

COMPLIANCE OR DEFIANCE?

THE CASE OF DALITS AND MAHADALITS

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Introduction

Dalits, who remain at the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy, have resisted social and economic inequalities in various ways throughout their history.¹ Their struggles have sometimes taken the form of the rejection of Hinduism in favour of other religions. Some Dalit groups have formed caste-based political parties and socio-religious movements to counter upper-caste domination. These caste-based organizations have been at the forefront of mobilizing Dalit communities in securing greater benefits from the Indian state's affirmative action programmes. In recent times, Dalit organizations have also taken to international lobbying and networking to create wider platforms for the promotion of Dalit human rights and development.

Along with protest against the caste system, Dalit history is also characterized by accommodation and compliance with Brahmanical values. The everyday Dalit world is replete with stories of Dalit communities consciously or unconsciously adopting upper-caste beliefs and practices. They seem to internalize the negative images and representations of themselves and their castes that are held and propagated by the dominant groups. Dalits are also internally divided by caste, with hierarchical rankings. They themselves thus often seem to reinforce and even reproduce the same system and norms that oppress them.

This article engages with both compliance and defiance by Dalit communities. Both these concepts are central to any engagement with populations living in the context of oppression and inequality. Debates in gender studies, colonial histories and subaltern studies have engaged with the simultaneous existence of these contradictory processes. Do subordinated populations consciously reproduce the dominant values and norms that oppress them? Or is their compliance with them just a façade for coping with coercive regimes and dominant structures? This article attempts to understand the contradictory processes of compliance and defiance through a case study of Dalits, especially Mahadalits, who are among the poorest Dalit castes.

¹ Dalits are those formerly known as 'Untouchables' in the Indian caste system. Etymologically the word 'Dalit' has its roots in Sanskrit. The root *dal* (*dri*) means 'to break, crack, to split open, to crush'. In current socio-political discourse, the term is used for people belonging to the Scheduled Castes (the term used for 'Untouchables' in the Indian constitution). The terms 'Dalit' and 'Scheduled Caste' are used interchangeably in this article.

The discussion on Dalit compliance and defiance has antecedents in the anthropological study of caste centred on the contending paradigms of consensus and conflict. Structural-functionalist theories highlighted the integrative role of caste. Here consensus is the norm and not just compliance. Dalits and upper castes share essentially a harmonious relationship. In structural-functionalist writings (Ghurye 1969; Hutton 1946; Srinivas 1962, 1989), caste is viewed as a system of interdependence and reciprocity, and not as inequality or exploitation. The same emphasis is also found in the structuralist approach of Louis Dumont. In his classic work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), Dumont argues against viewing caste system, which is based on the principle of hierarchy, as a form of social stratification. He sees the system in terms of holism; each hierarchically ranked caste, following the dharma assigned to it, helps to maintain the whole system. Following Dumont, Michael Moffatt maintains that the lower castes share with the higher castes the basic assumptions and values of the caste structure. They recreate among themselves the entire set of institutions and ranked relations from which they have been excluded by the higher castes. He thus sees cultural consensus at work from the top to the bottom, which includes the principles of inclusion and exclusion, complementarity and replication (Moffatt 1979).

Contrary to the consensual model, several anthropologists have placed emphasis on the conflict and difference that characterize caste relations. A number of studies conducted from the perspective of Dalits demonstrate the difference between the socio-religious ideologies of the Dalits and the upper castes (Berreman 1971, 1979; Charsley 1996; Deliège 1992; Gellner 1995, 1997; Gough 1973; Juergensmeyer 1982; Mencher 1974; Mosse 1994). They point out that Dalits do not accept the unclean and demeaning status assigned to them in the caste hierarchy. Dalits have diverse notions of their own as to how and why the caste system developed, most of which refer to the superior wealth and power of the higher castes rather than their purity. Due to socio-economic compulsions, therefore, Dalits seem to subscribe to the dominant ideology rather than being in consensus with it.

This article aims to go beyond the consensus and conflict models because they seem inadequate to explain Dalit compliance and resistance. The everyday Dalit world demonstrates, on the one hand, complex processes that mask inequalities and power relations, but on the other hand it also contains elements that demystify power and resist dominant representations. In order to explain these mutually conflictive processes, I draw on Antonio Gramsci's idea of contradictory consciousness that presents subaltern life-worlds as representing domination and resistance. Accordingly, the main arguments of this article are presented in two sections. The first section examines the everyday Dalit world as a site of

both submission and struggle through a case study of a Mahadalit caste known as the Musahars. The second section engages critically with key theoretical concepts in relation to resistance and compliance, with a particular focus on Gramsci's contributions. Drawing on more than ten years of anthropological research among Dalits in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, I argue for an integrative framework that locates compliance and defiance in a mutually constitutive field of structure, agency and power.

1. Mahadalits, the lowest among the Dalits

Dalits constitute over 15 percent of Bihar's population of 100 million (Census of India 2011). The term 'Dalit', however, is not a homogenous category but includes 22 caste groups that the government has classified as Scheduled Castes (SC). Although grouped together as Dalits, they occupy varying locations on the bottom rungs of the caste hierarchy, some being poorer and more discriminated against than others. The poorest among the Dalit groups were given the name 'Mahadalits' by the Bihar Government in 2007. Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of the state, set up the Mahadalit Commission in order to identify the most deprived communities among Dalit castes and suggest measures for their development. The Commission identified 21 out of 22 castes as Mahadalits (see Table 1 for Dalit castes and their share in the Dalit population in Bihar).

