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LAND REDISTRIBUTION AND DALIT ASSERTION: MAPPING SOCIAL CHANGE IN GAYA, BIHAR, INDIA

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LAND REDISTRIBUTION AND DALIT ASSERTION: MAPPING SOCIAL CHANGE IN GAYA, BIHAR

BY

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DEDICATION

To my parents

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This dissertation uses social mapping in conjunction with ethnography to undertake a spatial analysis of the long-term effects of legal rights to redistributed land among Dalit communities in Bihar to reframe what land means to these communities and how it has transformed their immediate social landscape and subjectivities. It does so by assessing questions undergirding the long-term impact of the Bodh Gaya land struggle that for the first time in the history of social movements in South Asia resulted in primarily Dalit women securing joint land titles along with their husbands. How has ownership of redistributed land shaped Dalit subjectivities in rural South Bihar? What do the altered material and social conditions of Dalits tell us about the claims made by land-based social movements and the State? How have acquiring productive assets for Dalits, a historically marginalized population, altered what is referred to as the 'hidden apartheid' in rural India? In answering these questions, attention to social space is crucial, as little attention has been paid to the ways in which rural spatial segregation within the

village re-inscribes caste on a daily basis. First, the ownership of redistributed land has allowed for the emergence of a "politics of becoming" that actively opposes practices that perpetuate the social exclusion of Dalits. Through the actual control (kabza) over state owned land, previously under the control of the landed castes/elites, Dalits are effectively undermining the century old practices of kamiauti or servitude in the region and questioning old forms of caste mediated and gender relationships. Second, despite the mainstreaming of gender and land rights issues, the state bureaucracy continues to act as 'machines for the social production of indifference' toward the Dalit community. The 'bureaucratic phase' of the land struggle is characterized by prolonged inaction that has worked to not only intensify Dalit social suffering, but also has jeopardized the viability of peaceful forms of mobilization and resistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

My initial interest in the Bodhgaya land struggle of the late 1970s was driven by two main reasons: first, it took place in Bihar, and second, women, in particular, Dalits[1] (Ex-Untouchables), actively took part in the land struggle and successfully secured rights to redistributed agricultural land. These two key aspects of the Bodhgaya land struggle seemed very implausible at first and the discovery was a pleasant surprise for someone who self-identified as a Bihari. The implausibility was informed by an intimate understanding of the popular perception of Bihar in the national imagination and the secondary status of women in India when it comes to owning agricultural land. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 —amended only as recently as 2005—attempted to do away with gendered bias when it came to inheriting residential property and agricultural land.[2] Research meant to end with a paper I wrote for my Master's seminar class, therefore, ended up becoming the subject of inquiry of my doctoral study, as I wanted to document how procuring legal titles to land had, due to the Bodhgaya struggle, fundamentally altered women, and in particular, Dalit subjectivities, as well as

1 Dalit literally meaning, "broken" people, is a term used by rights activists to refer to "untouchables." They are referred to as Scheduled Castes in the government parlance and constituted of castes that are located at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Also see Anupama Rao. 2009. The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India, which details how India's Ex-untouchables have transformed themselves from stigmatized subjects into citizens of the postcolonial Indian nation-state.

2 Government of India, in 2005 passed an amendment to the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 that ensured that all Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain women have the same rights as their brothers to inherit residential property and agricultural land.

transformed the rural landscape in and around the villages where the struggle had—and/or continues to have—a strong hold.[3]

Contextualizing implausibility: A note on rural unrest in Bihar

The image of contemporary Bihar stands in sharp contrast to the image of ancient Bihar. While ancient Bihar is known for being a world center of knowledge, progress and the birthplace of world religions like Buddhism and Jainism, present-day Bihar often gets projected as a space/place that is mired in its feudal past, and until very recently, was viewed as the land of no opportunities—often justified by the vast numbers of Biharis across class-caste, who sought success and means of livelihood outside their own state.[4] Bihar is characterized as one of the poorest states in India and has had the dubious distinction of being the source of cheap, disposable, migrant labor. Bihar is also predominantly agrarian, with nearly 89 percent of the state's population living in villages and nearly a similar percentage of that population engaged in some form of agricultural pursuits. However, despite the predominance of agriculture in the state's economy and culture, and the long history of land struggles in the region, very little has been has done post-independence by the state to address the rural distress and strife that has deep-seated roots in the inequitable nature of land holding patterns. The powerful zamindars

[3] The fall 2005 seminar paper was titled, *A Gendered Approach to Land Rights: An Inquiry into what perpetuates the secondary status of women in postcolonial India*. Also, See, Bina Agarwal's Are we not Peasants too? Land Rights and women's claim in India, 2002, The Population council Inc. http://ccc.uchicago.edu/docs/AreWeNotPeasantsToo.pdf accessed December 2005.

[4] In mid-1980s, a special acronym, BIMARU, literally meaning sick, was coined to indicate the four most backward of the Indian states. The acronym was made using the first letters of the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (BIMARU).

(landlords) have been largely successful in undermining legislative efforts directed toward formulating and implementing redistributive land reform. Therefore, even though Bihar was one of the first states to propose the Zamindari Abolition Act in 1949, it was challenged in the High Court and Supreme Court by the landed elites, leading to its delay and undermining of its intended potential. Successive legislative efforts in the form of the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, and the Bihar Land Reforms Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land Act, 1961 (Bihar act, 12 of 1962), met similar fates as the powerful landed caste lobby that were/are deeply entrenched in the state machinery effectively stymied it.[5] The rise of grassroots mobilization and rural unrest from the late 1960s onward indicate that the facade of change that independence from colonial rule promised was diminishing, as it became abundantly clear that much of the state action was geared toward maintaining the political power and status quo of the landed elites. Bihar witnessed massive upheaval in the 1970s, as widespread unrest and the rise in several forms of resistances and mobilizations at the grassroots level gripped the state. The armed Naxalite movement was fast taking hold in the countryside, while massive anti-corruption demonstrations engulfed the cities in Bihar. The Bihar Movement started in late 1974 with student protests, but soon engulfed the disenchanted middle class, as dissenters took to the streets to express their discontent with the prevalence of corruption in everyday life. Although the student-led protests, ideologically helmed by veteran

[5] See Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar, by F. Tomasson Jannuzi, 1974 and The Republic of Bihar, Arvind N. Das, 1992.

Gandhian Socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan (popularly known as JP) soon turned against the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi (who responded by imposing emergency rule on 25th June, 1975)— it proved to be the genesis of the *Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* (CYSV or Sangharsh Vahini), a youth organization committed to realizing JP's goals of "total revolution"—entailing transformation of both self and society through 'peaceful' means.[6] Sangharsh Vahini activists caution that their emphasis on Bodhgaya struggle as a peaceful one should not be confused as a non-violent struggle, just because Ahimsa forms the core of non-violent struggle. "We understand our struggle as peaceful that in turn had scope for small incidents that are primarily taken in self-defense," explained Kaushal Ganesh Azad, a former Sangharsh Vahini activist. JP's idea of "total revolution" galvanized the youth from all over India, who came to view Bihar as a social laboratory where ideas and means to realize total revolution could be tried and tested. JP expressed his disillusionment with Marxism and the Sarvodaya movement, citing one relied greatly on violence, and the other too much on persuasion.[7]

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6 Often referred to as the dark period in the history of Indian democracy, the twenty-one-month period that ended on 21st March 1977 witnessed the suspension of civil liberties and the crackdown on grassroots mobilization, forcing leaders to go underground. JP has written about the need to have his own corps for total revolution as he became aware that there was a considerable size of the student population that was not affiliated with any organized political party; students affiliated with organized political parties were wary of giving up their identity and group interests for the ultimate goal of the movement, and lastly the party cadres, often selective in their approach, carried out only those policies that suited their political party interests. He formed the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (CYSV or Sangharsh Vahini) whose membership would be restricted to women and men within the age group of 14 to 30.

7 See, Total Revolution and Social Change: Long live Total Revolution, Jayaprakash Academy, 1980. The Bhoodan movement is part of the Sarvodaya movement. As the term denotes it relied on landed elites donating land for the landless and was said to be very successful in Bihar. Despite the critiques and limitations directed toward each of these three radically different grassroots mobilizations, they were primarily responsible for land redistribution in Bihar. They are: a) the communist struggle of which the Naxalite movement forms a part, b) the Sarvodaya movement of which Bhoodan forms an integral part and c) the socialist struggle embodied primarily through the Bodhgaya land struggle.

The history of the Bodhgaya Land struggle is therefore intertwined with the legacies of resistance and grassroots mobilization in Bihar. Alongside the armed Naxalite struggle, the Bodhgaya land struggle took hold in areas under the control of the powerful Bodh Gaya Math (Hindu Monastery). The youth who were at the forefront of the Bihar Movement took an active role in the Bodhgaya land struggle as well. Often referred to as JP's youth corps, Sangharsh Vahini activists were sworn to non-partisanship and assigned the task of forming labor organizations and movements such as Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS) and working in the alliance with it. The MKS formed during the Bodhgaya land struggle consisted predominantly of members of the Bhuiyan caste who were confined to serve as bonded slaves, locally referred to as Kamia, on the Math's land under the religiously institutionalized practice of Kamiauti. In the social hierarchy, the Bhuiyan caste is considered to be at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The Sangharsh Vahini effectively completed its activities with Bodh Gaya by 1987, following the Supreme Court order that the Math can have only a maximum of 75 acres of land in the name of deities and 25 acres of land in the name of *sevayat* (those serving the deities); and the remaining land under its control was to be distributed among the landless and agricultural laborers (Kelkar & Gala; 1990: 92). In addition, age restrictions on Sangharsh Vahini membership, along with a split in the organization on ideological lines that differed over what constituted acceptable funding sources, were cited as the prime reasons behind the CYSV dissipating in the region.[8] Old members had to relinquish their posts and move

[8] Membership in CYSV has an age restriction of 14 to 30 years.

out of the organizations, making way for new leadership and work areas being divided, that in turn led both to breaking up the organization in former areas and moving on to new areas in the region. Following JP's death on 8th October 1979, the lure of joining the CYSV dwindled among the youth, leading to diminishing enrollment numbers across the country. Former CYSV members, those who were part of the Bodhgaya land struggle, formed the Janmukti Sangharsh Vahini (JaSaVa) in December 1989, to ensure continuity of the ideals and works that they committed to under the CYSV and to their leader JP—who continues to be the ideological compass of the organization. Contemporary political leadership of Bihar—men such as Laloo Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and Sushil Kumar Modi— are all said to be products of the Bihar Movement and are credited with diluting the hegemony of the upper castes in the state.

