

Chapter 12

Sanskritisation

Critical reflections from North Bihar in comparative perspective

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Reflecting upon the factors for the persistence of caste over several centuries, the eminent sociologist MN Srinivas offers special salience to the possibilities offered within the 'system' for upward mobility. Specifically, Srinivas (1952; 1962, 1989) refers to the ways in which members of *jatis* at or near the 'bottom' of the hierarchy emulate the practices of those at the top. He coins the term Sanskritisation to analyse these processes. Since Srinivas' formulation, the term has gained enormous prominence in explaining different aspects of social change, ranging from changing gender norms (Cohn, 1955; Nussbaum, 2000; Ciotti, 2010), increased adoption of vegetarian diets (Sharma, 1996) and transforming communal identities (Narayan, 2009).

The perspective that 'lower' castes emulate the practices of the 'higher' castes characterises much scholarship undertaken in the structural-functionalist mode. In such writings, caste is perceived as a socio-cultural *system* whose constituents share its value system. Consensus is the defining feature of the system, which is analysed as based on interdependence and harmony rather than inequality or oppression (Ghurye, 1969; Hutton, 1946; Dumont, 1980; Moffatt, 1979). Such views developed in critical conversation vis-à-vis the scholarship that asserted the conflict which underpins caste relations. In such works, members of different *jatis* possess diverse worldviews of their own, which may or may not have anything in common with one another (Gough, 1960; Berreman, 1971; Deliege, 1992; Juergensemeyer, 1982). Kancha Ilaiah (2010) makes this argument most strongly when he refers to the ideological conflict between 'Brahmanism' and 'Dalitism' in contemporary India. Where structural-functionalist writings emphasised 'consensus', the critical writings on the subject underscored 'conflict'. Where 'compliance' was the central theme in structural-functionalist scholarship, 'defiance' was key to the works of the critical scholars.

Nevertheless, that many quotidian practices of members of different *jatis* are similar cannot be ignored. In many instances, such similarities are the result of recent changes among members of *jatis* that face social discrimination, economic exploitation and ritual subordination. How are we to analyse these changes? The lens of Sanskritisation offers one influential way of analysing such changes. In this paper, however, I will explore alternative approaches to investigate and explain social change, drawing on, but also departing from, Ilaiah's (2010) insightful interventions. Based on observations from my own ethnographic work in north Bihar, and situating them against research conducted elsewhere in Bihar and India, I make the case that social change among members of oppressed populations be perceived in their own right rather than as emulation of a dominant ideology or value system. But, just as I am sceptical of emulation-oriented perspectives offered by Sanskritisation, I also caution against subscribing to a defiance-centred viewpoint.

I first outline the ways in which the Sanskritisation thesis has been applied to studying social change among Dalit communities, who are frequently stigmatised as untouchable *jatis*. I also note academic discontent with such interpretations. I next illustrate three socio-political changes experienced by members of north Bihar's Musahar community, simultaneously offering their interpretations of the change. I consider the growing incidence of Musahar women selectively withdrawing from local labour markets, vegetarianism and support to Hindu nationalist political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). To adumbrate, while these changes appear to indicate a convergence with social and political practices of the privileged castes, my interlocutors from among the Musahar community did not perceive them to be imitative. In the subsequent section, I refer to ethnographic work conducted in south Bihar (Kunnath, 2012), Andhra Pradesh (Still, 2014), and Tamil Nadu (Heyer, 2014) that illuminates the complex relationship of Dalit communities with the values and norms of the privileged castes. I conclude by underscoring the limited utility of the notion of Sanskritisation in explaining socio-political change in contemporary India.

Sanskritisation: the career of an idea

Since MN Srinivas' use of the term 'Sanskritisation' in his doctoral thesis, eventually published in 1952, the term has widely circulated in the academic scholarship exploring the sociological and anthropological dimension of caste. Srinivas himself defines Sanskritisation as a "process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, rituals, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a 'twice-born' (*dwija*) caste" (Srinivas, 1989: 56). In this vein, he also clarifies that Sanskritisation does not only entail emulating the beliefs and practices of the Brahmans, who place themselves at the apex of the ritual hierarchy. Rather, Sanskritisation includes the appropriation of customs and beliefs of the dominant caste, who are not necessarily Brahmans. It is only in southern India, Srinivas contends, that 'lower' castes may emulate the Brahmans. In northern India, they are more likely to imitate the Rajputs, as Kshatriyas, second on the ritual hierarchy, while in western India, there is a greater possibility of them mimicking the practices of the Vaishyas, the commercial castes who are placed third on the hierarchy. In all three instances, Srinivas notes, the brunt of the Sanskritisation process is borne by women of the 'lower castes' whose productive and reproductive abilities their men seek to control and curb to the extent they can.

Srinivas' formulation finds resonance in the writings of several scholars. Writing about Uttar Pradesh, Bernard Cohn (1955) refers to the ways in which members of the Chamar community supposedly appropriated the practices of the Thakur community by tightening patriarchal authority and imposing controls over women, precisely at a time when the Thakurs themselves were abandoning such practices. Nearly two decades later, based on his research in Tamil Nadu, Michael Moffatt (1979) described the ways in which Dalits shared with their social superiors the basic assumptions of the caste hierarchy and reproduced the graded hierarchies that sustained notions of caste purity. Srinivas attributes to the process he labels as Sanskritisation a cohesive role in Indian society for the manner in which it putatively assimilated the aspirations of different *jatis* into the caste hierarchy. In this sense, the resonances between Srinivas' scholarship and Louis Dumont's writings are striking,

because both perceived the caste 'system' in holistic terms. In their readings, each ritually ranked caste followed the *dharma* associated with it and contributed thereby to maintain the coherence of the system. Nonetheless, Dumont concurs with Srinivas that the caste system was not immutable, and that the 'lower castes' imitated the practices of the 'upper castes'. While accepting disagreement over specific details, Dumont notes the "strength of the tendency to imitate and also the main direction of the tendency" (Dumont, 1980: 192).

However, Srinivas' (1962, 1989) formulation did not go unchallenged. A number of early critics argued that Dalits possessed egalitarian worldviews that was fundamentally opposed to the ideologies cherished by the privileged castes (Gough, 1960; Gough, 1973; Berreman, 1963; Berreman, 1971; Mencher, 1974). Gail Omvedt (1976) interrogated the appropriateness of the term to describe what, in many cases, represented a move to contest, rather than affirm, the dominance of the *dwija* castes. Robert Deliege (1992) demonstrates that Dalits forge cultural identities to reject, rather than to accept, the caste hierarchies. He further notes (Deliege, 1999) that even when they appear to share the values of the privileged castes, such acts do not necessarily imply a consensus with the system as a whole, but could well reflect their weak structural position. Dalit affiliations with egalitarian religious practices such as the Ad Dharm (Juergensmeyer, 1982); Buddhism (Zelliott, 2001); Christianity (Mosse, 1994); Kabirpanthi (Kunnath, 2012; and Satnami (Fuchs, 1965) have been quite justifiably interpreted as indicative of their discontent with the position attributed to them under the ritualistic hierarchy of the caste system.

In his recent work, Kancha Ilaiah (2010) offers the most cogent expression of what might be called Dalitbahujan difference, or the view that the Sudra and Dalit communities possess worldviews, norms and ideas that are fundamentally at odds with those held by the privileged Savarna communities. He points to the existence among Dalitbahujans of their own gods and goddesses, customs, rituals and worldviews, interrogating the notion that they were discarding these practices and emulating those of the privileged castes. While Ilaiah does not deny that several of these practices are changing, he is critical of viewing them through analytical lenses that foreground such notions as emulation, imitation and mimicry. In a fascinating polemic, he wonders how is it that Srinivas interprets the apparent Dalitbahujan imitation of Savarna practice as Sanskritisation, but refuses to interpret the reverse practice- of Brahmins in his study village taking to agriculture- as Sudraisation or Dalitisation. While Ilaiah's critics, such as Chandrabhan Prasad, have legitimately charged him with imposing an artificial unity between Dalits and Sudras, his interventions have compelled social scientists to confront the assumption that social and economic change among India's historically oppressed communities derive from an emulation, imitation or mimicry of the privileged castes.