The Nitish Kumar government's decision to create this new category has been criticized as an electoral stunt by the opposition. The Dusadhs (Paswans) are the only Dalit caste who were left out of this category, apparently in order to marginalize Ramvilas Paswan, a well-recognized Dalit leader with a Dusadh vote bank, electorally. A discussion of the political motives behind the creation of this category would go beyond the bounds of the present article. But whatever the politics of the distinction between Dalit and Mahadalit, there certainly is and has been an internal hierarchy between the various Dalit castes. Dusadh, the second largest Dalit caste with its traditional occupation as watchman, is traditionally ranked higher than other Dalit groups. Musahar (rat catcher), one of the largest Mahadalit castes, is regarded the lowest in the caste hierarchy.

The Musahars are the main focus of this study. On the one hand this community clearly demonstrates extreme forms of compliance and resignation in the face of caste oppression, but on the other hand several members of this caste have actively taken part in various resistance movements, including the Maoist struggle. This section first discusses the durable effects of the Musahars' extreme poverty and of upper-caste hegemony on the Musahar life-world before addressing the issues of defiance and agency within this community.

S. No.	Dalit Castes in Bihar	Population in Bihar	Share in Bihar's SC population (%)
1	Bantar	101,223	0.78%
2	Bauri	2,096	0.02%
3	Bhogta	12,659	0.10%
4	Bhuiya	568,403	4.36%
5	Bhumij*	2,333	0.02%
6	Chaupal	100,111	0.77%
7	Chamar	4,090,070	31.34%
8	Dabgar	3,590	0.03%
9	Dhobi	64,7491	4.96%
10	Dom	155,383	1.19%
11	Dusadh	4,029,411	30.88%
12	Ghasi	674	0.01%
13	Halalkhor	3,960	0.03%
14	Hari/Mehtar	181,748	1.39%
15	Kanjar	1,620	0.01%
16	Kurariyar	6,567	0.05%
17	Lalbegi	809	0.01%
18	Musahar	2,112,136	16.19%
19	Nat	38,615	0.30%
20	Pan	3,653	0.03%
21	Pasi	711,389	5.45%
22	Rajwar	213,795	1.64%
23	Turi	33,638	0.26%
Total		13,048,608	

*Bhumij was later dropped from the list of SCs in Bihar, leaving only 22 castes in the list.

Table 1: Population of Scheduled Castes in Bihar (source: SC&ST Welfare Department, Government of Bihar 2012: 57)

The Musahar life-world: a case of compliance and defiance

The Musahars mainly live in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. A large Musahar population has also settled in Nepal.² In Bihar, with a population of over two million, the Musahars form the third largest Dalit group in the state. They are the poorest and the most discriminated against of all the Dalit castes in Bihar. Any reflection on the durable effects of poverty and untouchability on the community must take into account everyday actions and social arrangements that, although apparently 'normal' or 'harmless', still result in irreparable damage to the self-image and agency of the community. They include practices of untouchability, illiteracy, landlessness, infant mortality, the low status of

² In the Tarai region of Nepal, the Musahars, with a population of 172,434, are listed as the second largest Dalit group after the Chamars (Giri 2013).

Dalit women, and dominant discourses that represent Dalits in a negative manner, all being submerged or deeply embedded forms of structural violence (Farmer 2003; Herr 1999; Kleinman 2000; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Consequently, social, political and economic inequalities in agrarian relations and caste hierarchies are perceived as ‘natural’ and even as part of a ‘divinely ordered scheme’. The perceived ‘naturalness’ and ‘inevitability’ of the social order results in compliance and creates a sense of resignation among Musahars and other Dalit groups.

Within this conceptual framework of structural violence, I analyse how the dominant discourses, both Brahmanical and colonial, have constructed Musahar identities and their way of life. Religion, proverbs, myths and folktales give legitimacy and sanctity to these dominant renderings. Further, I examine the economic and social implications of the Musahars’ total landlessness and large-scale illiteracy in relation to their transformation into ‘complying subjects.’

Dominant renderings of the Musahars

Our understanding of the early history of this community is mostly confined to colonial records and upper-caste interpretations, dominant constructions that depict the Musahars as devoid of agency. In the writings of a number of British administrators-cum-anthropologists (Hutton 1946; Nesfield 1888; Risley 1891; Russell and Hira Lal 1916), the Musahars are portrayed as a fragment of a Dravidian tribe recently but imperfectly absorbed into the Hindu caste system. Risley traces their origin to the Bhuiya tribe of Chotanagpur (in some parts of Bihar they are still known as Bhuiyas). He argues that, while moving from the Chotanagpur hills in South Bihar towards the north Bihar plains, ‘a small number [of Bhuiyas] successfully established themselves in Hazaribagh’, while others, travelling further to the north, ‘fell under the domination of Hindus in Bihar, and were reduced to the servile status which the Musahars now occupy’ (Risley 1891: 111).

It is unlikely that the term ‘Musahar’ was the original name by which the community referred to itself. The term has a pejorative meaning, and it seems to be part of a dominant discourse. *Musa* means ‘rat’ in Hindi, and ‘Musahar’ means ‘rat-eater/-killer’. Risley (ibid.) thinks that Musahar is the name that their Hindu masters gave them because of their non-Aryan and unclean habit of eating field mice. Nesfield (1888) suggests that ‘Mushera’ (another variant of the term Musahar) derives from *masu* (flesh) and *hera* (seeker), possibly a more comprehensive term than ‘rat-catcher’. In keeping with Brahmanical notions of purity and impurity, it was the practice among upper-caste Hindus to give depreciatory names to

lower-caste communities because the upper-caste Hindus found the latter's food habits both revolting and impure. The name 'Musahar', although intended as a term of reproach by caste Hindus, has now been accepted by the Musahars, this being the name by which they refer to themselves today.

