By denigrating their cultural practices, the dominant castes denied recognizing them as social equals. The denigration of the Dina-Bhadri festival, rather than the multiplicity of its dates, was the problem. By problematizing the multiple dates of the Dina Bhadri commemorations, the MSS functionary was merely displacing the responsibility for the discrimination.

In a short piece titled *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Ranciére cautions social analysts against assuming a naiveté and impassivity on the part of "spectators", the people who view theatrical performances or receive intellectual knowledge. He reminds us that, whether as students or scientists, spectators observe, select, compare and interpret. While the show-masters, pedagogues or leaders might want them to see only specific things, feel specific feelings or learn specific lessons, spectators modify these messages on the basis of their own understanding. They make meaning of these messages, based on their own prior material experiences, feelings and beliefs, and transform both the messages as well as the existing ideas they might have. While people are not averse to engaging with new ideas, they do not always adopt them without consideration of their prior analytical and experiential frameworks. Ranciére’s formulation encourages us to be attentive to the specific ways in which people advance their own ideas of emancipation. They might appropriate existing ideas presented by political organizations. Else, they might amend some aspects of such ideas. Or, they might even ignore these ideas altogether and draw on alternative sources. Ranciére’s scholarship suggests that the empirical realities inhabited by spectators crucially shape their interpretation of the images they perceive and the messages they receive.

**Emancipation: A poly-vocal perspective**

The cases analyzed in this article foreground the contradictory ways in which agricultural laborers of the Musahar community think about emancipation. In the first place, the state is only one of many points on which their demands are directed. They engage with the state because of the numerous redistributive schemes earmarked for them. Second, the competing idioms of emancipation offered by different organizations, two of which I discussed in some detail here, are not uncritically accepted by the audiences of these discourses. The content of emancipatory messages varies enormously, as I have shown. In the worldview of the activists of the CPI(M/L-L), emancipation is predicated upon the inculcation of a class subjectivity. The CPI(M/L-L) functionaries certainly shared with their Musahar cadres their concerns regarding questions of honor, dignity, and respect. But they posited these concerns in class terms, thereby ignoring the caste basis of the social and cultural discrimination to which they were routinely subjected. The importance of the caste basis of such discrimination was recognized by the functionaries of the MSS. Their understanding led them to project the equality of their cultural practices vis-à-vis the practices of the privileged communities. In projecting such equality, however, MSS functionaries sought to forge a cultural identity that then tended towards flattening out the variations within their practices. On their part, Musahar agricultural laborers such as Domi Rishi continually scrutinize the CPI(M/L-L)’s imposition of class subjectivity as well as the MSS’ agenda of forging a cultural identity. Against the class subjectivity that was propounded by the CPI(ML-L), they demanded that the party recognize the caste basis of their oppression. And against the MSS’ calls for cultural identity, they insisted on retaining the plethora of locally convenient dates for their cultural observances. Tensions marked the quotidian engagements of the Musahars with these emancipatory claims and highlighted their ambivalences about such promises.

Do these ambivalences, tensions and contradictions imply that there is little support for emancipatory projects among Bihar’s Musahar laborers? I suggest that taking this approach would be a misreading of the "arcadian" spaces of emancipation (Shah 2010) imagined by them. My interlocutors unambiguously express an urge for a better world. They enunciate imaginations of a world where members of privileged communities and classes recognize them as social equals. To this imagination, state-initiated redistribution and welfare schemes, recognition of cultural practices, land reforms, and classifications of specific communities as Mahadalit in need of focused governmental attention is not unimportant. But because the motivation for their engagement with the state stems from their aspiration to social equality, they insist on being respected, on their own terms, by members of privileged communities. Thus, it is not that they do not want the state in their lives or seek to evade it, as James Scott (2009) would have it: they do, as is clear from their electoral participation and positive valuation of the functionaries who engaged successfully with the arms of the state. But they do not look up to the state as the fountainhead of emancipation, as analysts following Marshall (1950) would suggest.