Social change in Bihar: Sanskritisation or something else?

Bihar is one of India's most impoverished States. According to the Indian Government, over 40% of its 100 million plus people live below the national poverty line. Other estimates, more sensitive to the multidimensional character of poverty, place the proportion of the poor at

over 80%, again among the highest in the country. As elsewhere in India, deprivation remains disproportionately concentrated among historically oppressed Dalit communities who continue to be stigmatized as ‘untouchable castes’ by local and regional elites. Despite political mobilization and social awareness among members of these communities, they continue to be economically exploited, socially marginalized and discriminated against. Instances of violence perpetrated against them by better-off neighbors and co-villagers are not uncommon. At Independence, the post-colonial Indian state formally abolished untouchability and instituted affirmative action policies for members of Dalit communities: this constitutional ‘emancipation of untouchables’ was hailed by legal jurists and political scientists as a remarkable achievement for India’s deeply stratified society. Over six decades later, however, substantive economic and social inequalities continue to mark the relations between members of Dalit communities and others. Bihar, where Dalits comprise approximately 15% of the population (Census of India, 2011), is no exception.

Side by side, we must be sensitive to heterogeneities *within* Dalit communities. In Bihar, members of three Dalit communities account for nearly 80% of the entire Dalit population. Of these, members of the Dusadh and Chamar communities each comprise over 30% of the Dalit population, while those of the Musahar community make up more than 15%. From Table 1, it becomes clear that members of the Musahar community represent ‘marginal within marginals’. They comprise 3% of the State’s population. But their representation among marginal workers and agricultural laborers among marginal workers exceeds their share of the population in the State. A huge proportion of Musahars are employed on the fields of their wealthier neighbors who can afford to hire in labor. In the media and among civil society activists, Musahars have often been referred to as ‘Dalits among Dalits’. Given their ‘marginalisation within the marginalised’, Bihar’s State Government has classified them as Mahadalits (literally ‘greatly oppressed’) to refer to the chronic collective deprivations they face.

Table 1: Caste-disaggregated occupational data in Bihar, 2011

	All Bihar (1)	All Scheduled Castes (2)	Musahars only (3)	% of (3) to (1)
Population	104,099,452	16,567,325	2,725,114	2.61
Marginal workers	13,365,376	2,735,748	525,994	3.93
Agricultural labourers	18,345,649	4,478,387	1,009,641	5.50
Source of data	Census of India (2011): Primary Census Abstract (Bihar), Table A 5	Census of India (2011): Primary Census Abstract for individual Scheduled Caste (Bihar): Table A10		

Table 2: Proportion of Musahars in key occupational hierarchies, 2001

	All Bihar	Scheduled Caste	Musahar
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Cultivators as % of main workers	39	9	3
Agricultural labour as % of main workers	64	75	93

Source: Census of India (2001). Bihar Primary Census Abstract, Table A-10,

From Map 1.1, it is clear that the population of Musahars is not evenly dispersed across Bihar's 38 districts. They form an absolute majority among Dalits in three north-eastern districts, while they comprise a significant proportion in a few more. As Map 1.2 shows, their numerical strength to the total population of the district ranges from being as low as 0.2% to as high as 12%. Given that 'caste' structures relations between homologous groups rather than merely describing discrete social categories, the quotidian experiences of the members of the Musahar community varies across districts, depending on their numerical presence vis-à-vis other communities, Dalit or otherwise. In a context where political parties routinely mobilize voters along communal lines, the numerical importance of caste communities matter not only to electoral contests but to social relationships, even if they do not necessarily negate exploitative and oppressive relations. Musahars comprised an absolute majority among Dalits and constituted nearly 7% of the district's total population in Araria district, where my fieldwork was based.

INSERT MAP 1.1 & MAP 1.2

In the specific localities wherefrom I collected data, members of this community comprised nearly a fifth of the population, but owned less than 1% of all arable land. The primary source of household income for almost all families was agricultural labor or casual work as temporary migrants in far-flung cities¹. As in the rest of the State, they were disproportionately represented in low-remuneration and highly labor-intensive employment such as agricultural labor and other casual work, but poorly represented in salaried employment or retail. Socially, they were stereotyped by the privileged castes in derogatory ways that especially targeted the alleged promiscuity of Musahar women. Members of the privileged castes also derided Musahars' cultural observances as a waste of time and holding these responsible for their poverty.

Side by side, members of the community are ambivalent about their identity with the putative Brahmanical hierarchy. Several of my interlocutors- from across all communities- suggested that the Musahars were not a 'service' caste at all (as, for instance, the Yadavs, Kevats, Doms or Chamars supposedly were). The self-referential term to describe themselves as a collective

¹ The privileged castes in the locality comprised the Kayasth and Rajput communities, many of whose members owned substantial agricultural properties, invested their agricultural surpluses in profitable enterprises outside of the village and were well-connected in the bureaucracy and judiciary. Other communities in the locality included members of the Yadav and the Kevat communities. Many Yadavs tended to own some agricultural property although they managed only precarious surpluses: some Yadavs claimed tenuous social links with supra-local politicians. Most Kevats tended to own marginal agricultural properties and supplemented their meager incomes by hiring out their labor.

was not *jati* (*caste*) at all but community (*samaj*)². My interlocutors from among the Musahar community eschewed the use of hierarchical terms such as ‘upper castes’ and ‘lower castes’ to describe themselves in relation to others, as I will illustrate below. I follow my interlocutors in using the collective descriptor of community rather than caste. Admittedly, many among my interlocutors were uncertain about being called Musahar because they considered it to be an imposition by the privileged caste-communities in order to stigmatise them. In the study villages, a large number of my interlocutors referred to themselves as Rishdeo, highlighting their lineage with Sarvari Rishi, an ascetic with a part in some versions of the Ramayana. However, a number of the same people also referred to themselves as Bhuiyan to underscore their intimate connection to the land on which they toil. I could discern little agreement about these alternative referents. As a result, and given the widespread use of the name ‘Musahar’ among activists, policy-makers and academics alike, I have chosen to retain the term, anachronistic though I hope it becomes in future, for this paper.

In the rest of this section, I analyse the changing social and political practices among members of the Musahar community, changes which- at first glance- appear to justify the applicability of Srinivas’ model of Sanskritisation but which- upon closer scrutiny- do not.

Selective withdrawal from labor markets: My usual introduction to my interlocutors in the study village, which I call Sargana, about the purpose of my research was to say that I was studying social change in India. This introduction spawned a host of responses. One theme to which my interlocutors from among Musahar men of all ages returned time and again pertained to their perception that their social status had considerably improved, particularly after the advent of the charismatic politician Lalu Prasad Yadav as the State’s Chief Minister. A related comment they made was that Musahar women no longer went out to work. A typical remark, the likes of which recur throughout my field notes, was:

Earlier, we had little status in society. But after Lalu came to power, we could now look the landlords in the eye. We don’t depend on them for food, clothing and shelter. Our women do not need to work for them. The landlords respect us. Whatever they may say in their homes, they think before they speak in public.

Although a number of my interlocutors emphasised continuity with the past rather than highlighting change, even the most sceptical among them did not deny that Musahar women worked less on the fields of their neighbors today than they did about two decades ago. They accepted that while major changes had occurred in social relations underpinning the employment of agricultural labor, none was as far reaching as the fact that Musahar women did not work as much for agriculturalists as much as they did in the not-so-distant past.