Caste wars intensified in the decade of the 1990s with landed caste militias openly taking up the task of countering what was termed as the "red terror" by the state and the media—to describe the armed Naxalite movement that countered the upper and landed castes violence directed primarily towards Dalits.[9] The deep chasms of caste in rural Bihar and the nature of resistance to Dalit assertion can be gauged from rationale provided by Ranvir Sena, a private militia formed by Bihar's upper caste (Bhumihar and Rajput) in 1994 in the Bhojpur district, who claimed, "We kill children because they will grow up to become Naxalites. We kill women because they will give birth to

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[9] Bhatia, Bela, 1998. The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar. December 9. http://www.civilresistance.info/challenge/naxa, accessed November 14, 2014.

Naxalites."[10] As of 2015, the Patna High court has acquitted all those responsible for Dalit killings in five massacres; citing lack of evidence and remaining silent on the question of who did murder the Dalits in Bihar.[11]

The year 1990 also marked the beginning of the 15-year rule of Laloo Prasad Yadav's political party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). This was characterized both by the rise in assertion of the backward castes of Bihar—primarily the Yadavs that led to a relative democratization of the political, bureaucratic and social space in Bihar—but also a simultaneous rise in what has been termed the "jungle raj" (rule of the jungle) that witnessed a spike in crime and an increase in kidnapping and ransom throughout the state. Yadav's rule is primarily hailed for significantly undermining the upper caste control over the state and its affairs by forging a formidable alliance of the Yadavs and the minority Muslim community, indicated by the acronym MY. The crushing defeat of Yadav in the 2005 elections paved the way for the Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) party, who came to control state affairs on the platform of good governance; and has been credited with the positive upward swing in the states' image. At the time this

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[10] It unleashed a series of mass killings against Dalits and Naxal sympathisers.
See, http://www.thehindu.com/sunday-anchor/sunday-anchor-army-of-assassins/article7569720.ece.

[11] In January 2015, the court acquitted 24 accused in the Shankarbigha massacre case for lack of sufficient evidence against them. In 2012, the high court acquitted 23 accused of the Bathani Tola massacre of 1996 in which 21 Dalits were killed. On October 9, 2013, the Patna High Court acquitted 26 accused of the Lakshmanpur-Bathe massacre of 1997. On July 3, 2013, the high court acquitted nine of the ten accused in the Miyanpur massacre case of 2000 in which the Ranvir Sena men allegedly killed 32 people in Aurangabad. On March 1, 2013, the high court acquitted 11-convicted accused in the Nagari Bazaar massacre case in which 10 CPI-ML supporters, mostly Dalits, were killed in Bhojpur district in 1998. See, http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/no-one-killed-58-bihar-dalits-hc-acquits-all-accused/story-uCZZmxeiUgeOYbcXrJvd6O.html; http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/dalits-angry-bihar-court-acquits-24-accused-1999-massacre-case/1/413339.html

dissertation was being written, a coalition government formed by the parties of Nitish Kumar and Laloo Prasad Yadav control the state. Although the push for land rights for and to women have become a mainstay of development and electoral politics, ground realities suggest there is little or no progress made in realizing women's actual control over the land.

Secondary status of women: Mapping state anxiety through the 2005 amended Hindu Succession Act of 1956

The anxiety of the postcolonial Indian state in granting equal land rights to women can be understood through a close study of the proceedings that led to the passage of the Hindu Succession Act in 1956, which was amended in 2005, almost half a century later, to grant equal rights to Hindu women. Legal transformation, Srimati Basu (1999) states, is a better reflector than initiator of political or economic change. A similar observation can be made on the issue of land rights and women. In discussing the power of law on women in the 'new' nations, Basu notes that the laws that are most effective and successful are in sync with social changes, as opposed to laws established in the interest of greater redistributive justice. The complexity of this space for provisional empowerment is further complicated with relatively few women availing themselves of the rights guaranteed by the law. Basu observes that, in postcolonial nation-states like India, 'progressive social legislation' may be largely symbolic, especially when it comes to

altering roles and entitlement patterns within the family.'[12] In addition, law itself may be resistant to radical change and, may incorporate superficial changes only to reinforce hegemonic principles.[13] A look at the passage of the Hindu Code Bill, both pre- and post-1947, reveals the contradictions of the dominant discourse on women as well as

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[12] See. Srimati Basu (1999) She comes to take her rights: Women, Law and property in India.

13 Ibid. Pg. 11. In India, prior to the amendment of the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, laws governing women's agricultural land rights were separate from women's general legal rights regarding property. The segregation was primarily because of division of legislative powers between the state and the center under the principle of federalism in India. With respect to agricultural land-related enactments, the state government continued to hold considerable legislative powers. The Government of India Act in 1935 vested all legislative powers in relation to agricultural land exclusively in the state (provincial) legislatures leading to women's inheritance rights to be determined by personal law on all matters of property other than those relating to agricultural land. The government of India Act of 1935 allowed for agricultural land to come under the purview of the provincial (post-independence, known as state) legislatures. This act marginalized women, as the provision implied that women's inheritance rights would be governed by the rules of the particular state (province). Therefore, women's rights in agricultural land, varies by state, reflecting regional differences in social attitudes and legal approaches. The biases against women are stronger in North India than in South India. Also, Kerala is the only state that has social as well as legal laws that are relatively favorable to women. However; studies have shown that the matrilineal tradition in the state is being challenged to accommodate patriarchal demands. See, Kodoth Praveena and Mridul Eapen's (2005) Looking Beyond Gender Parity: Gender inequities of some dimensions of well-being in Kerala, wherein the authors suggest women's empowerment figures for Kerala may be misleading. They suggest that women's rights are slowing eroding given the rise in violence against women. Also, See Bina Agarwal (1994) A field of one's own: Gender and Land rights in South Asia. Pg. 249-291. The regional variation as well as contradiction in securing equal rights for women is further reflected in statements put forth by the Law commission's in its report on, "Property Rights of Women: Proposed Reform under the Hindu Law (May 2000), "Notwithstanding these constitutional mandates/directives13 (Articles 14, 15(2) and (3) and 16 of the Constitution of India not only inhibit discrimination against women but in appropriate circumstances provide a free hand to the State to provide protective discrimination in favor of women. These provisions are part of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Part IV of the Constitution contains the Directive Principles which are no less fundamental in the governance of the State and inter-alia also provide that the State shall endeavor to ensure equality between man and woman. See, Law Commission of India, 174th report on "Property Rights of Women: Proposed Reforms under the Hindu Law" (May 2006), given more than fifty years ago, a woman is still neglected in her own natal family as well as in the family she marries into because of blatant disregard and unjustified violation of these provisions by some of the personal laws." (As quoted in the, Law Commission of India, 174th report on "Property Rights of Women: Proposed Reforms under the Hindu Law" May 2006.) Also, land reform policies have been based both on principles of redistributive justice and arguments of efficiency of land use. Agarwal details the reluctance of administrative officials to register and/or allocate land in the name of women. Land titles are usually given to the male head of the family or to the eldest living son. Also, Sangharsh Vahini activists detail the difficulties they faced in getting the state to recognize women as equally entitled to independently holding redistributed land. The lack of large-scale gender disaggregated data on land rights and control over resources reflects the governmental apathy in looking into the structural inequities that relegate women to a secondary status and perpetuate gender inequities. In addition, the presence of only female members of parliament and only a single male member at a discussion on women's right to property in the upper house (the Rajya Shabha) showcases members' commitment and lack of political will to create gender equities. The presence in the house was extremely low, according to a report in the national Daily. See- 'The Hindu' Wednesday, Aug. 17, 2005 Equal rights for women in parental property accessed on June 30, 2006 http://www.hindu.com/2005/08/17/stories/2005081705461200.htm.

secularism in India, which in turn impacted women's right to inherit ancestral land.[14] The Hindu Code Bill, formed as a result of efforts to understand the effect of various personal laws on women in 1939, was met with much resistance. While in colonial India its codification was strongly contested, post-independence the issue of Hindu Law reforms gained prominence, as well as opposition to it from staunch majority members. Thus, the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, also hailed as the benchmark legislation that gives Hindu women equitable if not superior entitlements as legal subjects, bears scrutiny. India's first President, Rajendra Prasad,[15] expressed his unequivocal opposition to the Hindu Code Bill, stating that he would not sign the bill in case the legislation was passed in both houses of parliament, an act that would have precipitated a constitutional crisis. Apprehensions for those against granting women equal rights in ancestral property was reflected in the comments made by M. A. Ayyargar, who stated, "May God save us from having an army of unmarried women."[16] Maitrayee Chaudhuri posits that the willingness to grant franchise rights to women and the relentless opposition to granting rights of inheritance and succession to women is reflective of what constitutes the public and the private in social life. Gender equity in economic terms, it was argued, would have fundamentally challenged the stability of the family (Thapar 2000). The right to family property challenges the traditional authority structure within the family and is perceived as a direct affront to patriarchy. A woman in a joint Hindu family, consisting both of a

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14 See, Maitrayee Chaudhuri (1993) Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival Pg. 182-196.
15 Also from Bihar
16 As quoted Romila Thapar (2000) India: Another Millennium. Pg. 39.

man and a woman, had a right to sustenance, but the control and ownership of property did not apply to her.