The colonial representations employed the Brahmanical scale based on the notion of purity and impurity to measure the social respectability of the Musahars and other Dalit groups. The criteria devised by E.A. Gait, the Census Commissioner of India in 1911, to ascertain the extent of deprivation of human dignity included categories like 'denied the services of Brahmins as family priests, denied access to Hindu temples, caused pollution by certain distance or proximity, did not receive *mantra* from a Brahmin or a recognized Hindu Guru, did not worship Hindu Gods, buried their dead, took beef and did not show reverence to cows' (Census of India 1911: 232–3). The Brahmanical norms thus became the official criteria with which to assess the social status of different groups and the defining criteria for social organization. And naturally the Musahars met all of these parameters of disabilities or discrimination.

Colonial discourses also propagated a negative image of the Musahars, as clearly demonstrated in the following account by a Mr E. Lockwood, the Collector of Munger District, Bihar, in 1873:

The *Mushirs* or *Mousers* as they be called, are found in every village of Monghyr and half-starved even in times of plenty. They seldom see coins, but receive their scanty wages in coarse grain, which they flavour with rats, mice and snails and jungle roots whilst living in hovels, *which an English pig would consider a poor accommodation*. One would imagine that such persons would *find difficulty in getting wives*, but the contrary is the case, for bachelors and spinsters are unknown. Directly they arrive at the age of puberty, they present themselves at the landlord's house and having signed a deed binding themselves to remain in bondage for the term of their natural lives, receive a few shillings in return, with which to entertain their friends at a marriage feast and to set up a house. (Lockwood 1878: 8, my emphasis)

Although they provided some knowledge about the community, colonial portrayals of the Musahars contained little about the latter's views of themselves and their origins, or their stories of subjugation and servitude. These portrayals gave sanction to existing cultural stereotypes, thus making them 'official'. Colonial rule depended on producing knowledge about people, this being part of the production of an identity to which the dominated had to conform (Dirks 2001).

Various folk expressions, including proverbs and myths in circulation among caste Hindus, further reinforced the negative image of the Musahars. In some proverbs quoted by upper-caste people, the Musahars are represented as people who are unreliable, as in the sayings *Musahar ka thaht math par*, ‘A Musahar’s roof is on his head’, meaning there is no stability among them and that they will run away at any time. Another such phrase is *Musahar jan aur kaubutar dhan*, the sense of which is that Musahar labourers are like a herd of pigeons who fly anywhere in search of grain – there is no sense of loyalty in them. Several other local sayings ridiculed the Musahars as foolish and useless: *kuthe ki poonch aur Musahar ki soch barabar* (no amount of effort can change the Musahars; their thinking is like the dog’s tail, which can never be straightened); *meddahk ko sardi nahin hoti, Musahar ki baithak nahin hoti* (just as frogs never catch cold, so Musahars can never hold a meeting); and *Musahar ko samjhana aur Kalkatha paidel jana barabar* (it takes as long to walk to Calcutta [from Bihar, which is around 350 miles] as it does to get a Musahar to understand).

In a similar vein, a depreciatory myth about the Musahars recorded by W. Crooke, a British administrator, in 1896 is still narrated by upper-caste Hindus:

When God created the first man of each caste, he gave each person a horse to ride on, and a tool to work with. Everyone, but the Musahar, took his tool and mounted his horse. The Musahar however, began to dig a pair of holes in the belly of his horse in order to keep his foot as he rode. When God saw his folly, he cursed that his descendents should live on rats dug out from the earth. When God had finished eating, the Musahar began to lick his leaf platter. Seeing this, God said, ‘these are low people. They shall always lick the platter’. (Crooke 1896: 17)

These proverbs and myths gave legitimacy and sanctity to the dominant discourse. They also acted as a medium for the reproduction of upper-caste superiority and Musahar inferiority. These proverbs and myths were so effective that the Musahars seem to have internalized them and often refer to themselves through these dominant interpretations. In many villages, I have observed Musahars refer to themselves by the terms that the upper castes use to degrade them. Some Musahar parents call their children *achut* (Untouchable), *suvar ke bachche* (descendants of pigs), *nich* (degraded) and so forth. Some even call their children *Dukhan*, (the sorrowful), *Sukhali* (the dried), *Marnichiya* (the dead-like), *Bhudhu* (the stupid), *Phenki* or *Pheku* (the thrown away), or *Sadali* (the rotten). I never came across such names among the upper- or middle-caste communities. With these names, the Musahars seem to transfer

their experience of a ‘systematic negation of their personhood’ to the generations after them, resulting in the creation of a collective ‘colonised personality’ (Fanon 1988: 250).