Writing about social change in Uttar Pradesh, Bernard Cohn comments: “While the Thakur wife is coming out of seclusion, the Chamar wife is being put into seclusion.” (Cohn, 1955: 68). More recently, Martha Nussbaum (2000: 47) endorses the perspective that members of

² For instance, in referring to specific observances and customs, they would say “Humare Musahar samaj mein...” (In our Musahar society) rather than saying “Humare Musahar jati mein” (In our Musahar caste). Sometimes, I was told about Musahar “varg”, which would translate into Musahar class.

ritually subordinated castes imitate the norms of those who place themselves at the apex. “For women,” she tells us, “this process of imitation has very specific implications: in particular, for the kind of work they are allowed to do. Generally, this involves the *withdrawal* of women from the labour market” (emphasis in original). The comments of my interlocutors from among the Musahar men might be interpreted as resonating with the perspective that women’s gradual withdrawal from work is viewed as a symbol of enhanced social status among them (Deshpande, 2002; Kapadia, 1995; Chakravarty, 1993; Dube, 1988). For that reason, we might expect that women are being compelled by their husbands, sons, brothers and fathers to withdraw from the labour market.

I was able to conduct only limited ethnographic work independently with Musahar women because of gender barriers as well as the fact that they largely spoke Thaiti, unlike the men who used Thaiti, Maithili and Hindi interchangeably. Such barriers did not prevent conversations however, many of which returned to the theme that women worked much less, if at all, on their neighbors’ farms today than they did a few decades ago. A young man, with whom I frequently hung out translated for me what the 50-year old landless Musahar woman Teliya Rishi said:

There was a time, babu, we lined up at the landlord’s place the night before the cropping work would begin. It would be bitterly cold, but we needed the work: if we didn’t get there, somebody else would. We would be grateful for any work he gave us, for any payment- cash, food, crop waste- he would make. He would make all kinds of demands and do all kinds of things. (Looks away as she says this. My translator proceeded to elaborate on what she might have meant, but Teliya Rishi touched his wrist as he started to, and he began to talk about something else). But today, its different. The landlord has also changed. Now, he comes here, and asks (my translator folds his hands, imitating the gesture my interlocutor made) my husband, my sons and nephews, to work for him. Of course they go. But we, the women, don’t.

Teliya Rishi’s account is a useful reminder of the gradual, but ineluctable, shifts in the social relations of production. Whereas three decades ago, she and her neighbours were far more dependent on the agriculturalists for employment, that dependence appears to have reduced now. Although it was not explicitly said, by referring to “all kinds of demands and do all kinds of things,” Teliya Rishi probably referred to sexual claims being advanced by employers. In contrast with that period, it appears that now women have ceased agricultural operations as hired labourers. Although Teliya Rishi did not couch this change in a narrative of status, the glint in her eyes and her animated gestures made it clear that she endorsed these changes.

My translator’s rendition of Teliya Rishi suggested that no Musahar woman worked as hired agricultural laborers any more. His rendition sat somewhat oddly with data from my census survey, covering 2200-odd households in the locality³, which suggested that nearly half of all Musahar women worked as agricultural laborers at some point during the year. If both his rendition and my survey data are correct, it is possible that Teliya Rishi might have been prescribing an *ideal* state of affairs rather than describing the actual goings-on. Further conversations with Teliya Rishi and other Musahar women suggested that they did indeed

³ See Roy (2011) and Roy (forthcoming) for details of the survey.

find employment in cropping operations for labour-hiring agriculturalists. However, all accounts concurred with the perspective that the incidence of Musahar women hiring their labour out for farm work had declined in comparison with previous decades.

Interviews with seventeen of the agriculturalists on whose farms Teliya Rishi, her family and neighbours in the Musahar hamlet worked, revealed to me their perspectives on the matter. Each one of my interlocutors complained bitterly about a shortage of agricultural labor. They attributed these shortages primarily to government-funded schemes such as the public distribution system and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes (MGNREGS). Additionally, several Musahar men migrated to towns and to other prosperous villages for work, making them less and less interested in the fate of the agricultural operations in their own localities. One of my interlocutors, a 45-year old large landowner of the Rajput community by the name of Hunny Singh, whose agricultural operations were carried out entirely through the use of hired labour, added that such changes made the Musahars 'upstarts'. In his own words,

Musahar men return [from their migratory destinations] with loads of cash. They get everything free (an allusion to the PDS). The government pays them money for digging ditches (an allusion to the MGNREGS). The result is they don't work for us. You should look at their women. When I was young, I remember the Musaharni (a reference to Musahar women) wearing something that barely covered her body. You could see their (refers to parts of the female anatomy, using his hands to complement his oral descriptions). But now, they have so much money they try and copy us. They wear sarees, buy ornaments, and possess chappals. They don't work on our fields any more....But let me tell you this: a Musaharni will always be a Musaharni. A belagaam ghodi (mare who cannot be reined). [I was genuinely bewildered. Sensing that I had not understood, he elaborated:] She will speak out of turn. She will (insinuations about promiscuous behaviour).

Hunny Singh's account of the changes in Sargana is anchored in anxieties about the members of the Musahar community refusing to subscribe to the subordinate roles they had occupied for generations. Particularly irksome to him appears to be the possibility that Musahar women might be able to lead better lives without needing to labour for agriculturalists such as him. More relevant for us here is Hunny Singh's claim that the Musahar women were 'copying' their Rajput counterparts by wearing clothes that more fully covered their bodies or ornaments that conveyed their purchasing power. Even their possession of footwear conveyed to Hunny Singh that the Musahars were imitating the privileged castes! Nevertheless, he is also convinced that Musahar women will retain their putative essence, which he identifies in terms of their alleged outspokenness and promiscuity.

In a moving description of everyday oppression faced by Musahar women, Kumar (2006) tells us about the following songs common among Musahar women:

*Sainya kahe rope chala dhanawa
Rope hum geli jamindar ke badhariya
Jamindar papi nirkhai badaniya.....*

[My husband says, let's go to plant paddy....
To plant paddy I go to the zamindar's field
Zamindar, the sinner, ogles at me]

Kumar, 2006: 4282

Bun laawe geli hum jamindar ke aganwa

*Eke hathe jamindar papi taula hai majooriya
Dosar haathe toai aapan manwa
Saiyan kahe rope chala dhanawa*

[To fetch my wages, I go to zamindar's courtyard
Zamindar, the sinner, weighs the wages with one hand
And fondles himself with the other
My husband says, let's go to plant paddy....]

Kumar, 2006: 4287

The song cited above is one that Musahar women sing while at work, on the fields of the privileged caste landlords. I did not hear my interlocutors sing it, and was not sure if it would be appropriate for me to ask them their thoughts on it, given the content. However, that such a song is part of the cultural repertoire of Musahar women indicates their anger at the sexual claims made with impunity by their privileged caste employers. Stringing together songs such as this with the accounts presented by the privileged caste hirers of labour and the Musahar women agricultural labourers offers important clues as to why the latter withdraw from cropping operations on the fields of the agriculturalists as soon as they can. Identifying the Musahar men's quest for social status as the chief reason for the selective withdrawal of their wives and sisters from agricultural labor markets offers only a partial vignette of the main factor influencing my interlocutors' decision to withdraw from agricultural operations.

During my conversations with Musahar women, limited though they were, they offered no suggestion that they were being coerced by their husbands or sons to withdraw from work. In fact, during our conversations they alluded to the extra-economic demands levied upon women by their employers. That these demands existed was corroborated by the reading of folk songs compiled by other author-activists in northern Bihar as above. My interviews with employers provided me with a glimpse into the ways in which they perceived the sexuality of their employees, which provided a justification for privileged caste agriculturalists to sexually abuse them with impunity. From such a contextualisation of social relations, to derive and sustain the claim that Musahar women withdraw from cropping operations because they or their husbands are imitating the privileged castes, is difficult.