In addition, women in India— despite having considerable legal rights to inherit land—cannot do so, due to the existing social conditions that prevent them from claiming their rights. As cited in Agarwal (1994), a 1991 village sample study of rural widows by Marty Chen found that only 13 percent of women with land-owning fathers inherited land as daughters, and only 51 percent of widows with land-owning husbands inherited any land. Therefore, 87 percent of the daughters and 47 percent of the eligible widows did not inherit land. Also, the widow's land is usually registered jointly with that of adult sons and is effectively controlled by sons. Widows without sons rarely inherit land.[17] As has been noted by Basu, new laws are most effective only if they legitimize changes that are socially acceptable. In post-independence India, "property issues—and particularly gendered division of property—have centrally marked the conflict between perpetuation of the older systems of privilege and the establishment of a modern new nation founded on principles of individual rights and liberties."[18] The notion of 'the family,'[19] in the above context, therefore becomes a primary unit of focus when it comes to economic planning, policy-making, development and implementation of government-initiated schemes. According to Agarwal, the explicit definition of 'the family' is found within

[17] See Bina Agarwal (1994). A field of one's own: Gender and Land rights in South Asia. Pg. 252-253

[18] See, Srimati Basu (1999). She comes to take her Rights: Women, law and property in India Pg. 3.

[19] Amartya Sen's article, "Gender and Cooperative Conflicts" helps me think about the notion of household and the different economic theories that range from the altruistic model—wherein every family member is seen as equal or having equal say and benefits equally—to the bargaining models that suggest that there is inequality within households; and incorporate or are cognizant of the same when formulating economic policies.

public policy in India, especially legislation concerning the fixation of ceilings and assessment of surplus land.[20] Since patrilineal systems— like the Mitakshara school of Hindu law— wherein, a woman was not given a birth right in 'the family' property like a son, continue to find place in post-colonial India, the notion of 'the family' becomes an important site of investigation when conducting inquiry into the issue of women's right to land. In investigating the dominant assumptions about 'the family' and its gendered implications in the Indian context, Agarwal states that, "the family is a black box" for most economists and policy makers wherein the implicit and explicit assumptions showcase their adherence to the unitary and altruistic model of 'the family.' Such assumptions largely ignore the power relations within the family that determine distribution and accessibility of resources within the family.[21] Assumptions of unitary and altruistic models are also congruent with a deep-rooted patriarchy in Indian society. The prominent viewpoint that the economic benefits of a household get distributed equally among each member is incorrect; as studies suggest the contrary. [22] Government interventions in most instances tend to reinforce male bias directly as well as indirectly.[23] These assumptions include: that men are natural heads of the family; that they are appropriate representatives of the family in public decision making forums; that

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[20] See, Bina Agarwal, 'The Family' in Public Policy: Fallacious Assumptions and Gender Implications. January 2000 National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi. Pg. 6.

[21] This is my interpretation of Michael Foucault's notion of power.

[22] See Agarwal's (1994) Land Rights from women in South Asia: Conceptualizing Gender Relations In *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Pg. 53.

[23] Most land reform schemes and resettlement schemes transfer agricultural land to men. Also, in most cases government officials are either hesitant to deal with women or suggest that property should be in a male member's name or that they would like to deal with the male member of the family.

men are primary producers and therefore hold legitimate claim over resources; that women are largely dependents and that their dependency status is unproblematic—and in certain instances desirable—and that marriage is universal and stable.[24] These explicit, as well as implicit assumptions also form the basis for land allocations in resettlement schemes.[25] Although at present there is a mainstreaming of gender in the issue of land rights, the history of social movements is one of privileged gender seeking independent and/or joint titles for women. Like the Bodhgaya land struggle, other movements have had to deal with a reluctant state that sought to negate such demands, citing lack of precedence when it came to granting land titles to women.

Why the issue of land rights and control over resources is increasingly becoming important for women (Dalit) in Postcolonial India and the neoliberal Nation-state

According to the 2011 census, roughly 70 percent of the population lives in rural India.[26] Thus, in the context of rural India and its vast population, land not only serves as social status and power within the village community; it also determines relationships within the household. Having access to land, therefore, translates into identity, rootedness, permanence, self-esteem and respect. Access to land therefore, not only empowers but also serves as protection against economic, social and political

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[24] See, Bina Agarwal, 'The Family' in Public Policy: Fallacious Assumptions and Gender Implications. January 2000, National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi. Pg. 6.

[25] For details on gendered implications of land distribution, See Bina Agarwal, Family in Public Policy: Fallacious Assumptions and Gender Implications. January 2000, National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi.

[26] See, http://www.censusindia.net/results/ Also see, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/about-70-per-cent-indians-live-in-rural-areas-census-report/article2230211.ece Accessed on 17th December 2013

vulnerability. In many communities, ancestral land is symbolic of the continuity of kinship and citizenship. While these aspects are recognized to be important at a household level, their importance, especially for women, has received scant attention. Like men, women too depend on agriculture; however, despite their need and contribution, most women rely on the goodwill of their male relatives for access to land and resources.

While there is no large-scale survey in India that showcases the percentage of land controlled by women; small-scale surveys and village studies show that typically few women own arable land and even fewer control them effectively.[27] Even if they have rich parents, in the absence of independent land rights, they are forced to work as wage laborers on the marital land, depending on the mercy of well-off brothers and or brothers-in-law. Agarwal states that this alone showcases 'the essential property-less-ness of women as *women*'.[28] The percentage of women dependent on land is far greater than that of men. Statistics show that 86 percent of rural female workers are in agriculture.[29] Several social, political and structural factors weigh against women and have negatively impacted their participation in increasing numbers in the non-agricultural sector. Burden of domestic work, less or no education, little or no access to investing assets, low wages,

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[27] In most developing countries, with the recent exception of Nepal, large-scale surveys and agricultural census collect property- related information on the household level. Also see, Bina Agarwal (2002) "Are we not peasants too? Land Rights and Women's Claim in India" Seeds, Issue 21. Keera Allendrof's. 2007. "Do Women's Land Rights Promote Empowerment and Child Health in Nepal?" The figure is also indicative of the gendered movement of rural population to the urban areas for employment.

[28] See, Bina Agarwal, (1989) Women Land and Ideology in India In Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia. Pg. 72-73.

[29] Bina Agarwal (2002) "Are we not peasants too? Land Rights and Women's Claims in India" Seeds, Issue 2. Pg. 5.

inherent male preferences and biases, coupled with a secondary and inferior status of women in society–at-large, acts as a barrier to their entry into non-agricultural work. Relative to men, women get lower real wages for the same type of work, and their work is given lower importance than that of men. While these factors largely hold for women across all caste and class, those belonging to the underprivileged and economically disadvantaged section of society are further marginalized. Poor rural women in India constitute the lowest socio-cultural and economic 'caste.' Rural women perform housework, agricultural work and non-formal forest–based and other industrial labor. Their workdays are invariably one-and-a-half times longer than men's workdays.[30]

The global restructuring of agriculture has greatly contributed to the significant reduction of women's control over earnings, which traditionally belonged to them.[31] For example, introduction of time saving technologies in rural areas have had gendered effects across different classes of rural women. The alleviation of workload from women of landed households, often translates into loss of livelihood for landless women who received wages for such processing operations performed for these households. In describing the gendered impact of agricultural intensification, Priti Ramamurthy (1993) posits that on one hand agricultural intensification has further relegated women to the domestic sphere —a process that is increasingly allowing for women to be defined

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[30] See Charterji (2005) Land and Justice: The struggle for cultural Survival Voices Concerns and Initiatives from Orissa. 16. Also see Escobar's (1995) The Making and Unmaking of the Third World, Pg. 171-182.

[31] See Chatterji (2005) wherein she details how the Green Revolution in practice has served to destroy ecological and cultural communities dependent on land and forest. Also see, Escobar (1995) wherein he mentions how women are less eager or in some cases resistant to adopt modern techniques and approach to agriculture than men, and how women's resistance to developmental interventions gives indication of patriarchal power at work. Pg. 173.

primarily as dependent beings and thus being denied control over property, income and active participation in public and 'political' decision-making. On the other hand, patriarchal dominance within the home is reinforced through sex-based division of labor and male control of women's reproductive capacity. Ramamurthy also details how agricultural intensification has significantly contributed to the gendered migration of the rural population to urban centers, causing an increase in women-headed households.[32] In explaining the social and economic implications of this, Agarwal suggests that in the process of transformation of agrarian economies in the Global South, the process of a shift in labor has been slow and gender-biased. Labor that has moved to the non-agricultural sector and migrated to the cities and town has been primarily male, while women have significantly remained in agriculture, making them disproportionately dependent on land for their income. Recent estimates show that in India 20 to 35 percent of the households are headed by women; and these estimates include not just single, widowed, or deserted women, but also women in households wherein the men have migrated out and women are effectively farming the land.[33] Also, a 1988 report by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in Informal Sector states that, "one third of all households were solely supported by women, and in another third, 50 percent of the earnings were contributed by women."[34] Chatterji, states that majority

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[32] See, Priti Ramamurthy (1993) Patriarchy and the Process of Agriculture Intensification in South India In *Gender and Political Economy, Explorations of South Asian Systems*. Pg. 177-214

[33] See, Bina Agarwal, (1989) Women Land and Ideology In *India In Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia*.