Musahar landlessness and its socio-economic implications

Compliance among Musahars and other Dalits is linked to their poverty and dependence on the landowning castes. In Bihar, as everywhere in rural India, power and dominance are linked to the ownership of land, which in turn is related to caste status. Of the four upper castes in Bihar (Brahmans, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasths), who constitute 12.7 percent of the population, the Rajputs and the Bhumihars own the most land and are dominant in rural areas. The upper stratum of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), comprising mainly the Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri, and constituting 19 per cent of the population, are also among the landowning dominant castes in the state (Blair 1980). While 26.2 per cent of the population owns 88.8 per cent of the land, the bulk of the population, 73.8 per cent, owns just 21.2 per cent (Prasad 1987). Dalits, who constituted over 15 per cent of the state population, are mostly landless agricultural labourers. Among them the Musahars suffer the worst because of their absolute landlessness. According to the Census of India for 2001, over 97 percent of the Musahars are considered labourers, of whom around 92 per cent are landless agricultural labourers. As shown in Table 2, the Musahars have the highest percentage of labourers compared to other major Dalit castes in Bihar.

Economic category	All SCs	Chamar	Dusadh	Musahar	Pasi	Dhobi	Bhuiya
Cultivators	7.9	7.9	10.3	2.7	12.3	14.8	6.6
Agricultural labourers	77.6	80.2	75.9	92.5	46.5	48.1	86.8
Household Industry workers	3.3	2.1	1.6	0.8	12.2	9.6	1.0
Other workers	11.2	9.8	12.2	4.0	29.0	27.5	5.6

Table 2: Percentage distribution of workers in four economic categories (source: Census of India 2001)

The Musahars do not own even their homestead land but build their huts on *gairmazarua zamin* (public land). The irony is that the Musahars, who are an offshoot of the Bhuiya tribe – etymologically meaning of the land (*bhumi*) – have no land, not even to erect their own huts.

In an agrarian society like Bihar, landlessness means much more than material poverty. Land represents many things, including economic, social and political power, and with it respect. The Musahar and other Dalit groups' total lack of land has effectively prevented their participation in the decision-making process in rural India. This powerlessness has also led to their lack of influence, especially over local manifestations of the state, including the police and welfare officials (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998).

The outcome of Musahar powerlessness was their transformation into agricultural slaves totally dependent on upper- and middle-caste landlords. The Musahars' dependence was based on and reproduced by a mechanism of credit and indebtedness centred on *kamia-malik* (labourer-landlord) relations. By extending small loans to labourers in times of distress, marriage, etc., the landlords ensured their control over the *kamia*'s labour until the debt had been repaid. At the same time, the repayment conditions were formulated in such a way that the labourer would never be able to pay back the debt. For instance, repayment day was fixed for a certain day in *jyeth* (July-August), a time of recession (Mukherjee 1961). Due to the *kamia*'s inability to pay back the debt, the landlord ensured that the labourers' wives and children also worked for him. This bondage subjected them all to a 'system of restrictions: restrictions on their movements, their labour, and their persons' (Prakash 1990: 1). Although bonded labour was abolished by law in 1976, one report indicated that during the 1980s and 1990s more than 400,000 Musahars continued to live in bondage to upper-caste landowners in Bihar (Bhushan 2002).

The practice of bonded labour, at least in theory, seems to have undergone some changes in recent years. Presently, the Musahars and other Mahadalit castes work as either *lagua mazdur* (attached labourers) or *chutta mazdur* (free labourers). The *lagua* labourers – or *harvaha* (ploughmen) as they are also called (involving only men; women mostly work for the same landlords to whom their men are bound by these contracts) – are bound to a landlord on a one-year contract. This contract is different from the type of bonded labour described above, in which the labourers were bonded from one generation to another. However, the mechanism of entering into this type of contract usually depends on the same process as the earlier one. The landlord advances a loan to the labourers and thus secures their services (including those of members of their households) for one agricultural season. Those in the second category of agricultural labour, the *chutta mazdur* or free labourers, are hired on a casual, day-to-day basis. Both categories of worker are usually paid four or five kilos of either rice or wheat as their daily wages. In addition, the attached labourers are usually given a small plot of land by the landowners for their own cultivation (Kunnath 2012). The daily

wages of one or more persons in the household are never sufficient to meet the family's schooling, medical and various other expenses. As a result, most of the Dalit households have to take loans from moneylenders or landlords; Dalits remain in 'chronic deficit',³ and the cycle of bondage never ends.

Musahar illiteracy as part of a hegemonic design

The wretched situation of the Musahars is further reflected in their dismally low rate of literacy. In the census reports of 1991, the Musahar literacy rate in Bihar was recorded as 2.25 per cent; the Musahar female literacy rate was 1 per cent. Ten years later, the Census of 2001 recorded 9 per cent of the community as literate, with the literacy rates among Musahar women being 3.9 per cent. Even this record of marginal increase, as the statistics given in the report of the SC&ST Welfare Department of the Government of Bihar (2012) indicate, is rather optimistic. According to this report the literacy rate among the Musahars is 4.6 per cent (male: 7.7 and female: 1.3). As the table below demonstrates, the literacy rate among the Musahars is the worst of all the Mahadalit castes in the state.

S. No	Dalit Castes in Bihar	Literacy Rates (%)		
		Female	Male	Total
1	Bantar	3.7	20.4	12.4
2	Bauri	7.8	35.2	22.1
3	Bhogta	4.5	21.9	13.6
4	Bhuiya	2.8	14.5	8.9
5	Chaupal	6.4	29	18.8
6	Chamar	7.1	35.3	21.8
7	Dabgar	13.2	42.8	29.2
8	Dhobi	14.2	48.2	32.3
9	Dom	7.4	26.3	17.4
10	Dusadh	8.4	35.7	22.9
11	Ghasi	13.9	36.6	25.4
12	Halalkhor	12.4	39.2	26.2
13	Hari/Mehtar	13.4	38.7	26.9
14	Kanjar	4.5	15.1	10.7
15	Kurariyar	8.8	30.2	19.5
16	Lalbegi	12.2	30.6	21.7
17	Musahar	1.3	7.7	4.6
18	Nat	6.2	20.6	13.8
19	Pan	19.1	47.7	33.9
20	Pasi	12.9	44.5	29.6
21	Rajwar	5.2	29.6	18
22	Turi	6.5	28.6	17.9

³ Prasad (1979) uses this term to describe the condition of agricultural labourers in Bihar, who are perpetually in debt.