The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that nearly half of all Musahar families in Sargana had worked on the MGNREGA at one point or the other during the previous year. Women from nearly every Musahar family sought- and obtained- employment under the program. Since 2010, I have gone back to the field village each year: my interlocutors- both men and women- report that more and more women participate in the MGNREGA when they can. Thus, the withdrawal from the labour market is selective. Musahar women in north Bihar are ceasing to hire out their labour to agriculturalists but not necessarily withdrawing from the public sphere.

But what material factors allow such changes in the practices of Musahar women? Employment in the MGNREGA is erratic, and cannot be depended upon to meet household expenditures. Incomes from the program certainly do not match the dependability of income from agricultural work. In this context, two factors can be singled out. One relates to the economic remittances by Musahar men, circulating through town and country across northern

and north-western India. The second relates to the provision of subsidised food through the PDS enable Musahar families to meet whatever income shortfall occurs due to women's partial but gradual withdrawal from agricultural labor markets. A consideration of the norms and values held by the privileged castes neither motivates, nor facilitates, Musahar women's exit from oppressive labor markets.

Espousing vegetarian diets: A recurring question that my interlocutors put to me related to my personal dietary practices. In time, I welcomed this question because it provided me with an opportunity to delve into a very personal sphere of my interlocutors' lives. Such a question was particularly sensitive from the point of view of the Musahars because of the frequent associations between their name and their alleged dietary preference for rodents. Colonial officials who systematised the classification and codification of the Indian population suggest that the communal label refers to their dietary practice of eating (*ahar*) rats (*musa*). For instance, one official, the Collector of Munger district, surmised that:

[The Musahars] 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.

Other officials suggest that the term was more likely to be devised by the privileged castes than the Musahars themselves. Risley proposes that the Musahars migrated from the Chhota Nagpur region, some three hundred kilometres to the south, when they were incorporated under relations of servitude by the privileged caste landowners. It was these landowners who in all probability labelled the Musahars in a derogatory way, to emphasise the difference between themselves and their agricultural serfs and labourers. Several of my Musahar interlocutors insisted that neither they nor anyone else in their living memory had ever eaten rodents, although they could not deny the possibility that people in an earlier age might have done so. Some among them said they were trying to discard that label altogether. During my interview with him, the President of the Musahar Vikas Manch, a Patna-based organisation which states its mandate to be working for the development of the Musahar community, took a more nuanced view. He suggested that the name of the community derived not so much from the eating of rodents, but from the view that its members were so impoverished that they had to dig into rodents' burrows so they could obtain the grains they stored for their hibernation. Whatever be the provenance of the collective label for the Musahar community, its intimate connections with their perceived dietary practices made the question of what they ate a potentially fraught one.

A number of my Musahar interlocutors noted that, although they did not eat rodents, they were not averse to consuming fowl and fish. Others gave me to understand that they were staunch vegetarians. While the former group of interlocutors admitted to drinking alcohol now and then, the latter insisted that they were teetotallers. My survey questionnaire did not include questions about diet, so I cannot statistically predict causality, but it became clear to me that my vegetarian interlocutors were all followers of the Kabirpanthi sect, or children and grandchildren of members of this sect who, even if they were not adherents themselves, continued to eschew alcohol and meat. There might have been others who were vegetarian

and not Kabirpanthi, but I found, based on my conversations, a great deal of overlap between being Kabirpanthi and being vegetarian.

The Kabirpanthis follow the teachings of the 16th century saint Kabir, who preached values of love, friendship and equality in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Kabir's compositions are replete with taunts against the privileged castes and calls to his followers to shun hierarchies. One of his couplets, that my Kabirpanthi interlocutors often recited to me to underscore Kabir's egalitarian teachings, was:

Akai pāt sakal baithāye, chhūti let dhown kaki

The English translation of the couplet would be along these lines: *All people are seated on the same earth. Who should then call another untouchable?* The reasons for the popularity of such egalitarian messages among members of a community stigmatised as untouchable is not far to seek. An ode by one of Kabir's disciples, Ravidas, to the fictitious city of Begumpura invites his audience to think about 'a regal realm with sorrowless name'. This realm, he claims, is achievable in the secular domain, not a spiritual afterlife (Omvedt, 2008). Ravidas' messages are followed closely by another Dalit community which has historically been labelled as Chamar, but who now consciously fashion their collective identity as Raidasis. Latter-day social activists have celebrated Kabir's teachings for their humanism. For instance, the anti-caste ascetic Swami Achhutanand, active in Gangetic northern India during the early twentieth century, interpreted Kabir's thoughts to proclaim that "all human beings are equal...the feeling of high and low is an illusion" (cited Khare, 1984: 84).

My discussions with members of the Musahar community suggested that in a single ward of Sargana village, about 20 families of their community adhered to the Kabirpanthi sect, and its intellectual, social and dietary norms. In the entire Gram Panchayat, comprising ten wards, they estimated about 100 families of the Musahar community to be adherents of the Kabirpanthi sect. Added to that were the members of the Yadav, Kevat and Koeri communities who espoused the Kabirpanthi sect, and the number of Kabirpanthi families could be as high as 200, or between 8 to 10 per cent of the Gram Panchayat's population, which comprised 2500 households. As Kabirpanthis, they were enjoined to wear a locket with a single bead of basil (*tulsi*) wood. They organised *kathas* at different times of the year, to which preachers from other parts of India were invited to lecture about Kabir's key messages of love, equality and humanity. Although their collective identity as Kabirpanthi did not undermine their caste-specific communal identities (marriages among Kabirpanthis of different castes was unheard of, at least in Sargana village), it did provide members with the social possibilities of building cross-caste relationships.

A central tenet of the Kabirpanthi sect was to abstain from eating meat and drinking alcohol. David Lorenzen argues that such abstentions among Kabirpanthis "can legitimately be considered an example of *sanskritisation* in the direction of caste Hinduism" (1987: 267). Lorenzen bases his argument on the premise that the consumption of meat and alcohol are considered degrading and polluting by the Brahmans. Lorenzen infers from his premise that abstentions from meat and alcohol must, then, reflect an attempt to improve social status and seek respect from the Brahmans and other Savarna communities. He concludes that members

of Dalit and other communities stigmatised as ‘low caste’ have little option but to refrain from consuming meat and alcohol.

My interlocutors were puzzled when I explored their vegetarian and teetotaler practices in such terms. During my interview with Karpoori Rishi, a 57-year old Kabirpanthi, my initial question about his vegetarian practice elicited the response that as a Kabirpanthi, he was not allowed to destroy another life. His brother, 51-year old Shanichar Rishi, also Kabirpanthi, joined our conversation. When I probed further as to whether they and other Kabirpanthis were vegetarian because the “upper castes” were, they were amused. I report below an excerpt of our conversation.

IR: Are you vegetarians because the Upper Castes (*unchi jati*) are vegetarian?

SR and MR exchange glances, amused.

SR: Who told you they are vegetarian? You hang around with that Jha *jee* (a reference to a cadre of the local communist party, who surname was Jha, a Brahman surname). He is a Brahman. Is he vegetarian?

IR: No, but he is communist. Other Upper Castes are vegetarian.

MR: Who? No Brahman I know is vegetarian. They may say they are. But if you give them a piece of meat, they will gobble it up (gesturing with his hands to his mouth).

IR: But other Upper Castes?

SR snaps: Why do you keep calling them Upper Castes? What is this language of high and low? Are we not all equal?

[MR intervenes, and they discuss something in Thaiti before returning to our discussion.]

MR: None of them is vegetarian. The Rajputs. They all eat meat. Yes, if they are poor, they can’t afford it. But I have seen them eat meat during feasts.

SR: And people of your community (alluding to my being Kayasth, which was known to them). Have you asked if they are vegetarian? That doctor whose son works for you (he was referring to the father of one of my twenty-two surveyors). He is vegetarian on Tuesdays. What changes on Tuesdays I do not know. Then, [someone else] is vegetarian on Thursday: a different sun emerges on Thursday, *jee*? [An old landlord who had an ongoing dispute with his Santhal sharecroppers, with whom my interlocutors were friendly] is vegetarian because he has ulcers (chortles). Other than these exceptions, every Kayasth I know eats meat whenever they can.