[34] As quoted in Chatterji (2000) The Politics of Sustainable Ecology: Public Forest Land Reforms in Orissa. Pg.103.

of these (Dalit) women, reside in rural areas and are primarily dependent on land and natural resources. While these women share increasing responsibilities, they are restrained by the lack of land titles. The women are disadvantaged due to difficulty in getting loans and other credit services from institutional sources or moneylenders, or getting information on technology and increasing agricultural productivity practices and inputs. This problem of making such resources available to women, in addition to the already existing class and gender bias, gets further compounded in rural India. Kandiyoti also proposes that there are considerable differences between the land-use preference of men and women. While men tend to grow crops that are commercially profitable, women tend to choose crops that are necessary for daily subsistence. The Chipko movement is an example wherein women rallied for the protection of the forest and its regeneration against the interest of the men who were opting for commercially viable timber plantations. In the larger context, women's relationship with land has positive ecological impact.[35]

One indirect advantage of holding land titles includes that the land serves as critical reserve in bad harvest years.[36] Agarwal also states that there exists a negative relationship between incidence of absolute poverty and land access (owned or operated),

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[35] Escobar (1995) explains how power and visibility works in the development discourse wherein women are negatively impacted. In discussing the problem of the manner in which 'women in development' has been broached in dominant development discourse, he highlights the possible positives of women-headed and or women-initiated projects. Also see Pg. 154-211. Also, Gita Sen's (1994) Women, Poverty and Population helps me think about women figuring in the dominant development discourse as sites of reproduction, as bodies that require integration within the development project at the cost of their social and economic rights.

[36] See, Bina Agarwal, (1989) Women Land and Ideology in *India In Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia*. Pg. 72-73.

as landless workers are found worse off than the near-landless workers. Also, a gendered analysis of households showcase that women-headed households are more prone to higher incidences of poverty than male-headed households. Incidence in poverty is further aggravated by the decline of village common property and forest reserves leading to the increased importance of privatized land.[37] Even while better employment opportunities complement land-based opportunities, they cannot substitute for land. Further, efforts to diversify livelihoods of asset-poor rural households through small-scale livestock production and sericulture also require some land base, no matter how small it is.[38]

More importantly, effective control of land and land-use translates into empowerment. Land rights— apart from securing some sort of economic security—also serve to empower women as they are placed in the position to challenge domination and oppression, both within and outside the boundaries of home. As Agarwal sates, the health and well being of the family depend largely on women's access to resources.

> Women in poor households typically contribute almost all their earned incomes to the family's basic needs with men typically keeping a not-significant part for tobacco, liquor etc. With absolute contributions by women being substantial in all cases… the risk of poverty and physical well-being of a woman and her children could depend crucially on whether or not she has direct access to income and

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[37] Decrease in village owned common reserves like forests have forced households to purchase goods that until recently they received for free. See, Angana Chatterji's (2000) History and Context of Forest Management in India.

[38] See, Robin Mearns, Policy Research Working Paper 2123, 'Access to Land in Rural India'.

productive assets such as land, not just access mediated through her husband or other male members.[39]

Interviews of women who got land as a result of the Bodhgaya movement suggest that, while they continue to struggle against patriarchy, biases and prejudices at the home, institutional and administrative levels; land ownership has certainly made a positive difference in their lives on multiple levels. A woman who benefited from the movement remarked that the land is a source of sustenance (*zameen jeevika hai*) that buffers them from extreme forms of poverty and exploitation.

Mapping Social Change in Gaya: Experimenting with methodology

Although social mapping—in which a group of people and/or individuals, draw by hand the physical space they occupy (with a piece of chalk, stone or wood on the ground)— is not widely used to study the inter-relationships between land, caste and gender within anthropology, I have used this technique alongside ethnography, as a methodological and theoretical intervention to understand how legal rights to land, due to the Bodhgaya land struggle, has stimulated change in long-standing and seemingly unaltered social hierarchies and landscapes. As a method, social mapping is both collaborative and innovative in its nature, as it allows us to render visible the social space occupied by Dalit women. The collaborative aspect is underscored by the fact that this method emphasizes Dalit women's knowledge of their immediate surroundings and

[39] See, Bina Agarwal, (1989) Women Land and Ideology in India In Women, Poverty and Ideology in Asia. Pg. 72-73.

serves to undermine the hierarchical relationship between the researcher-researched. Given that I belong to a dominant caste and class, this method not only provided a way for me to circumvent some of the researcher-researched power relations—by providing Dalit women an objective way to enter into sensitive conversations—but also clued me to the layout and history of the research sites. The method therefore proved crucial to my ability to establish rapport very early on in the fieldwork process. It proved to be the most unobtrusive way to get to know the land, caste and gender dynamics at work in the research sites. The method also helped me understand the women's worldview, as formal or informal interviewing techniques failed to elicit detailed responses.[40] The mapping process therefore generated much interest and spontaneity and provided rich details of a place/site/moment through a collective revisiting of historical events that had shaped their present. The innovative aspect of the social mapping process is highlighted by the fact that the social space gets visualized. Visualization allows for other forms of microanalysis to take place. For example, social mapping allows us to visually ascertain the caste composition of the village and the bridging of distance between the different caste houses. In addition the location of caste groups on a map allows us to make further inquiries about issues of access by Dalits. More importantly, it allows us to discern, the discrepancies between what is claimed and the ground realities.

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[40] Dalit women later commented that people of importance, such as elected, state, and government officials, normally do not talk to them or think they have anything important to contribute or say. I too had noticed the women lost their spontaneity when asked direct questions or were rather brief when asked to describe the situation or event, but during the mapping sessions the comments were free flowing and illustrated and/or described the situation in great detail.

Spatially mapping the outcomes of the Bodhgaya land struggle

As I sought to draw maps of the villages/places I visited during my fieldwork conducted in the summers of 2009 and 2010, and then for extended periods of time from January 2012 to December 2012 and July 2013 to May 2014, the maps visually indicated that the land struggle had shifted from its initial epicenter and found new places and meanings. The mapping of the varied outcomes of the struggle therefore provided key insights into the intertwined and acutely mediated space/place politics of land and caste mediated gender relationships. Apart from providing a situated understanding of the challenges that Dalit assertion faced at specific sites, the mapping exercise also raised questions of the individualistic notion embedded in efforts to advocate for women's rights to land and instead drew attention to the power relations Dalit women find themselves embroiled in and must navigate everyday. The visual representation of the space/place alongside the ethnographic inputs allowed for the questioning of dominant notions of timelessness of the Dalit situation, as well as the 'lack of agency' that is projected on a Dalit subject to both normalize caste violence and render invisible caste-based discrimination.

Although the initial sites of the Bodhgaya land struggle continue to remain sites of intense normalized violence in both domestic and public social spaces, the mapping exercise in conjunction with Dalit narratives, helps ascertain the shifts in the nature of violence that seek to masquerade as an a-historical self-inflicted suffering endemic to the Dalit existence. For example, places that were once the epicenter of grassroots mobilization and change are witnessing a near reversal of gains made by the Bodhgaya

land struggle. Land is fast slipping away from Dalit control for reasons as varied as: a) unable to pay back loans taken during economic hardships; b) encroachments by influential elites who may have benefitted from the Bodhgaya struggle itself; c) compelled to relinquish control over land; d) voluntarily parting with the land; and e) forcibly being evicted from land. Much of the land grabs are being triggered by speculation in land prices. In addition, due to the international repute of Bodh Gaya as a key Buddhist tourist destination, land in and around is much coveted and fetches handsome prices in the real estate market.

The speculative impact of land prices declines as one moves away from the main towns. In the recently established new Dalit villages, Dalit demands were articulated around legal entitlement to land they already had brought under their control. In some of the areas, Dalits are also organizing around the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which for the first time in the history of pre- and post-colonial India recognizes those living in or near the forests areas as stakeholders rather than encroachers. I therefore contend that the mapping of how the struggle unfolded spatially in three different sites allows for a visualization of the different factors at play that are working to undermine Dalit and in particular Dalit women's interests.

Although I have spent a significant amount of time in Kaari, the writing of this dissertation has been greatly shaped by this personal mapping exercise of the different villages I visited during my stay in Gaya to get a better sense of the struggle I intended to study. Therefore, between telling the story of how the Bodhgaya land struggle unfolded

in one village versus charting the various outcomes of a radical struggle that highlights the complexity of the social change it helped engender—I choose the later. The effort has been to underscore that control over productive assets such as land is fundamental to acts of Dalit assertion in rural Bihar as it has facilitated the inquiry of deeply rooted caste related hierarchies and has created new possibilities for Dalits in the region. The mapping of the varied outcomes of the struggle also highlights the nature of resistance Dalit assertion face, both from the landed/caste elites, but also from the state.

I chose to include Mastipur in the heart of Bodhgaya town as Dalits here are losing control over their hard won land rapidly—even as the state remains a mute spectator to this entire process. The astronomical rise in land prices has triggered land grabs as well as violence (perceived and real) toward Dalit-women who refuse to part with their land. In Kaari, the place where I spent most of my time, the struggle appears to the in the bureaucratic phase; where the state has refused to send a person to measure and clearly demarcate the land that would allow Dalits to have effective control. Dalits here recognize that if they try to forcibly stake control over the land to which they have legal titles, there will be bloodshed. The state has so far maintained a hands-off approach, which has buoyed the hopes of the landed elite who are encroaching upon the land they lost during the Bodhgaya struggle under some false pretext. And, a rise in speculative land prices has made even the most infertile and barren land lucrative. In Dehri, we have evidence that Dalits have staked Kabza (control) over nearly 140 acres of government land and are now petitioning the state to give them legal titles to that land. By detailing

the long-term impact of the Bodhgaya land struggle in three sites I have attempted to show: a) spatially how the struggle unfolded in the region; b) the multiple and diverse outcomes of the land struggle; and c) the different spatially marked factors that mediate Dalit relationships to land. This also shows that it is the Dalit women who are directly associated with the land through their labor. Dalits view the land as a means of *jeevika* (subsistence); however the dominant perception of land as a commodity has created new stakeholders and continues to severely undermine Dalit relationship and control over their land.