Total	7.1	30.6	19.5
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Table 3: Literacy Rates of Dalit Castes in Bihar (source: SC&ST Welfare Department, Government of Bihar 2012: 62)

The high rate of illiteracy among the Musahars is closely linked to their position at the bottom of the caste and class hierarchy. The hegemonic interests of the upper castes ensure that the Musahars always remain illiterate and are, therefore, a readily available source of cheap labour. In some villages, Musahar parents even have to ask permission from landlords to send their children to school. Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) refer to the story of Jitan Ram Manjhi, the Musahar politician from Bihar. Seeing his son's interest in learning, Jitan Ram's father approached the Bhumihar landlord to whom he was bonded, asking for permission for his son to go to school. The response was a sound thrashing for the presumptuousness of even asking.

For the Musahars, in their struggle to survive each day, there seems hardly any time, energy or incentive for education. In my fieldwork, I hardly observed Musahar parents making any efforts to send their children to school. They often asked me: *Musahar ka bachcha padkar daroga banega?* ('By going to school, will the Musahar child become a police inspector?'), an expression of their feelings of irony and helplessness. On further inquiry, they told me that their children are often ridiculed at the village school by other students and the teachers.

Schools are not divorced from the wider socio-cultural environment in which they operate. The everyday practice of the school often fulfils the social purpose of maintaining established power relations (Herr 1999), thus reproducing domination and subordination by favouring some children and disfavouring others (Bourdieu 1977). Musahar children dare not go to schools attended by children from other castes for fear of ridicule and discrimination. Those children who do persist initially leave very soon, not only without the education they deserve, but also with a sense of failure and internalizing the violence meted out to them at the hands of an educational system that is designed to perpetuate the dominant culture (Herr 1999). Even when schools are established exclusively for the Musahars, there are few Musahar pupils. The Musahars told me that teachers from other castes were highly prejudiced against them. As Van Soest and Bryant (1995) pointed out regarding the biased nature of educational institutions, rural schools in Bihar deprive the Musahars of the opportunity for emotional, cultural and intellectual growth by systematically ignoring or depreciating their cultural background. Therefore the Musahars' dependence on the landlords continues because

they receive no education that might help them acquire alternative skills to those needed in working for the landlords. As the landlords seek to reduce their own dependence on their workers to a minimum, the vulnerability of the Musahars actually increases.

Musahar women and everyday violence

Hailing from the lowest and the most discriminated caste, Musahar women's experience of violence and exploitation hardly receives any attention. Ironically, at first glance Musahar women appear to be more independent in comparison with their counterparts from other Dalit castes, and certainly more so than upper-caste women: compared to non-Musahar women, there are fewer restrictions on their movements and work. But a closer look reveals that this apparent freedom actually serves the interests of the dominant. Musahar women are easy targets of a hegemonic design that seeks to appropriate both their labour and their sexuality. Hailing from the lowest of the low castes, the Musahar woman's sexuality is considered to be of low value, hence it is can more easily be transgressed. The cultural stereotype of treating Musahar women as low in morality makes them easy victims of exploitation, abuse and ridicule. Similarly, in the caste-centred feudal mode of production, because of their low position they are treated as slaves in the agricultural sector and in caste-defined menial occupations. Consequently, their role as labourers undermines their importance as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. Their only value seems to consist in their role in the production and reproduction of the labour force (Velaskar 1998).

Musahar girls are married off at an early age so that they do not fall prey to the sexual designs of upper-caste men. The young girls are kept dirty and unkempt. On inquiring, I learned that this is a way to ward off the sexual advances of upper-caste young men. Marriage, however, brings more misery for Musahar women. In their view, marriage is like a cow being sold from one home to another (Mander 2002). Whether in the natal home or in their husband's, women bear the brunt of poverty. In periods of extreme scarcity, which often occur, they do the rounds of scavenging for food – picking rotten potatoes and vegetables discarded from cold storage and vegetable markets, collecting dead chickens and rotten eggs from poultry, and even sifting through cow-dung for undigested grain. The marginality of the Musahar women is thus highlighted in a Bhojpuri saying, *musahar ke beti ke, na nahire sukh, na sasure sukh* (The Musahar's daughter brings happiness neither to her natal home nor to her in-laws').

To sum up, Musahar compliance is the result of the community's continued existence on the economic, social and political margins of society as described above. The durable effects

of poverty and untouchability have resulted in a certain fatalism among the Musahars that nothing can possibly change their situation. This attitude leads to a sense of resignation, passivity and acceptance of the oppressive conditions of their existence. Their marginalization has been further reinforced by the dominant discourses that perpetuate the negative images of the community. For instance, upper-caste images of the Musahars projected a singular, inferiorized identity of the community, with no room for alternative representations. Such imaging is done without reference to time and space (Lobo and Das 2007), thus projecting an image of the Musahars as existing from time immemorial. Consequently, the Musahars, like other dominated groups, seem to perceive unequal power relations and social arrangements as part of a given social order, normal and unchanging.