The Musahar agricultural laborers whose perspectives I report in this paper do not appear to accept the vanguardist views of emancipation offered by either the CPI(M/L-L) or the MSS. As we have seen from the assessments offered by them, they do not uncritically accept the ideas of emancipation that emanate from the ideologues of these organizations. In fact, they collectively subject the claims of the party functionaries to careful scrutiny. This indicates the extent to which they believe themselves to be socially equal to the party functionaries and the ideologues of emancipation. No narrative of emancipation is considered sacrosanct. They interrogate the presumptions of the organizational elites who believe in the fashioning of new subjectivities, the one based on class and the other on caste. Against such presumptions, the agricultural laborers insist on retaining their multitude of identities.

Their invocations of social equality call to mind Jacques Ranciére’s (2009) formulation of emancipation. In Ranciére’s view, emancipation begins by recognizing the foundational equality of all people, not in a juridical sense that rests on constitutional guarantees but in the social sense that insists on assuming that all people have equal critical faculties and the ability to discern what is useful and relevant to them from what is not. Authoritarian exhortations cannot be justified under any circumstances. Rather, Ranciére’s (1991) approach recognizes that equality is not a situation to be achieved, but one whose presence has to be recognized. It speaks to Marx’s (1844) perspective which suggests that emancipation cannot be relegated to the juridical-legal realm that envisages human beings as solipsistic individuals. Like Marx, Ranciére insists on thinking about emancipation as a process through which people assert their membership in a political community as members of society rather than as juridical constituted beings. As I have shown in this article, it is to this idea of human emancipation that the invocations of social equality by Bihar’s Musahar laborers speak.

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Indrajit Roy researches democracy and social change, with a focus on the Global South. His monograph *The politics of the poor: Negotiating democracy in contemporary India* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press. As ESRC Future Research Leader, Indrajit is working on his second book, provisionally titled *Fragmented transitions: Mobility, growth and democracy in the Global South.*

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1. Ranciére’s insistence bears the imprint of Mao’s ‘mass-regarding’ thesis, through which he urged party cadres to combine people’s quotidian ideas and experiences with their own program of building revolutionary consciousness (Hewlett 2010). However, Ranciére is no Maoist, and his approach guards against undervaluing people’s practices in the name of raising them to putatively superior revolutionary consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because my presence in the locality was not dependent on the support of either of the two organisations, I enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy in my ability to move about among a diverse range of interlocutors from among agricultural laborers of the Musahar community.

   Admittedly, my inability to converse in the local languages used by Musahar women inhibited my ability to gather first-hand accounts of their perspectives. Although they understood Hindi, which I used to communicate, they exclusively spoke the Thaiti language prevalent in north-eastern Bihar, a language of which I understood very little. My incompetence did not inhibit my women interlocutors’ enthusiasm for sharing their life experiences. Nevertheless, my incomprehension of Thaiti meant that the accounts on which I base my analysis is based largely on my interactions with men, and my dependence on them to translate for me and explain the opinions shared by the locality’s women. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I follow the lead provided by analysts of caste who refer to the ‘ethnification’ of caste identities. Politicians increasingly eschew use of caste vocabularies and refer to ‘community’ (in English) or to *samaj* and other vernacular equivalents. Anthropologists have justifiably followed suit. See for instance Michelutti (2008) and Rao (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more details, see Roy (2013) and Roy (pre-press) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the General Program adopted by the CPI(ML) 9th Party Congress, accessed from www.cpiml.org/party-documents [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jaoul (2011) notes that nearly 60% of this body’s 2.5 million strong membership is drawn from Bihar. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. His exact words were, “jo woh har-din bhed bhao jhelte hain, hum use inhe mukti dilana chahte hain” (Interview. Gyandev Rishi, March 19, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Indian Census (2011) enumerates slightly over 18 million people in Bihar as agricultural labourers. Of these over four million are Dalits. Nearly a million of all agricultural labourers are Musahar. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year\_2002/april/article%20caste%20and%20class.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See accounts provided in Das (1982), Bhatia (2005) and Kunnath (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed, my interlocutors’ command over the Marxist literature was impressive. They were disappointed to observe my limited knowledge of what Karl Marx and Vinod Mishra had written about the impending revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ilaiah refers to this as an epistemological conflict between Brahmanism and Dalitism (2010: 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)