Note on the multiple nature of Dalit assertion in Gaya, Bihar

As I surveyed the area to get a sense of the land struggles in the region and its effects in the present, I was impressed with the fact that although the struggle against the Bodhgaya Math, staged by the Sangharsh Vahini in alliance with the MKS, might have come to an end, the struggle for land continues in the region. While I was aware of the presence of armed struggles around land in Bihar, I found myself a bit surprised with the fact that 'peaceful' land struggles continue in the present. In fact, both armed and 'peaceful' land struggles have existed simultaneously and oftentimes in close proximity[41] leading sometimes to turf contestation. Talking to the members of the Dalit community in

[41] Over time it became clear to me that the area of work was clearly divided among the different grassroots organizations subscribing to different ideologies. Given that I had restricted myself primarily to villages that qualified as Vahini villages, my sense of what may have been 'naxal' or 'party' villages (as it is referred to by the locals) came from my interaction with them.

the villages I visited during my fieldwork gave me a sense of how Dalits navigated these choices. These choices—though seemingly benign—were tough to make on their part, exposing them to violence, both from the state as well as the "party." Irrespective of what form of resistance Dalits choose to demand their land rights, the fear of being branded as "Naxalite or Naxal sympathizer" was and is always there. People shared experiences of how police often harass Dalits or those most vocal, putting their name on the Naxal sympathizer list, and forcing the person named to bribe them just to get their names removed. Even those who clearly identified with the Sangharsh Vahini expressed that the police could very well use this tactic simply to harass them. Regardless of whom I spoke to in the Sangharsh Vahini villages, both Dalit women and men clearly articulated the reasons they choose to stage peaceful protest vis-à-vis an armed one. They all reasoned with me that taking up arms would necessitate arming each and every member of their family to ensure their survival. The ongoing struggles not only pointed to the contentious nature of land in the region, but also raised questions over how these struggles themselves are altering societal equations.

Here it is important to mention that the preponderance of reportage and scholarship around the armed Naxalite movement and the landed caste militias has however worked to solidify the image and narrative about rural Bihar as encapsulated in terms such as "the flaming fields of Bihar," "the killing fields of Bihar" and the "Red Zone." These dominant images and narratives have however served to obscure the fact that there exists on the ground other forms of resistances and struggles by those who are

striving to bring about social change and transformation in the region by adhering to principles other than violence. Even as I make this assertion, I want to acknowledge that this purportedly skewed picture of the rural landscape of Bihar only goes on to indicate the violent nature of resistance that Dalit assertion face. This acknowledgement is also not meant to undermine the fact that it is the ultra-left groups in Bihar that have kept the issue of 'land to the tiller' from being relegated to the margins as it continues to be a formidable challenge to the hegemony of the landed elites. However, I believe that there is a need to draw attention to other articulations of land struggles in Bihar and to the nature of the state's response to peaceful grassroots mobilization; to first, challenge the state narrative that relies on a distorted portrayal of Dalit assertion, that in turn justifies the state's use of violence to curb acts of Dalit assertion. Given that the majority of the landless laborers belong to Dalit communities, this distorted portrayal of rural unrest and struggle, among other things, serves to justify the nation-state's high-handed approach to resistance and rural grassroots mobilization. It also serves to mask the violence and resistance that Dalits face from the landed elites. The specter of Naxalism has been used by the state to suppress any form of Dalit mobilization and acts of assertion. Second, examining state response to multiple forms of Dalit assertion can work to hold the state accountable toward the margins and to adjudicate the responsibility of escalation of violence and rural conflict by highlighting state apathy and the state's role in entrenching everyday forms of violence on Dalit lives. In addition, the dominant perception that Dalit assertion manifest primarily through armed struggles works to obfuscate readings of

subjectivity, identity, resistance and agency as being multi-dimensional, complex and contextual and serves to promulgate and justify the state monopoly of violence.

Theoretical underpinnings

a) Social Mapping: While oral histories draw out the narrative of Dalit women in a culture that has traditionally relied on masculine, caste-biased interpretations (Gluck & Patia 1991), social mapping allows for visual represention of a social space, which in turn, will faciliate other forms of micro-analysis to take place (Chambers 2006; Herlihy & Knapp 2003; Rocheleau 1995). Although traditionally maps have been known to serve the powerful, when produced by subaltern groups (Dalit women in this case) they serve to contest dominant representations (Black 1997). A place on a map is also a place in history (Rich 1986); maps are therefore not just strategic but also cultural constructions that reflect cultural practices of their producers, revealed by analyzing what is included and what is excluded in the presentation of images in relationship to each other (Woods 2003). I have used social mapping as a method to develop an understanding of the space occupied by Dalits as "an everyday, shifting and contingent project of subjectivities, lived expereinces and tangible and intangible social and material relations" (Sletto 2009) and not as something that is perdermined by power/caste positions. Social mapping substituted for the usual interviewing method and helped provide a sense of the 'commonsense geography' (Schegloff 1972: 85) that allowed me to unearth the spatial dimensions of gender and caste; get access to subjugated knowledge by providing a voice

to rural Dalit women whose viewpoints are normally left out of the policy making and research process; and get at the issues of power. The social mapping process evoked what Dolores Hayden (1995) has called "the power of place," the process of ordinary landscapes to "nurture citizens' memory" and allow for stories of collective struggle, discussions of the history of the area, as well as gossip and jokes to emerge (Wood 2003). Given that "it is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too" (Massey 1984: 6) the visualization of women's space and their life-paths (eg; map of village showing location of Dalit houses in relationship to landed caste members; relative distance of village amneties from Dalit homes; nature of Dalit women's access to village resources; the routes Dalit women take normally, as well as avoid, due to caste mediated gender discrimination etc.) became important, as it, along with the process of identity formation and experiences of places are mutually constitutive and is an active element in creation of gendered spaces (Spain 1992; Nead 1997).

b) Space, Place and Resistance: Although the literature on caste in Anthropology as well as Sociology is vast (Banerjee-Dube 2008), the dominance of Dumont's theories of caste as based mainly on the dyad of purity and pollution (1977) and Srinivas's notions of dominant caste (1952) and sanskritization (1955) to account for mobility within caste, severely limits the literature's ability to account for Dalit experiences of and resistance to caste (Rege 2006, Berreman 1991). Therefore, to understand and render visible the spatial experience of caste, I use social mapping in conjunction with scholarship on caste and gender that exemplifies: lived experiences of caste (Ambedkar 1943; Dube 1993;

Ilaiah 1996; Freeman 1979; Jadhav 2005; Viramma 1997; Pandian 2003); relationship between caste and land politics, in particular landlessness (Omvedt 1983; Barik 2006); the connections between caste, identity and identity politics (Shah 2001; Kothari 1994; Narayan 2009; Pai 2002; Zelliot 2005; Rao 2010); and Dalit feminisms (Rege 1998; Datar 1999). To understand how Dalit assertion are taking on and making new spaces/places and faciliate a reading of Dalit women as actors vis-à-vis passive and easily influenced subjects; I draw on literature that helps theorize everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985, Foucault 1978, Ortner 1995), assertion and violence, that in turn, have the capacity to produce and render boundaries fluid (Das 2007; Feldman 1991). I view resistance as having rhizomatic characteristics (Deleuze & Guattari's 1987) that are mobilized through specific spaces and time (Routledge 1997; Massey 1992; Harvey 1990), and in the process takes on and makes new spaces/places (Pile & Keith 1997). Space, is viewed here as being a surrogate of power, where transgressions are staged to either challenge and/or confirm normativity (Lefebvre 1974; Cresswell 1996; Gupta & Ferguson 2002; Foucault 1991; Weizman 2007). I have taken inspiration and insight from Black (feminist) literature to articulate Dalit experiences of becoming and the role of memory (Fabre & O'Meally 1994) to understand the processes of claiming radical identities and charting one's own history, as I argue that the Bodhgaya land struggle forms an integral part and legacy of Dalit assertion in the region.

Overview of the Bodhgaya land struggle

The Bodhgaya land struggle was against the Bodhgaya Math, a Hindu Shaivaite monastic institution, headquartered adjacent to the UNESCO world heritage site of the Mahabodhi Vihar— the site where Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. The struggle against the Math started in the late 1970s at a time when the armed Naxalite movement had started to gain popularity in the region. It was a "peaceful" struggle staged by bonded laborers, mostly Dalits, in alliance with the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (CYSV), an offshoot of the Jai Prakash Narayan's socialist movement, against the Bodhgaya 'Math' (religious institution) and the state. By the end of the 19th century, the Math was seen to be the biggest landholder and most influential institution in the Gaya district. The Math exercised absolute control over its bonded laborers through local courts called *Kacheheris,* established across its estate spread over several districts of Bihar.