Musahar defiance and the seeds of contestation

‘No mode of production,’ writes Raymond Williams, ‘and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention’ (Williams 2005: 43). The durable effects of poverty and untouchability, as well as the dominant discourses discussed above, have not in reality wiped out the consciousness of protest and seeds of defiance from the Musahar community. Like other Dalit and Mahadalit groups, the Musahars challenge dominant norms and oppression through numerous overt and covert strategies, and by both individual and collective actions. Their protest actions include the revival and celebration of their religio-cultural traditions, deities and legendary figures.

Musahars, like all dominated groups, have always employed various subtle and hidden forms of behaviour and actions to protest against exploitation and domination. Such actions, or what James Scott calls ‘the ordinary weapons of the relatively powerless groups’, include ‘foot-dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, flight, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth’ (Scott 1985: 29). Musahars are particularly adept at denying their labour to landlords at peak seasons in the agricultural cycle when they are unhappy with their terms of employment. The Musahars back out of previously made agreements to work in the fields during the paddy planting season, when there is a high demand for labour. This is the time when farmers go around the Musahar settlements in the evenings literally pleading with them to work in their fields next day. Probably this is the reason for a proverb, the sense of which is that the Musahars say ‘yes’ in the evening and ‘no’ the following morning. In order to keep themselves out of the coercive control of the local landlords, the Musahars often prefer to work in brick kilns away from the village (Giri 2013). The numerous ‘hidden transcripts’

which the Musahars employ represent their ‘critique of power expressed behind the back of the dominant’ (Scott 1990: xii), and demonstrate the autonomous domain that is present in the consciousness of this community.

Departing from the usual covert and individual forms of everyday resistance, Musahars openly and collectively challenge the interests of the dominant on different occasions. As early as the 1930s, Saini Musahar led a Musahar protest movement against the atrocities of landlords and demanded cultivable land for the community. Saini Musahar also emphasised the need for religious and social reform among Musahars (Singer 1997). In the 1970s, Musahars in large numbers took part in the Bodh Gaya Andolan (movement). Under the leadership of the Chatra-Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, an organization of students and young people inspired by Jaya Prakash Narayan in Gaya District,⁴ this movement demanded the redistribution of the surplus land illegally held by the *mahant* (headman) of the Shankaracharya *math* (temple) in Gaya. Of the 1,060 people who were imprisoned during this struggle, about 80 per cent belonged to either the Musahar or Bhuiya communities (Prabhat 1999). In spite of severe repression by the police, the Vahini succeeded in redistributing more than 1000 acres of land seized from the *math* among the Musahars and other landless people (Louis 2002; PUDR 1990).

The Musahars were at the forefront of the Maoist struggle in the 1980s in Bihar. In Jehanabad District, a Musahar woman by the name of Shanti Devi organized women against the caste atrocities and sexual abuse of Dalit women by upper-caste men. The first martyrs of the Maoist organization called Party Unity in 1982 were three Musahar youths, one of whom hailed from a village in Jehanabad where I did fieldwork (Kunnath 2012). An upper-caste member of the Maoist party told me that it was among the Musahars that the revolutionary activists felt the most secure from the police and the private militias of the landlords, due to their fierce loyalty to the Maoist organization.

Though compared to other Dalit groups the Musahars have been slow to sanskritize (i.e. emulate the culture and customs of upper castes), the educated among them do see this as a way of achieving upward social mobility. In order to shed the negative images attached to the community, some Musahar youths adopt generic surnames which give them anonymity, such as Bharati, Prasad, Mondal and Kumar, in place of traditional names like Manjhi, Musahar or Rishidev. Like caste Hindus, the Musahars take a morning bath and worship the Sun God. Some Musahars have joined ascetic cults like the Kabirpanth and have taken to

⁴ Jaya Prakash Narayan, or JP as he was popularly known, was a political leader of national stature and the proponent of *sampoorna kranti* (total revolution), a programme of structural transformation in Bihar.

vegetarianism. The sanskritized Musahars claim a superior position in relation to the rest of the community.

The Musahars, like other Dalit groups, contest marginality through a revival of their own religio-cultural practices and celebrations centred on ancestral figures and resistance martyrs. Celebrations of Ma Sabari, the best known female deity of the Musahars, have become popular in recent years. In the Ramayana, Ma Sabari is mentioned as a devotee of Ram. The Musahars claim her as one of their ancestors. Apart from Sabari, other Musahar legendary figures such as Rikhi Muni, Tulasi Bir and Dina Bhadri are venerated by the community. They are revered as Musahar warrior heroes who lost their power and prestige in society only because of the treacherous actions of the upper castes and their gods. The revival of festivities centred on these figures by various Musahar organizations is part of the community's collective assertion to reclaim and reinvent its origin, history and identity.

2. Beyond compliance and defiance

The compliance and resistance of the Musahars narrated in the previous section confronts us with a persistent contradiction which social theory has debated over decades – that between structure and agency. The notion of agency as juxtaposed to structure implies that individuals are not the product of their social worlds but that they are thinking, feeling and acting subjects who create the world around them. As opposed to agency, structure – a term loosely applied to any recurring pattern of social behaviour – conveys a sense of determinism. Structure determines the content of the conscious experience, and in the process the human subject and its agency are eclipsed.