MR: We have nothing against people who eat meat. Our own people, not from our sampraday (referring to Musahars who were not Kabirpanthi) also eat fowl and fish sometimes. Sometimes, they even eat the pork their Dom neighbours cook for them. They don’t tell us, but we know. But we are vegetarian. Because Saheb (a term of endearment for Kabir) says so.

SR: Saheb told us to respect life.

IR: The Shastras also say that we should respect life (I realised later that I had no evidence to back this claim).

MR: We are illiterate people. We don’t know what’s written in the Shastras. [Some discussion on what I meant by the Shastras].

SR: We follow Saheb. Saheb told us to treat life with respect. He told us that we are equal. That’s what we are trying to do.

The perspective that clearly emerges from the above excerpt is that Kabirpanthi Musahars did not consider their vegetarian diets as emulating the Savarna communities for the simple fact that not many of the Savarnas they knew were vegetarian! In fact, the Brahmins, Rajputs and Kayasths they knew were all voracious meat-eaters, as I had ample occasion to view during my field work. It follows then that their espousal of vegetarian practices had little to do with imitating the practices of those at or near the apex of the ritual hierarchy. If indeed they had sought to emulate the Rajputs and the Kayasths, they are more likely to have espoused the consumption of meat and alcohol than eschewing it. While reflecting on the vegetarian dietary practices of the Kabirpanthi Musahars, many other interlocutors, Musahars who were neither Kabirpanthi nor vegetarian endorsed the view that abstention from meat and alcohol were indeed anchored in sectarian practices than following from a desire to imitate anybody else. They laughed off the suggestion that their compatriots were mimicking members of the Savarna communities. As cadres of a local communist party, their interpretation was that the Kabirpanthis were emphasising their *difference* vis-à-vis the dominant classes. Although they scoffed at the Kabirpanthis' aloofness from the collective struggles launched by the communist party from time to time, even they did not fault the Kabirpanthis of consenting with the values and norms of the dominant classes.

Given the perspectives offered by my Musahar interlocutors, both Kabirpanthi and others, it is difficult to support Lorenzen's (1987) contention that their dietary practices reflect Sanskritisation. The perspective of Sanskritisation privileges the values and norms of the privileged castes and the dominant classes in explaining processes of social change among subaltern groups. Such privileging ignores the possibility that subaltern populations do not necessarily share the values and norms of their oppressors, even if their practices might sometimes converge with practices associated with those of their oppressors. In fact, from the afore-mentioned account provided by Kabirpanthi Musahars of their vegetarian practices, the proposition that they were emulating, imitating or mimicking the norms and values of the Savarna communities becomes even less sustainable.

Negotiating Hindutva: The one formation that has been particularly perceptive of the ways in which members of the Musahar community seek to have their claims to dignity and recognition accepted by others in society is the Hindu Right. Activists and ideologues of Hindu Rightist organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) do so in a blatant attempt to appropriate the struggles waged by the members of the Musahar community against economic exploitation and social discrimination. An exponent of the RSS in northern Bihar, a professor of physics and an amateur historian, told me quite matter-of-factly in English during my interview of him:

What do the untouchables want? They want dignity. The only people who can give them that are the ones who have treated them as untouchables all these years. They don't want separate treatment. Rather, they want to be treated like everyone else. They want Hindus to recognise them as Hindus.

Analysts suggest that the Hindu Right owes its success to its successful mobilization of members of marginalized communities who seek respect and honour from other members of society (Narayan, 2009; Gudavarthy, 2014). The apparently universal message of the Hindu Right, aimed at creating a homogenous Hindu monolith where distinctions based on caste

would be obliterated, appeals- it seems- to voters from these communities. The unprecedented electoral success in Bihar of the political front of the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the national elections of 2014, appears to lend credence to this argument.

There is much to be said about the appeal of this message to members of Dalit and other communities stigmatized for centuries as 'low caste'. Given the importance that notions of social dignity and recognition hold for my interlocutors in Bihar, it might be expected that such messages of inclusiveness would be welcomed enthusiastically by the Musahars. Many of my Musahar interlocutors told me of the routine visits to their hamlets by RSS volunteers and functionaries and of the manner in which they would sit with them, ask for *chai*, chat about life and work, and ask if they faced any problems. The work of these volunteers and functionaries was supported by local organisers, who maintained regular contact with the residents of the hamlets where Musahars lived. My Musahar interlocutors were full of praise for one such local organiser, Dharmesh Srivastava, of the Kayasth community. His brother and sister-in-law were BJP politicians. The BJP had been a partner of the coalition government that ruled the State till the party's exit in September 2013 following a bitter political disagreement with the leading party, the Janata Dal (United). Access to the BJP added to the credibility of Dharmesh Srivastava.

My Musahar interlocutors commended him as being a fair and just arbitrator: they could count on him if they ever had a dispute either with one another or if one of them had a dispute with a member of another community. He had been instrumental in exposing several corrupt practices that plagued the implementation of welfare schemes, especially the operation of the public distribution system (PDS) for providing subsidized food for the poor, the disbursement of social security schemes and the identification of beneficiaries for social protection programs. I gained the opportunity to know Dharmesh Srivastava quite closely during my fieldwork. He was not particularly religious, and rarely attended the numerous observances of different communities that were held from time to time. But he vigorously defended the commemoration by the Musahars of their community heroes, the legendary brothers Dina and Bhadri. As he explained,

Look, you have to understand. We have so many festivals and so many deities. But all are manifestations of the same god, are they not? You know that part of the Bhagvad Gita, where Bhagwan Krishna says- no matter who you worship, you worship me. So, worship is good because they are all worshipping manifestations of the same Lord Vishnu [One of the three primeval deities in Hindu mythology]. The Buddha is an avatar [incarnation] of Vishnu, so we worship him. Dina and Bhadri are avatars [incarnations] of Ram and Krishna [protagonists of the epic Ramayana], so we worship them. Why, even the Muslims are Mohamadiya Hindus, Hindus who believe in the teachings of the prophet Mohammed! And the Christians- they are really Masihi Hindus for whom the words of Isu Masih [Hindi for Jesus Christ].

In propounding an essential origin for all the deities worshipped or celebrated in the locality, Dharmesh Srivastava was of course relaying the well-established position among ideologues of the Hindu Right that every Indian was fundamentally Hindu. His thesis that Dina and Bhadri ought to be worshipped because they were incarnations of Ram and Lakshman, the two main male protagonists in the Ramayana epic, represents an explicit attempt to co-opt the

deities into a specific view of Hinduism that privilege certain interpretations over others. Badri Narayan (2009) tells us that the RSS in the neighboring State of Uttar Pradesh projects the brothers as incarnations of the Ramayana protagonists.

As might be expected, this thesis was the subject of intense scrutiny among the Musahars in my fieldwork locality. While some members of the community, perhaps under the influence of the RSS, did indeed accept the view that the brothers were incarnations, or manifestations of the mythological characters Rama and Lakshmana others found this view completely unacceptable. The appropriation of the legacy of Dina and Bhadri within the interpretive framework of the characters from the Ramayana serves to make this epic commonplace to the religious practices of members of the Musahar community. Such appropriation seeks to establish the Ramayana as the point of reference for the cultural and religious practices of the Musahars. More insidiously, it downgrades the significance of Dina and Bhadri within the interpretive framework of the Musahar community and tries to configure them as derivatives of more 'originary' - and therefore, more significant, deities, such as Rama and Lakshmana. The consequence is the absorption of the Musahars' religious beliefs and cultural practices within the rubric of a Hinduism that is sanctioned by elites of privileged castes. This interpretation appeared to have been accepted by individuals neither directly affiliated with the RSS nor related to any of the RSS activists. Some of these individuals confidently attested to the theory that Dina and Bhadri were "in fact" (*asal mein*) incarnations of the Ramayana brothers, while others proposed that they might have been incarnations of Rama's sons Lava and Kusha.