The local story goes that the site was claimed by a wandering ascetic name Gosain Ghamandi Giri, a member of the Giri sect of Shaivism around the 16th Century, who upon seeing the deserted site with what appeared to be temple ruins, felt that it was suitable for an ascetic abode. Historical accounts suggest that after the death of the third Mahant (*abbot*) a vast complex was built on the banks of the river Falgu and adjacent to the Mahabodhi temple ruins to house the *sannyasis* (priests) (Mackenzie 1902: 75; Grierson 1893:17; Trevithick 2006). Around 1727, the monastery received a *firman* (grant) from the Mughal emperor assigning the revenues of the surrounding villages of the monastery to the Mahant (abbot) allowing the Math (Hindu monastery) to collect

revenues from the neighboring villages (Malley 1906: 49; Hamilton-Buchanan 1937: 139). The position of the Giris was further cemented by the arrival of the British, as they not only recognized the Giris hold over the region and permanently settled the land in their favor, but also observed their control over the Mahabodhi temple site (Copland 2004). The British preoccupation with retaining control over a region to ensure a smooth flow of revenue contributed to the Giris being held in favorable terms throughout the colonial period. Scholars of Bodh Gaya Math history note that the Giris repeatedly claimed that they had 'actively' sided with the Company Raj during the 1847 revolt (Grierson, 1893: 17) when it came to leveraging Math interests from the colonial rulers. Even though the British never contested the Giris version of "valuable aid" during the mutiny there is no evidence that can support this claim. On the contrary, the Giris never put themselves at odds with the colonial rulers at any stage of the colonial rule, nor did the region under their control pose any problem for the British. There was even a time in colonial history when the Giris enjoyed patronage from both the British as well as the Buddhist king of Burma (Trevithick 2006). Another factor that played a huge role in the favorable relationship of the Giris with the British was that Bodh Gaya was 'quiet' and free from communal tensions—unlike other parts of British India that witnessed Hindu-Muslim riots and clashes among the various Hindu sects. This peace indicated that the Giris had ensconced themselves comfortably in the region with no serious challenge to their authority (Trevithick 1999). The patronage and support that the Math enjoyed from Muslim and then the British rulers, continued into the post-colonial Indian state as well;

as we see evidence of the Math's unabated influence and hold in the region up until the late 1970s—when the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (Sangharsh Vahini) activists arrived on the scene.

The Math's monastic-feudal governmentality was secured over the region through wide networks of local courts of Kachheris. When the land struggle started, it was calculated that there were 53 Kachheri's of the Math (Kelkar & Gala 1990: 91). These Kachheri's served multiple functions. Apart from acting as a granary, the Kachheris' served as courthouses where everyday matters of the estate were delegated. It also served as an administrative, policing and disciplining site in the village. These Kachheris were run by *Barahils* (local administrators) chosen by a member from a dominant caste in the village. To ensure that the law of the Bodhgaya Math was obeyed in letter and in spirit, the Math used *Goraiths* (armed personnel) normally belonging to the Dusadh community. The Goraiths' job was to ensure that the Kamias reported to work promptly, obeyed the Math's orders, and disciplined the Kamias—should there be an irregularity and indication of defiance on their part. The Goraith served as the eyes and ears of the Kachheris and through violence ensured total obedience towards the Math.

It has been observed that the Giris of the Bodhgaya Math were so well ensconced in the region that they received no serious threat to their establishment up until the late 1970s. However, I contend that the unraveling of the Math's estate most likely started with a piece of progressive legislation—the Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act of 1961— that led to a rush to dispose of

ceiling excess land, either by creating various small trusts or by selling it off. In Kaari, one of the villages where I conducted research, the *Gumastha* of Math started secretly selling off land around that time for paltry sums of money to the Grihast. The Dalits in the village came to know of it only when they attempted to sell off the land that the Mahant had given them to stay on. When confronted, the Gumastha retorted, "When there is no Math then whose Kamia are you? You have no basis for staying in this village." Following this, Dalits in the village started looking for help. "We went to the anchal (regional office), but were driven out," said Sarju Majhi. They sought out leaders of the various political parties and even experimented with the armed Naxalite movement that was gaining a foothold in the Gaya region. "No official or party was willing to help us at that time. Then we briefly sought help of the 'party' but then we soon felt disillusioned as they always held meetings in the middle of the night in deserted places. But we quit the party, when they asked us to arm ourselves. Arming ourselves would mean arming our women and children. If I kill one *grihast*, the *grihast* will also kill some of my people. This way the killing will go on and on. If no one is alive then what is the point of struggling? Then we came to know about the Vahini and we went to their office to ask for help." The progressive legislation was responsible and was generating much discontent in the rural areas—as those having control over the land started evicting their laborers and sharecroppers.

The Math characterized the Sangharsh Vahini activists as communists who, by diluting the Math's control by forcing it to part with land that it held above the ceiling

laws, had acted against the Hindu religion. Dalits in alliance with Sangharsh Vahini staked claim to the 10,000 acres of surplus land of the Math (Kelkar & Gala 1988). The land struggle was radical as it sought to challenge caste and gender hierarchies even while fighting for land rights for historically marginalized populations. Personal interviews with activists involved with the struggle suggest that issues pertaining to gender and caste were actively made central to the struggle, both in theory and practice. This experience was in sharp contrast to women's experiences in other contemporary land struggles, where their roles were largely viewed as 'supportive' even as social movements rely on women for their success and mass appeal.[42] For example, in the Telangana peasant struggle, women did not get land in the land distribution program, except when they were widows. The State however, ruled against separate land titles for women and instead granted joint titles with their husbands for one acre of land.

Importance of studying the 'peaceful' Bodhgaya land struggle

The Bodhgaya land struggle headed by the socialist youth is credited with developing praxes around some key issues that contested and challenged established hierarchies of the time. For instance, the struggle put into practice issues that appeared radical for the time—such as demanding land rights for women, advocating for "*jiska*

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[42] See 'Stree Shakti Sanghatana. 1989. 'We were making History…': Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle. New Delhi: Kali for Women. The book makes the argument that although women stood at the forefront of the Telangana struggle, resisting the landlord and later the Indian army; and devised collective forms of resistance that were both spontaneous and untaught, their participation was largely viewed and interpreted as 'supportive.' The authors suggest that "to make distinctions that state that women supplied the stones and men used the slings is to create precisely the distinctions and hierarchies that make women invisible" (Pg.17).

sangharsh, uska netrithwa" meaning leadership of and by those whose struggle; it was (and is) the crafting of peaceful guerilla tactics that challenged the limits of both violence as well as non-violence by advocating for action based on self-defense. Members of the Sangharsh Vahini, as well as the MKS, undertook critical reflection and concrete steps to intervene on their privilege. Steps included changing the names to obscure caste affiliation, challenging gender set roles by sharing household chores such as cooking and cleaning, actively encouraging inter-caste and faith marriages or experimenting with forms of cohabitation, along with openly renouncing religious affiliation. For the first time after independence, women in Bihar stepped out into the public sphere to actively partake in the efforts to rebuild a just future—where the socialist tenets of equality of gender, caste and religion were heeded and made central. Middle class women activists also underscore the importance of the years from 1976 to 1985 being declared the 'decade of the women' by the United Nations, which played a role in heightening gendered consciousness among educated middle class college-going youth, particularly women, by highlighting the plight of women in India.[43] Armed with a clear understanding of how patriarchy operates in society, women leaders actively steered gendered considerations in its day-to-day activities and interventions, by articulating their concerns and seeking out adequate and appropriate representation at all functional levels in the organization. Women activists expressed great pride and relief that their demands for making gender a critical lens of inquiry and investigation did not engender a split in

[43] See http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/women/.

the organization, rather it strengthened the organization's base as women participated wholeheartedly in the movement and created a formidable force in undermining and buffering state-police violence and atrocities. While middle class women activists took part in common programs they also held separate shivirs (sessions) for women—enabling women to have a space within the struggle— where issues relating to patriarchy were debated and attempts were made to actively deal with the concerns. The Bodhgaya land struggle therefore, is a unique example of how addressing women's specific demands and needs do not necessitate an autonomous, separate or independent space; rather it calls for gendering the issues that the movement is struggling for. This allowed for collective exploration of how caste hegemony and patriarchy works through the subjugation and control over women's bodies.

Defining Land Rights

Land rights can be broadly understood as a variety of legitimate claims to land and the benefits and products produced on that land.[44] Thus land-rights comprise a collection of multiple rights and vary in sources of their legitimacy and the extent to which they are put into practice. Thus, a distinction is made between *de jure* and *de facto* land rights. It could include the right to cultivate, control the proceeds of cash crops, harvest and dispose of medicinal plants, plant and harvest fruit trees, graze livestock in

[44] As cited in, Kerra Allendorf's paper, 'Do Women Land Rights promote empowerment and child Health in Nepal?'

the fields during the dry season and cultivate and dispose of the vegetables.[45] Positing that appropriation of resources is important for women, Deniz Kandiyoti states that land rights should not be restricted to merely holding title; but must also encompass a definition of beneficiary status, their ability to accommodate women's customary land use rights (where they exist) and their success in integrating women into mass organizations (such as cooperatives) as full members. She states, "Piecemeal measures, especially if they are confined to title ownership only will have limited impact unless they are backed up by a whole package of measures covering every phase of production process including marketing."[46] In critiquing the approach in women in development research and policy implications she states:

> Assistance to rural women often appears as part of a series of stop-gap measures to take some of the most visible outcomes of underdevelopment, such as hunger and malnutrition. It seems highly improbably, however, that such assistance can have lasting benefits unless it is accompanied by sweeping changes in land distribution, pricing and credit policies, in short, an onslaught on the mechanism that reproduce and intensify inequalities within the agrarian section.[47]

Apart from the legal clause for rights to exist and be exercised, Agarwal adds the social clause. She defines rights (in any form of property) as claims that are legally and socially

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[45] See Deniz Kandiyoti (1990) Discussion paper on Women and Rural Development Policies: The changing Agenda. See, Bina Agarwal, Are we not peasants too? SEEDS 21st Issue 2002, and Eve Crowley (1999) Women's right to land and natural resources: Some implications for a Human Rights-Based Approach.

[46] See Deniz Kandiyoti Discussion paper on Women and Rural Development Policies: The Changing Agenda Pg. 10.