Structural Marxists in anthropology explain compliance through the dominant ideology thesis. Here subjugated classes are said to have internalized the dominant values. Structural Marxists offer a critique of the notion of consensus discussed earlier. Consensus, according to them, is based on the mystification of power and false consciousness and not on shared norms and reciprocity. They point out how the apparently harmonious and integrating institutions, beliefs and practices in reality mask unequal power relations and oppressive social, political and economic structures (Ortner 1995). Their analysis harks back to a passage in *The German ideology* where Marx and Engels state, 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time, its ruling intellectual force (Marx and Engels 1998: 67). Through its control of ideological production, the dominant class is able to produce a set of beliefs and practices for the subjugation of the subordinate classes. Gramsci provides a more nuanced explanation for this

process of ideological domination through his concept of hegemony.⁵ The ruling class, through its control of the ideological sectors of society, including culture, religion, education and the media, disseminates those values that reinforce its position. As a result, class rule is maintained not so much by sanctions and coercion as by the consent and passive compliance of the subordinate classes (Gramsci 1998 [1971]: 12-13).

Theories upholding human agency and resistance, on the other hand, point out that the concept of hegemony is limited to a surface examination of ‘front-stage’ interactions in power-laden situations that overlook the ‘backstage’ behaviours and actions of the subordinated classes that are rejecting and resisting the interests of the dominant (Goffman 1959; Scott 1985, 1990). James Scott argues that the concept of hegemony overlooks ‘the necessity of routine and pragmatic submission to the “compulsions of economic relations” as well as the realities of coercion’ (Scott 1985: 317). He contends that the idea of hegemony ignores the extent to which most subordinate classes are able, on the basis of their daily material experiences, to penetrate and demystify the dominant ideology (Scott 1985).

From the perspective of ideological domination, the Musahars and other Dalit groups are victims of the caste system. Their subordination is made possible not merely by brute force or through their deprivation of economic and political sources of power, but also by the creation of values and ideologies. The notions of purity and pollution, as well as the ideologies of *karma* and *dharma*, have imposed various disabilities on the Dalits’ way of life. These ideologies, backed up by brute force and economic power, are used to justify caste inequalities. Therefore, from the dominant ideological thesis it appears quite natural to portray the Dalits as passive, docile, submissive to elite norms and incapable of organizing themselves into resistance movements (Moore 1966).

In contrast, the proponents of the theories of agency argue that, beyond the realm of passivity and submissiveness, subordinated groups have a social existence, a consciousness of their own, that rejects the dominant structures and ideologies, and expresses protest in manifold ways. The scholars of the Subaltern School have explored a wide range of collective actions, hitherto neglected, such as grain riots, uprisings of hill peoples and small-scale peasant insurgencies (Amin 1984; Hardiman 1984). The various contributions to Subaltern Studies brought to the forefront the existence of an autonomous domain among subordinated peoples which elite domination and hegemony have been unable to suppress.

⁵ The concept of hegemony is not without its ambiguity, and its interpretations have also differed with each application (Crehan 2002).

Within the area of human agency, James Scott, and several others following him, contrast rebellion and open resistance with everyday struggles which are often covert. The concept points to the vital day-to-day struggles of the subordinated classes over space, leisure, wages, autonomy, privileges and respect. In a similar vein, several studies (Berreman 1979; Deliège 1992; Gough 1973; Khare 1984; Juergensmeyer 1982; Lerche 2008; Mencher 1974; Mines 2005; Mosse 1994) highlight Dalit agency and Dalit struggles for autonomy, respect and resources.

However, theories of ideological domination, as well as those affirming the agency of the oppressed, present a deeper dilemma – ‘a classic double bind’, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls it (1992: 533) – for the analysis of compliance and resistance. According to Scheper-Hughes (*ibid.*), either we can emphasize the power of oppression, but in doing so risk reducing the subjectivity and agency of people as victims; or, like James Scott and others, we can focus on everyday forms of resistance, tactics and coping mechanisms, but run the risk of romanticizing human suffering or of trivializing the effects of poverty on the human spirit and will. My approach is to transcend this dilemma by acknowledging the durable effects of poverty and oppression on Dalit agency, as well as Dalits’ ability to challenge them. I use Gramsci’s concept of ‘contradictory consciousness’ as an analytical framework, which presents subaltern consciousness as a site of both domination and resistance.

Gramsci develops his framework amidst two contrasting philosophical traditions regarding subaltern consciousness. The first viewpoint is influenced by the pre-Enlightenment philosophy of western Europe. This view attributes intelligence and critical consciousness to ordinary people. The feelings and experiences of the masses are held up as meaningful and as the source and content of every philosophical system. In contrast, the Enlightenment tradition condemns the views of the masses as superstitious, naive, meaningless and irrational. The consciousness of subaltern groups is viewed as the product of a process moulded completely by the ruling ideas (Patnaik 1988).

Gramsci criticizes both the tendency to ignore the subaltern precepts on the one hand, and the attempts to romanticize them on the other. He contends that a mere critique of the dominant ideologies and structures is unlikely to do away with the external relations of these ideologies in relation to working-class consciousness. It is also necessary to recognize the original and the creative in the masses even when they are subjected to domination (Patnaik 1988). Gramsci believed ‘there could be no revolutionary movement in a society unless its distinctive forms of consciousness and subordination were accurately identified, objectively understood and critically appraised by those who aspired to transform it’ (Arnold 1984: 158).

In his *Prison Notebooks*, therefore, he focuses his attention on the ‘spontaneous’ elements – initiatives, fragmentary conceptions of the world, incipient class identity and so on – as well as the hegemonic articulations ingrained in the subaltern consciousness (Gramsci 1998: 198).