At the same time, such an interpretation was forcefully challenged by others in the community. These individuals were vehement in their rejection of what *they* described as the RSS chicanery (*chhal*). They invoked the apparently supernatural powers of the brothers in healing, in fulfilling wishes and fixing problems to claim that the mythical brothers surpassed the Ramayana protagonists in their capabilities. In doing so, they refused to accept the thesis that the two brothers were incarnations, manifestations or embodiments of putatively divine beings: the two brothers were, in their view, divine beings in their own right. Of course, they staunchly affirmed that they were Hindu, and proudly claimed that not one of the two million Musahars in the State had converted to other faiths despite their poverty and despite the material inducements they claimed were offered to them from time to time by missionaries of these faiths. But, even as they affirmed their being Hindu, they refused to be relegated to a subordinate position within it.

This disagreement was reflected in the dissonance between the narratives offered by the RSS sympathizers and my Musahar interlocutors over the collective description of the Musahars. My RSS interviewees, including Dharmesh Srivastava, routinely and unhesitatingly referred to the Musahars as a *jati* or caste, sometimes using the English term to reiterate the point. The physics professor I referred to earlier did not think twice before using the term 'untouchable' to refer to the Musahars, Ravidasis and Dusadhs. The use of the vocabularies of 'caste' and 'untouchability' indicates that they implicitly uphold and accept the notion of a hierarchical system where members of different castes were divinely ordained to perform different duties. On the other hand, my interlocutors from the Musahar community in the study locality as

well as other prominent individuals and activists of the community with whom I met elsewhere in the State insisted on referring to themselves as members of a community (*samaj*). I commonly heard references such as “in our *samaj*, we believe that...” or “our *samaj* has been oppressed for centuries” or “people of our *samaj* are very hardworking”. The collective selves that my Musahar interlocutors sought to project reflected the image of an organic community rather than that of a caste in a hierarchically segmented system.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the RSS prominently backed Hindu Rightist parties such as the BJP and helped them secure massive electoral victories in the State. Preliminary studies of electoral behavior reveal significant support for the Hindu Right among communities historically stigmatized by elites of privileged castes as ‘low caste’ and ‘untouchable’. These analyses appeared to corroborate the claims of BJP leaders that they secured the electoral support of individuals from different castes, creeds and religions. More important, they appear to bolster assertions made by many observers, this author included (Desai and Roy, 2013; Varghese, 2014), that the BJP successfully recruited members of the so-called ‘low caste’ and ‘untouchable’ communities as voters by dangling before them the carrots of dignity and social equality. The crafting of a monolithic Hinduism constructs a homogenous political identity. This singular identity apparently eliminates caste-based distinctions and thus offers a vision of social equality that places members of these communities at least notionally at par with other Hindus.

However, the ambivalences and dilemmas vis-à-vis the discourses propagated by the Hindu Right that I have noted above compel us to reconsider applying these tempting formulations unquestioningly across the board. Follow-up interviews in July 2014, *after* the declaration of election results, with my interlocutors from 2010 reveal the analytical perils of conflating their claims to social dignity and cultural recognition with a desire for absorption into a Hindu Rightist project. Members of the Musahar community in the study locality explicitly stated that they had *not* voted for the BJP despite the apparently huge wave in the party’s favor. Their accounts were corroborated by Dharmesh Srivastava’s bitterness about the lack of electoral support to the BJP from the residents of the Musahar hamlets. “After all that I have done for them,” he rued. Musahar activists I met in Patna conceded that some Musahars might have cast their vote for the local BJP candidate, but it was inaccurate to claim, as was being done, by commentators, that the community had swung in their support to the BJP. Thus, while no member of the Musahar community actively negated their Hindu identity, they did not feel that the RSS’ views on their position within Hinduism merited wholesale political support.

A closer analysis of the electoral data compels us to be circumspect about narratives of a ‘rightward shift’ in Dalit politics in the first place. The National Election Survey data for the State of Bihar, published in *The Hindu* correctly identifies the polarisation of the Savarnas in favour of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The data presented in Table 1 below conveys the fact that the NDA was the preferred political vehicle for the Savarna communities. The data also reveals that no other political formation was able to count upon ‘vote banks’ the way the NDA could. In the absence of previous data with which to compare

(since the BJP and the JDU were alliance partners and contested elections together), allegations of saffronisation against entire Dalit communities do not hold much water.

Table 1: Caste composition of the vote share to different political formations during the Lok Sabha elections, Bihar

	Savarna	Yadav	Kurmi + Koeri	Other OBC	Dusadh	Mahadalit	Muslim
BJP+	78	19	26	53	68	33	2
RJD+	5	64	15	10	10	10	64
JDU+	8	12	30	18	6	25	21

Source: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/bihar-interpreting-the-massive-mandate/article6037680.ece>

The table makes explicit the extent to which the overwhelming electoral support of the Savarna communities, rather than the fragmented support of the Sudra and Dalit communities, propelled the BJP and its allies to victory in Bihar. The centrality of the Savarna population to electoral outcomes can be gauged by their proportion to the population, as gleaned from Robins' (2009) analysis of data from the 1931 census, presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Caste composition of Bihar and its two main geographic regions

	Savarna	Yadav	Kurmi + Koeri	Other OBC	Dusadh	Mahadalit	Muslim
North	16	24	9	23	6	11	20
South	20	27	11	21	6	15	11
Total	18	25	10	22	6	13	17

Source: Robins, 2009: 67-68

Reading the two tables together, it is evident that the Savarnas, who comprise nearly a fifth of the State's population, provide the core of the BJP's support. The electoral support by two-thirds of the Dusadhs, the State's largest Dalit community, may be accounted for to the inclusion of Ram Vilas Paswan, a prominent Dalit leader, in the NDA. The backing from the 'other OBCs', the vast majority of whom are classified in Bihar as Extremely Backward Class (EBC), may be attributed to the BJP's caste-specific appeals showcasing its Prime Ministerial candidate's humble caste origins (Roy, 2014). To infer from such personality-centred political choices that members of entire communities are marching into the welcoming arms of Hindutva might be premature. This is not to say that the RSS and other proponents of Hindutva are not trying to woo over Dalit communities, including the Musahars, into their fold. They are. But they have not been very successful, as my discussions noted earlier in this section and the data presented above, illustrate.

The 2015 legislative assembly elections exposed the hollowness of the Sanskritisation thesis particularly in regard to the Sudra communities. The election results laid bare the cleavage between the Savarnas and Sudras, driven as they were by Lalu Prasad Yadav's clarion call during the campaign that the polls were a *ladai* (fight) between the *Backwards* and the *Forwards*. The elections pit the National Democratic Alliance led by the BJP against the

Mahagathbandan or Grand Alliance, between Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD, Nitish Kumar's JD(U) and the Congress Party. Yadav famously took on the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat when the latter suggested that India's policy of protective discrimination for historically oppressed communities be reviewed⁴. Campaigning with a copy of the book *A bunch of thoughts* authored by MS Golwalkar, supremo of the RSS between 1940 and 1973, Yadav directed attention to its caste-supremacist insinuations and dared the BJP to disown its own ideological mentor⁵. When the counting revealed that the Grand Alliance had trounced the BJP-led coalition, Yadav tweeted: "Bihar's poor, oppressed and Dalit-Backwards have provided a new and agreeable turn to the country's politics." A better illustration of Kancha Ilaiah's formulation of Dalitbahujan difference is difficult to obtain.