[47] See Deniz Kandiyoti Discussion paper on Women and Rural Development Policies: The Changing Agenda Pg. 7.

recognized and are enforceable by an external legitimized authority, be it an institution at the village level or some higher-level body of the state. Land rights, Agarwal points out, can stem from inheritance, transfers from the state, tenancy arrangements, land purchase, or other factors. They can be used in usufruct (right of use), and can encompass different degrees of freedom to lease out, mortgage, bequeath or sell. [48]

However, in gendering the claims on the land issue, Agarwal makes a distinction between legal and social recognition, stating that a woman may have the right to inherit property but this may not be of any use if her claim is not recognized socially. Further, she makes a distinction between ownership and effective control. She states that as often has been the case, women—although having property in their name—may not still be able to have control over it. This could mean needing consent from male kith and kin, or serving the function of a custodian of property that is then to be transferred to the son. She also makes a distinction between individual and group rights in case of land. In this paper, I will use land rights to mean effective and independent land rights for Dalits-Dalit women. Agarwal (2002) describes effective rights as rights that are not just codified in law but which are also practiced. Independent rights, Agarwal describes, are rights that women enjoy in their own capacity and are independent of those enjoyed by men.

The impulse behind seeking particular narrative(s)

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[48] See, Bina Agarwal, (2002) Are we not peasants too? SEEDS 21st Issue Pg. 3.

My entry into the field was therefore, much before I physically entered 'the field.' Apart from the perceived unlikelihood about the Bodhgaya Land struggle's outcome, I was intrigued by the possibilities that the legal titles may have provided the women. My inheritances—my feudal background, and my subject-position(s)—have fundamentally shaped and informed my desire to understand what it means for a woman to own land in rural Bihar. My acquaintance with rural Bihar and most things 'Bihari' has been shaped by my yearly visits to my village. My understanding of Bihar has been primarily mediated through my father who shared with me his stories and the trials and tribulations of his travels from his village to the city and back. He has been my compass as I traversed the dusty and potholed riddled roads of rural Bihar—either in the form of letters or stories—that allowed me to navigate with much comfort and ease, the caste and gender riddled milieu that characterizes the state of Bihar. For more often than not, navigating space and place in Bihar often meant navigating a sea of men—both literally and figuratively.

Bina Agarwal's book *Are We Not Peasants Too?*, apart from engendering the land rights questions, motivated me to study the long-term implications of women holding land rights[49] in the Global South; as I understood the women's question as "seldom just a

[49] Worldwide, women own only one to two percent of the land. While there has been considerable pressure to generate gender specific data, the attitude in almost all countries in the Global South has been to see gender as an additional and/or separate category to a developmental project. (In most developing countries with the recent exception of Nepal, large-scale surveys and agricultural censuses collect property-related information on the household level. Also See, Kerra Allendorf's paper (2007), 'Do Women's Land Rights promote Empowerment and Child Health in Nepal?) There is little recognition of the fact that gender is not a category or an addendum to projects and developmental schemes; rather it is a lens—and one that needs to be taken into consideration to ensure effective and independent lands rights for women in promoting their empowerment, equality and emancipation. Kandiyoti, in detailing the biases, assumptions,

question about individual rights, but fundamentally about, culture, community and nation" (Ong 1996). The revelation that the land rights of women I intended to study were primarily Dalits came to me only while conducting my primary research in the region, in the summer of 2009. The intimate understanding of how caste played a critical role everyday in Bihar further attuned me to privilege the caste lens alongside gender. Scholarship on the Bodhgaya struggle has yet to explore what it means for women to undermine a centuries old system of bondage, as the category Dalit was subsumed under the category of 'woman' and 'agricultural laborers.' The exploration of this struggle has been done primarily within the eco-feminists literature to argue in favor of gendering the land rights issues.

During the entire period of my fieldwork, particularly in Kaari, I was viewed as a member of the Sangharsh Vahini both by the Dalits as well as the landed castes in the village. Dalit women alluded that my entry into their village mirrored the entry of middle castes activists in their village roughly three decades ago. The perceived similarity of

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and instrumental approach facilitated by the women in development approach and research, states that greater impetus has been given to population control, health delivery, food production, nutrition and alleviation of absolute poverty through expanded opportunities for 'income generation' rather than looking into women's access or control over resources. Kandiyoti states that the extent of women's involvement in subsistence production is a function of control over natural resources and the degree of overall commoditization of the agrarian sector. (See Deniz Kandiyoti's, Discussion paper on Women and Rural Development Policies: The changing Agenda, Pg. 3) In her discussion paper, Women and Rural Development Policies: Changing Agenda (1990), Kandiyoti states, that despite the widely held assumption that women are de facto food producers and active participants in the agrarian sector of the 'Third World,' not enough attention has been given to the fact that women's type and level of involvement in agricultural activities is consistently mediated by rural households' access to productive resources. (Women's participation in agriculture ranges from a high 87 percent of the labor force in low-income African countries to a low 14 percent in Latin America. See Deniz Kandiyoti Discussion paper on Women and Rural Development Policies: The changing Agenda.) Biases against women are ingrained at all levels of formulation and implementation of intervention programs. Angana Chatterji, in *The Politics of Sustainable Ecology: Public Forest Land Reforms in Orissa* (2000) states that discrimination against women starts right at the conception and formulation of polices meant to bring about equitable distribution of wealth and resources. She states, "While men entered the policy process as household heads and productive agents, women were viewed primarily in their capacity as housewives, mothers, and 'at-risk' reproducers."

'entry' into the fieldwork sites, in turn gave credence to the periodic rumors that were circulated to test my 'real' intentions behind staying in the village for extended periods of time in Dalit households. The fact that I did not dress up as a traditional Hindu married woman further compounded the landed caste anxiety that I was there to revive the land struggle. Quite a few attempts were made to intimidate me and/or compromise my standing in the Dalit community by fabricating stories about me. The Dalit community in Kaari refrained from drinking and smoking in front of me for almost a year, assuming that I was member of the Sangharsh Vahini and was there to revive the stalled land struggle. I however remained consistent with my positioning as a researcher who needed to live among the Dalit community to gain firsthand information about the Dalit women who were part of the radical Bodhgaya struggle of the late 1970s. I think this positioning was key, as it allowed me the flexibility to be associated with different groups and a grassroots mobilization that worked for the Dalit cause in the Gaya region. Throughout my fieldwork I took great pains to align myself with the Dalit women, even as I consulted Sangharsh Vahini activists and other prominent social activists in the region. I navigated the 'perceived' and sometimes very real everyday threats of conducting fieldwork by actively seeking and aligning myself with the Dalit community. I sought help and assistance from Dalit women and men to either address and/or mitigate challenges as they presented themselves during the course of my fieldwork. I relied on a close network of automobile drivers to commute to and back from the village; they often confided in me that they were often questioned about my whereabouts and credentials and more

importantly my caste. During my stay in the village, I always had the company of at least one Dalit woman, man or a child as I went about my daily tasks, so as to avoid being directly accosted by the landed elite. Although I faced many challenges during my fieldwork, I think the consistency in positioning myself as a researcher and overtly aligning my interests with Dalit women paid off in the long run.

Introducing the social field of research and analysis

This dissertation seeks to understand the transformation in caste and gender identities of Dalits, following the acquisition of redistributed land titles as a result of the Bodhgaya land struggle. It does so by drawing insights from the multi-sited ethnography conducted over a period of two- and-a-half years in three villages that at some point identified as Sangharsh Vahini villages. [50] Ethnographic insights from these three villages provide different aspects and outcomes of the land struggle that will document how material changes in Dalit lives have transformed a) Dalit identity and subjectivities and b) rural landscapes.

This dissertation will be the first attempt to study the radical 'peaceful' Bodhgaya land struggle ethnographically. Currently, agrarian unrest and change in rural Bihar is predominantly discussed through the framework of class struggle that assumes violence and violent means of protest as natural to bring about change in the social order. The

[50] The general consensus among the grassroots workers, as well as the leaders of the Bodhgaya land struggle, was that the movement started in 1978 and ended with a vijaya yatra (victory march) in 1988. The vijay yatra was held following the Supreme Court ruling that dismissed the Bodhgaya Math's plea to review its petition.

Bodhgaya land struggle may also be viewed as a caste struggle, however detoured from its means, and achieved radical achievements—yet the struggle has been vastly understudied. An examination of this struggle is critical as it can provide crucial insights and offer glimpses of foreclosed possibilities, as well as viable alternative models to effectively gender land rights at the grassroots level and among those who are directly associated with the land through their labor. Some of the major feats of the struggle include effectively undermining the power and influence of the most powerful landlord in the region—the Bodhgaya Math; chartering new precedents by having anti-caste, anti-patriarchy and anti-creed as its organizing principles for grassroots mobilization around land and land rights—making this a unique effort in the history of land struggles in South Asia that successfully integrated women's marginal status with the land question and forced the administration to grant titles in the name of women, most of whom belonged to the Dalit communities in the region. This study therefore provides key insights into subaltern agency and alternative forms of organizing, and offers possibilities that might hold keys to transforming rural landscapes for the historically marginalized population and for minimizing rural tension and strife that has only escalated over the years.

This dissertation attempts to first, broaden the history of this radical struggle by bringing forth the Dalit-women's[51] voices integral to the struggle and contextualizing how gaining legal titles to land plays out in the present; as well as the meanings land

[51] The hyphen in the Dalit-women is to draw attention to gender being caste-class mediated and it, along with caste-class, shapes and informs ownership of land.

ownership holds for Dalit-women's identity, agency and subjectivities. Such a reading allows for a juxtaposition of land, caste and gender that will facilitate an understanding of how one is premeditated through the other and in the process shapes and informs one another, particularly in rural Bihar. Placing ethnography alongside the literature on caste, gender and land, as well as space and place, I demonstrate that 'land'—a productive asset— assumes greater significance in rural Bihar as it continues to produce and sustain the hierarchical caste mediated gendered relationships. Ownership and effective control over land produces and sustains hierarchies in rural Bihar; and understanding what informs these linkages and how these linkages work will allow us to better advocate for women's right to land— in particular, Dalit women's right to land. It has been observed that withdrawal of the land struggle from a region more often than not results in an ever-increasing gap between legal control and actual control of Dalits over land, with some areas witnessing almost a complete reversal of gains made by land struggles and social movements. To effectively advocate for Dalit-women's land rights ownership, it becomes important to understand this phenomenon.