Gramsci views the subaltern consciousness as a contradictory realm of ideas and behaviour in which accommodation and resistance exist in constant tension:

The active man in the mass [...] One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci 1998: 333)

At the first level of consciousness, the masses possess intelligence and originality. This aspect of consciousness, according to Gramsci, is not yet fully developed, but contains a sense of emancipatory agency (Gutmann 1996). Gramsci locates the positive attributes of the subordinate groups mainly in the cultural and political realms. The subalterns may receive the substance of their culture from the hegemonic classes, but they make this culture their own by selecting some aspects and rejecting others. For instance, in the case of religion, they develop beliefs and practices reflecting their own needs, aspirations and way of life rather those of the hegemonic classes. For the subalterns, therefore, religion is not self-deception (or false consciousness), but a specific way of rationalizing the world and real life. Religion provides them with a general framework of political activity.

It is at the second level of consciousness that Gramsci locates ‘consent’, which informs his concept of hegemony. The dominant class, by moral and intellectual means, creates a condition for the subordinate groups to actively subscribe to its values and objectives. Here the moral and intellectual leadership is contrasted with a situation in which the dominant class merely rules, that is, imposes its will by force. The hegemonic group succeeds in convincing others that it stands or works for the interest of the general public. Consequently the subaltern class, according to Gramsci, ‘affirms this [dominant] conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in “normal times” – that is, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate’ (Gramsci 1998: 327). For Gramsci ‘normal times’ are opposed to exceptional revolutionary moments in which the subordinated groups as a class rise up in unity to challenge the dominant interests.

To return to the earlier discussion, in the light of Gramsci’s framework, the compliance of the Musahars and other Dalits is linked to the concept of hegemony and the uncritically

inherited traditions of the past. The effects of poverty, untouchability, sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation are ‘durably inscribed’ and ‘uncritically absorbed’ into the life-world of the Musahars and other Dalits. As a consequence, they sometimes reproduce the dominant values and norms by which they themselves are discriminated against. I described above instances of such reproduction in relation to the Musahars. Further, the Dalit castes in general, as Moffatt (1979) has pointed out in relation to Tamil Nadu,⁶ seem to replicate among themselves the idioms of caste by which they are excluded by the upper castes. Dalit castes such as the Dusadhs and the Chamars consider the Musahars as the lowest caste and the most ‘unclean’. My Dusadh and Chamar informants often advised me never to accept food or drink from Musahar households. In a similar way, the Dusadhs treat the Chamars as lower than themselves due to the latter’s involvement with their traditional ‘polluting’ occupation of tanning. There appears to be an apparent consensus among Dalits with regard to the general features of the caste system, especially in matters relating to purity and impurity.

Dalit resistance, discussed earlier, could be located in the second element that Gramsci highlights – that which unites a worker with his fellow workers in the transformation of the world. As discussed earlier, Musahar defiance includes both individual and collective assertions against what they perceived as injustice. Shanti Devi, the Musahar woman I mentioned in the previous section, became a Maoist leader in the 1980s. She told me that she was the first woman from the Musahar caste to become a leader of the Maoist party in her village. She organized Dalit women and landless labourers in several villages, and in a Gramscian sense unified all Dalit castes in their struggle against upper-caste domination.

Similarly, Dalit struggles for dignity and protest against caste oppression took different forms at different times and places. In his critique of Moffatt’s position, Deliège (1992) provides evidence of Dalit counter-cultural rejection of the caste system. He, like many others (Gough 1973; Mencher 1974; Berreman 1979), argues for the existence of a distinct Dalit culture, represented in their origin myths, songs and egalitarianism, which rejects upper-caste norms and practices. Dalit struggles and protests were further expressed in various socio-religious and political movements of the twentieth century. The Satnami Movement among the Chamars in Chhattishgarh (Fuchs 1965), the Ad Dharam movement in the Punjab (Juergensmeyer 1982; Khare 1984), Dalit conversions to Buddhism (Zelliot 2001)

⁶ Through his study of ‘Untouchable’ communities in Endavur, Tamil Nadu, Moffatt claims that the ‘Untouchables’ live in ‘cultural consensus’ with the generally accepted principles of the caste system and ‘replicate’ among themselves the principles of hierarchy, purity/impurity and various other norms associated with the system (1979: 3, 98).

and Christianity (Mosse 1994) and Dalit adherence to egalitarian sects like the Kabirpanth (Lorenzen 1996) were all part of subaltern struggles for symbolic and material resources. These Dalit struggles clearly affirm the argument in favour of Dalit agency in the face of the durable effects of caste dominance and exploitation, and show, as Gramsci argued, that the dominated class does not uncritically accept the dominant view of their position.

In order to understand the life-worlds of the dominated, we need to go beyond viewing Dalits and Mahadalits as either completely determined or autonomous. As Gramsci's framework suggests, complying and resisting subjects are both produced within the same structures of power. Underlying this perspective is the crucial assumption that human consciousness cannot be equated with or exhausted in the logic of domination. On the contrary, Gramsci viewed subaltern consciousness as a complex combination of liberating and submissive dimensions, a contradictory realm of ideas and behaviour in which elements of accommodation and resistance exist in constant tension. In the process, Gramsci rescues the human subject by positing a notion of ideology that does not obliterate the mediating faculties of ordinary people. At the same time, he does so in a way that situates human agency within a pre-existing field of domination that is open-ended in its effects and outcomes. Thus the notion of contradictory consciousness does not point primarily to domination or consensus, but to a sphere of contradictions and tensions that is pregnant with the potential for radical change.

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