North Bihar in comparative perspective

How much is any of this to do with the peculiar political geography of northeastern Bihar. Situated astride the mighty and fickle Kosi, the landscape of the region is highly unstable. The region represents one of the later agricultural frontiers of the Mughal Empire. The process of sedentrisation and peasantry entailed the recruitment of agricultural labor in large numbers in order to cultivate what continued to remain an inhospitable terrain till the beginning of the twentieth century. Such processes of recruitment resulted in the settlement of diverse labouring communities in the region, including not only the Musahars but also Santhals and Raiyeen Muslims. Could it be said that the presence of Santhals and Raiyeen Muslims, communities that have affirmed their separate collective identities vis-à-vis Savarna Hindus, enabled the Musahars to do so as well? Might it be possible that their presence enables the area's Musahars to interpret their social and political practices in endogenous terms rather than reading them off the practices of the Savarna communities? A broader question pertains to the generalisability of the material presented in the above section. An answer to this question entails directing some attention to the scholarship on processes of social and political change elsewhere in India. In this section, I want to draw on ethnographies and fieldwork conducted by other scholars in southern Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu to highlight the resonances between the material presented above with findings from elsewhere.

South Bihar: George Kunnath's (2012) powerful ethnography, titled *Rebels from the Mud Houses: Dalits and the Making of the Maoist Revolution in Bihar*, conducted among Musahars in the Jehanabad district of south Bihar provides fascinating insights into the continuities and change that mark their lives. Dalits comprise nearly a fifth of Jehanabad's population and the Ravidasi element in it is quite large. Kunnath's work focuses on the ways in which members of the Musahar and other Dalit communities negotiate with, and constitute, Bihar's Maoist revolution during the 1980s and 1990s. His book is based on in-depth interviews with activists, charting their life histories as well as participant observations.

⁴ See report here: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/lalu-dares-bjp-rss-to-end-reservation-for-dalits-backwards/1/479020.html>, last accessed December 4, 2016

⁵Yadav interview with journalist Barkha Dutt, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zW_HB_HdXUw, last accessed December 4, 2016

Among the several facets of social life that Kunnath observes is his interlocutors' affiliation with the Kabirpanthi sect and their vegetarian and teetotaler practices (2012: 151-154). He first notes Lorenzen's observations about the vegetarian practices of the Kabirpanthis and their putative derivation from the Savarna Hindu abhorrence of meat and alcohol. Thereafter, he puts forward to one of his Kabirpanthi interlocutors of the Ravidasi (sometimes also called Chamar) the proposition that they, the Kabirpanthis, were abstaining from meat and alcohol in imitation of the Savarna Hindu dietary practices. Kunnath is candid about his interlocutor's rejection of such an idea. It bears quoting Kunnath's interlocutor in full:

The Kabir-panth's prohibition of meat and alcohol has nothing to do with imitating the upper castes. In fact, these days more people from the upper castes eat meat and drink daaru (alcohol) than the Dalits do. We do not eat meat because we do not want to destroy another life. We respect all life (Kunnath, 2012: 153).

Kunnath's Ravidasi interlocutor is clear that as Kabirpanthis they refrain from eating meat or drinking alcohol not to emulate the Savarnas, but to follow the tenets of their own sect. In this sense, his account resonates with the perspective offered by my Musahar discussants noted above. Kunnath's own analysis, however, analyses his interlocutors' practices in terms of their aspirations for higher status and respect in a caste society. In this regard, he tells us, Dalits' espousal of vegetarianism and abstention from alcohol "seemed to serve as a badge of identity that distinguishes them from other members of their own caste as those seeking a higher status in the caste hierarchy" (Kunnath, 2012: 154).

My analysis of my own fieldwork and of the ethnographic material provided in *Rebels from the Mud Houses* leads me to a different conclusion. A consideration of the ways in which Kabir's teachings and membership in the Kabirpanthi sect has enabled adherents to interrogate the hierarchies stemming from caste differences is important. It would be incorrect, in my view, to interpret the adoption of the Kabirpanthi tenets as evidence of conforming to the caste hierarchy and the dietary practices privileged therein. The Kabirpanthi sect is resolutely against the perpetuation of caste hierarchies. In the context of my interlocutors' following of the Kabirpanthi sect and their blunt refusal to endorse the vocabulary of caste hierarchy, their defence of a vegetarian diet requires careful scrutiny. Indeed, their adoption of a vegetarian diet reflects an adherence to a sect known for repudiating caste hierarchies rather than seeking to improve one's status within it.

Tamil Nadu: Judith Heyer's (2014) study, which explores the ways in which Dalit women are 'becoming housewives', takes us to Tamil Nadu's Tiruppur region. Her paper, published in the edited volume titled *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalisation?*, provides readers with useful insights into the continuities and changes that mark the lives of Dalit men and women in a region whose economic engines shifted from commercialised agriculture to the emergence of small-scale industrialisation centred on knitwear manufacturing. Heyer's work focuses on the participation of Dalit women in labour markets between 1981 and 2009. She relies on sample surveys, which elicit information about social and economic characteristics, primarily participation in labour activities. In 1981, very few Dalit women described themselves as 'staying at home', indicating the sheer drudgery of their lives for Heyer. By 2009, as much as 35 per cent of her survey respondents reported 'staying at home'.

Whereas in 1981, the overwhelming majority of Dalit women worked as agricultural laborers, by 2008-9, a much smaller minority did. A number of Dalit women found employment in the emerging knitwear sector.

Heyer notes that the ‘domestic work’ which women now performed had become easier in many respects. Water is plentiful. Many families have access to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and use mixi grinders instead of the manual stone pestle and slabs. Tamil Nadu’s universalised PDS network supplies subsidised food to all households. Fertility rates have declined too, indicating less childcare commitments. For Dalit women, this represents a major change from 1981 when a majority of them worked as agricultural laborers, taking off virtually no time during pregnancy, childbirth or to provide childcare. Their domestic responsibilities were immense, fetching water and firewood, purchasing food, and cooking and cleaning. The time and effort required in these activities has now declined.

How do we analyse these changes? Heyer takes the position that “Dalit women’s withdrawal from paid work at crucial stages in their lives is a positive step given the poor quality of paid work available to them”. Her stance problematizes not only the position taken in much of the feminist literature that posits that a withdrawal from paid work is generally detrimental to women, but also calls in question the proposition that Dalit women who withdraw from the labour force do so in emulation of the practices of the Savarna Hindus.

To be sure, labour force participation of all women in Heyer’s study declined during the period from 1996 to 2008/ 2009. For Dalit women, their participation declined from 56% to 48%, while for other women, the decline was from 52% to 37%. Although the participation of Dalit women in the labour force outstripped that of others, there is little doubt that labour force participation rates followed the same general direction- that of a decline. Could we infer, as a Sanskritisation lens would have us believe, that Dalit women are emulating women from the privileged castes in withdrawing from the labour market?

Heyer does not take a position on this question. But the evidence she presents, a snapshot of which is presented above, should caution analysts against applying the optic of Sanskritisation. Given the economic drudgeries faced by Dalit women during the 1980s, and the subsequent changes in the availability of consumer products that reduced their hardships *as well as* the implementation of public policy that have reduced their vulnerabilities, it is difficult to explain the changes under the rubric of Sanskritisation. Heyer presciently notes the quality of the work available in the labour market as a key factor which may be used to analyse the nature of change. As she observes:

If the work that women do outside the household is arduous, involves long hours and low pay, and involves relationships with employees that are exploitative in other ways too, women can be more empowered, more autonomous without it than with it (Heyer, 2012: 210)

My analysis of the ethnographic material presented above leads me to concur with Heyer’s position. Given the oppressive relationships that mark the agricultural labor markets in north Bihar, Musahar women’s withdrawal from it as soon as they get an opportunity to do so needs to be analysed in its own right than be read off as derivative of Savarna Hindu practices. If Musahar women can reduce the daily drudgery of their lives by withdrawing

from oppressive labour markets, there is no reason for analysts to insist on applying the lens of Sanskritisation. Where sexual exploitation is a quotidian aspect of labour relations, Musahar women ceasing their contribution to cropping operations is an important way for them to safeguard their dignity. Their exit from the agricultural labour market represents a means of repudiating the hierarchies that lie at the heart of caste differences, not its perpetuation.

Andhra Pradesh: Through her detailed ethnography of social change in an Andhra Pradesh village she calls Namapalli, Clarinda Still (2014)'s monograph *Dalit Women, Honor and Patriarchy in South India* explores social mobility among Dalits. In her monograph, Still tells us of the ways in which the complex of prestige, honour and respect helps Dalits to negotiate their social status and the impact their espousal of such notions has on women. Still examines this complex under the rubric of *paruvu-pratishta gowravam*, which she defines as "a constellation of embodied, appropriated values which shape actions and aspirations in everyday life" (Still, 2014: xx). The meanings of these values and their manifestations in the everyday lives of Dalits is her primary concern in the monograph.

Still's ethnography alerts her to two quite contradictory processes at work. On the one hand, she notes that in subscribing to the notion of *paruvu-pratishta-gauravam*, Dalit men and women subscribe to dominant social values. On the other hand, they change the very nature of *paruvu-pratishta-gauravam*. In accepting and appropriating the constellation of values inhering in *paruvu-pratishta-gauravam*, Still suggests, Dalits transform these values as well. They 'Dalitise', and here Still draws on Kancha Ilaiah's (2010) formulation, the notion of *paruvu-pratishta-gowravam*. Privileged castes such as Brahmans and Kammas do not constitute the focus for emulation at all in relation to the idea of *paruvu-pratishta-gowravam*. Rather, it is affluent, middle-class Dalits, who are often Christians, who upwardly mobile Dalits tend to emulate. As she observes,

Indeed, in many respects, Dalits do not look up to the Kammas and Brahmans at all; they ridicule Hindu rituals, upper-caste customs and the perceived Kamma and Brahman characteristics of greed, cruelty, laziness and corruption. (Still, 2014: xx)

Still's sensitive ethnography explains that several of the changes in gender relations among women might appear conservative. Explaining why this might be the case, directing attention to routine sexual humiliation of Dalit women at the hands of the privileged castes. Because Dalit women's collective identities continue to be foregrounded as workers rather than wives and because the organisation of gender relations among them remain different as compared with among other communities, such distinctions now appear as shameful to Dalit men and the cause of the demeaning social position to which they are relegated. The continued poverty among many Dalits makes *paruvu-pratishta-gowravam*- in the conventional sense of property, possessions and cash- difficult to access. They therefore seek alternative arenas to assert their prestige, honour and status, one arena being in the arena of gender relations.

What is interesting from Still's ethnography for our purpose is her analysis of the changing practices among upwardly mobile Dalits as reflecting not so much their imitating of Savarna

practices but the practices of middle class Dalits. In this respect, her work provides a very specific instance of the Dalitisation process which Ilaiah (2010) urges analysts to take seriously. My own analysis of the ethnographic data presented earlier departs from Still's on several counts, not least because the people to whom I spoke did not evidently possess a Musahar middle class who they could emulate. Nevertheless, Still's study, by drawing on Ilaiah's insightful work, offers us a glimpse into the varieties of pathways to upward social mobility rather than uncritically applying the lens of Sanskritisation.

Conclusions: Towards contentious change

Before closing, I do want to direct attention to a fascinating exchange to which I was witness during my fieldwork. This account should alert readers to the similarities between the processes discussed by Still across the contexts of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. One of the young men I hung out with was a functionary of a community association called the Musahar Seva Sangh (MSS, no affiliate of the RSS from what I could gather, not at least up until July 2014). I have described the activities of this organisation elsewhere (Roy, 2013; Roy, 2015). Like others in the association, he believed that the one malaise from which his community members suffered was their lack of "discipline" (his words, in English). As an example, he referred to the alleged indiscipline among Musahar women in their public conduct. According to him, they spoke out of turn, without any inhibitions and without any decorum, according to him. In his words:

Just look at the ladies [the word he used was mahila, a more respectable term than the more colloquially used aurat, which might translate to 'woman']. They can't speak a word of Hindi, but they insist on talking to you. If I or anyone else tells them to keep shut, they will never do so. In order to have a public conversation, you must have people who are calm, reasoned and thoughtful. Do you think women [he used the term aurat now] have any of these qualities? Look at the Dhobhis and the Paswans. Just look at the way their women speak. They are educated, they do not speak such coarse language. And they speak when there is a need to, not poking their nose into all kinds of affairs. But our women- they refuse to listen. And their husbands- they refuse to control them.

However, as my interlocutor was no doubt aware, the notion that women must adhere to disciplinary codes established by men and act subservient to them in public was extremely contentious. Given my inability to converse in the languages used by Musahar women, I was unable to gather first-hand accounts of their interpretation of the situation. But even among the men, there was little unanimity on the worthiness of such an idea. Most elderly men were plainly unable to fathom the reason for the activists' insistence on 'disciplining' women. Younger men were sharply divided over this matter. Those with some education and affiliations with the MSS revealed quite specific anxieties about how 'their' women were perceived by men from other communities and were bitter about the stereotypes attached to them. As I have mentioned, I was witness to the expressed perception among the men of the privileged castes that Musahar women were promiscuous and possessed unbridled sexuality. It was ostensibly to dissipate these views and to 'protect' Musahar women that MSS activists sought to inculcate social discipline among them and urged them to be more reasoned in public. On the other hand, men with little or no education, especially those who migrated periodically, displayed far less anxiety over the issue of 'controlling' their wives. It was these men who were frequent targets of ridicule for the activists such as the MSS functionary, my

interlocutor. He continued his diatribe against these husbands - and their wives, alleging that they cared more for themselves rather than for the honor of their community and compromised the dignity of their members. Reacting to one such provocation, in my presence, one of these targets, 29-year old Shanichar Rishi, said:

*Mother Chandi has made us all. Who are you to tell us which one should speak and which one should not? There is no difference between you and those motherf*****s [pointing to the residences of the Rajputs].*

The exchanges revealed to me the ways in which some men from the Musahars sought to reduce the difference between themselves and the privileged castes by placing restrictions on women's public and household practices. In doing so, they seemed to be emulating members of other Dalit communities, such as Dusadhs and Dhobhis who had been able to avail of state-sponsored educational opportunities and taken up salaried employment in public schools and government offices in nearby towns. The practices the Musahar men wanted their women to imitate pertained to what they believed to be reasoned public deliberations, that too conducted in Hindi.

However, other men rejected such attempts. They did not believe that their wives, sisters and daughters needed to be controlled, perhaps in recognition of their own long periods of absence from the village while they were earning their livelihoods. If Still's prediction holds, Shanichar Rishi's oppositions to the project of circumscribing Musahar women's practices are destined to fail. But in the meantime, it is important for analysts to record the oppositions and interruptions to this agenda. As important as the contentious nature of these changes is to note that they were impelled not so much by a desire to mimic the practices of the privileged castes but those of the salaried members of other Dalit communities who had secured public sector employment in positions that did not require manual work.

This paper first outlined the debates over the ways in which the Sanskritisation thesis has been applied to studying social change among Dalit communities. I next took readers through a discussion of socio-political changes experienced by members of north Bihar's Musahar community, all the while directing attention to their interpretations of the change. I considered the growing incidence of Musahar women selectively withdrawing from local labour markets, vegetarianism and support to Hindu nationalist political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although these changes appeared to indicate a convergence with social and political practices of the privileged castes, my interlocutors from among the Musahar community did not perceive them to be imitative. Before closing, I referred to ethnographic work conducted in south Bihar (Kunnath, 2012), Andhra Pradesh (Still, 2014), and Tamil Nadu (Heyer, 2014) that illuminates the complex relationship of Dalit communities with the values and norms of the privileged castes. Taken together, the argument offered in this paper underscores the limited utility of the notion of Sanskritisation in explaining socio-political change in contemporary India.

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