Second, this dissertation underscores the question of how and why liberal land rights discourse fails to adequately address the challenges that caste mediated gendered subjects on the margins pose in the Global South. The gendered aspect of land ownership disappeared within a generation as Dalit women who got titles to redistributed land as women rarely passed on their land to their daughters or daughter-in-law's, which led to the critique that these actions defeated the feminist underpinnings of the movement. Dalit

women who got legal titles to land had no answer when asked why they were vocal in asking for legal recognition to redistributed land from the state, yet refrained from doing the same within the family. I attempt to interpret women's silence by paying attention to "when and why women speak" keeping in mind that women's subjectivity is "dissident subjectivity, both as it is situated within dominant (male) cultural, political and social structures as it elaborates alternative models of speaking and writing" (Visweswaran 1994:10). I argue that women—Dalit women in particular—recognize the interdependent nature of agricultural work and what it takes to hold on to the land, and are therefore silent when it comes to advocating for independent rights to land. In addition, to counter the challenge of holding on to the land after the marriage of daughters, I came across families with no male child practicing matrilocal marriages.

Lastly, this dissertation shows that even with legal rights to land, overcoming marginal subject-positions, particularly when it comes to caste mediated gender barriers, remains ever partial. I draw upon the oral histories of Dalits who took part in the struggle for land ownership to reiterate that even though their efforts are to transcend received hierarchies they assert that these remain ever partial—due to systematic resistance to Dalit assertion in the region.

The research primarily took place in three villages in and around Bodh Gaya, located in the Gaya district of Bihar. The district has the highest proportion of scheduled castes or Dalits in Bihar. While the town of Bodhgaya is a very popular international Buddhist tourist destination, and boasts almost all modern amenities, the villages around

it are characterized by deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination and destitution. An overwhelming 93 percent of the Dalit population resides in rural areas, of which over 75 percent of them are landless 'agricultural laborers' and approximately 8 percent are small cultivators (Census of India 2001). Therefore, the combination of market incentives and state remedial policies (or reservations), touted as alternate routes for Dalit emancipation, has had virtually no impact on Dalits in rural Bihar. Also, Dalit empowerment in contemporary politics is primarily articulated through the language of caste and reservation policies, supplanting the pre- and post-independence political rhetoric of substantive land reforms. The meager land reforms undertaken by the state have largely benefited the upper backwards castes, as they primarily constitute the tenants and sharecroppers population in the state (Guru and Chakravarty 2005). Dalits, being landless agricultural laborers, were/are evicted from agricultural land following any efforts to initiate and/or implement land reform policies. Although major regional political parties today rely on the mobilizing power of different Dalit caste histories to make them an integral part of the modern democratic, electoral processes (Narayan 2004), such parties' efforts are yet to make any significant dent in the socio-economic conditions of vast majority of Dalit population in rural Bihar.

During the first year of my fieldwork I stayed in Mastipur[52] village, located in Bodh Gaya. My incidental residence in Mastipur constitutes my fieldwork related experience, which has found its way into the narrative: I did not go actively looking for

[52] Name not changed.

Mastipur nor did I intend to ever make it a part of my dissertation fieldwork analysis. Despite the odorous trek[53] to reach my rented apartment, I took up this place because the rent was reasonable and well within my means. In addition, the apartment-like set-up offered me a sense of 'privacy and security' as I was living with my then four-year-old daughter and my parents, who took turns accompanying us during most of the fieldwork. Activists associated with the land struggle later told me that the village was once their hub. However, the present day situation makes it hard to reckon that Mastipur once served as the center of a radical struggle. Even though I remained a passive observer there, my observations and experience of Mastipur continues to force its way into this dissertation as the lived experience of Mastipur reminds me time and again that the story/narratives I seek to share cannot mask/bear a semblance of completion without its inclusion. I try to make sense of this compulsion by phrasing it as an instance in which 'the field' chose the researcher instead of the usual other way around. This village is located close to the world-renowned Bodhgaya Temple and the Bodhgaya Math.

The second village, which I shall call, Kaari, was a village approximately 20 kilometers (~ 12 miles) from Bodhgaya town. This village is rather unique, as not all villages under the influence of the Sangharsh Vahini accepted the idea of land titles being handed out either jointly or in the women's name. Up until that moment of discovery, I had assumed that the entire 10,000 acres of land redistributed following the land struggle was either jointly or independently held by women, the majority of whom, were Dalits.

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[53] The open sewage and defecation lend a peculiar odor to the air which worsened during the monsoons.

The last site, which I shall call Dehri, was my initial choice of fieldwork; as the long-time grassroots activist who introduced me to this village said, "the movement is alive and active here." It is also located at a similar distance from Bodh Gaya as is Kaari village but in the diametrically opposite direction. The land struggle here is a result of the work that has been carried out by activists who were directly involved in the Bodhgaya land struggle and therefore would qualify as a contemporary struggle. After the Sangharsh Vahini retreated from the area, Dalits activists who were organized under Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS) continued their work in these regions. Dehri is a byproduct of the Bodhgaya Land struggle. Including it in the dissertation was important as it shows how the legacy of the radical struggle informs Dalit assertion and resistances in the present.

Chapters Outline

In the first three chapters I basically map out how the struggle unfolded in the three respective sites: Mastipur, Kaari and Dehri. In the last two chapters I discuss what land rights has meant for Dalit subjectivities in the present—to reiterate that the struggles and outcomes may have been captured as singular moments in the history of the land struggle, but the manner in which it unfolded over the years, in the different fieldwork sites, forces us to be cognizant of the factors that form and influence Dalit-women's ownership of land rights, which in turn shapes caste and gender relationships.

The first chapter, "Contesting Scape(s): Shifts in the dynamics of land, caste & gender in Bodh Gaya, Bihar" maps out the Dalit present in Mastipur and describes the challenges of doing fieldwork in a site that once was the heart of the struggle. The power vacuum left by Bodhgaya Math has brought to the forefront the long struggles of claiming Bodhgaya as a Buddhist place of worship. A concerted bid to develop Bodh Gaya as the "spiritual capital for it to serve as a civilizational bond between India and the Buddhist world"[54] has yet to take into account Dalits' histories, struggles and legacies in the regions that are systematically being wiped out. With 'land' becoming a commodity in the areas in and around Bodhgaya, Dalit communities are witnessing a complete reversal of the gains made by the Bodhgaya land struggle. The sharp rise in demand for land by international organizations attempting to profit from developing Bodhgaya as an international Buddhist tourist destination has systematically pushed Dalits to the sidelines. While the administration has been largely conspicuous by its absence, Dalits have resisted the sale of land at the risk of injury and death.

The second chapter, "Contesting Erasure? From bondage to relative freedom," details the present in Kaari village, where over 40 women secured joint land titles; and only a handful have been able to exercise full and/or partial control over their land. This chapter details how the gains of the movement have been severely undermined by the state machinery that overtly aligns itself alongside the landed castes. Drawing on my

54 See http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/narendra-modi-bodh-gaya-to-be-developed-as-spiritual-capital/article7619321.ece

ethnographic fieldwork in Kaari, I argue that despite the diametrically opposing stance of the state machinery and the landed caste towards Dalits, redistribution of material gains in the way of rights to redistributed land has broadened the space and scope for registering Dalit assertion and resistances.

In the third chapter, "Dalit 'kabza' over land: praxis for undermining social exclusion in rural Bihar," I use my ethnographic fieldwork insights from Dehri village to describe how the experiences of Bodhgaya land struggle have been used by Dalits beyond the actual movement itself. After the middle class activists of Sanghash Vahini receded from Gaya, Dalit activists continued their work in the region, resulting in the establishment of new Dalit villages. Although land remained the central organizing principle, through their movement they were simultaneously raising issues pertaining to wages, alcoholism, and other government programs. In addition, Dehri illustrates a subtle shift has taken place around the issue of demanding redistributed land. Dalits in Dehri are demanding that the state give them legal recognition over the land already under their *Kabza* (control).

In the fourth chapter, "Contested hierarchies? Dalit assertion over land redefines space/place," I discuss how Dalit identity has been transformed through the material gain of land rights. Additionally, I discuss the life history of Maaiya to show that although land has enabled and provided a voice to Dalits—this voice and new identity is consistently challenged and under threat. In documenting the journey from bonded slavery to relative freedom, I describe the struggles that were overcome and those that

have reinscribed social hierarchies, and in the process redefined the private and public domain.

In the fifth chapter, "Contested belonging? Mapping contemporary politics of Dalit becoming," I engage with the life history of Bhikari Ali, to illustrate the perpetual struggle of Dalits desirous of overcoming caste- and gender biases. While the practice of shunning caste and religious names was integral to the land struggle, its practice in everyday life requires careful consideration that might necessitate a momentary shift from being Bhikari Ali to Bhikari Bhuiyan. I make a case in this chapter that while individuals might choose at certain times to exercise autonomy from those identities prescribed at birth, at other moments they might have to return to these very detestable identities to achieve the next goal/moment/ the next event/ the next possibility, thereby blurring a clear escape from received identities, toward a full realization of adopted radical identities.

CHAPTER 1: CONTESTING SCAPE(S): SHIFTS IN THE DYNAMICS OF LAND, CASTE & GENDER IN BODH GAYA, BIHAR

History is not so much a fixed, objective rendering of "the facts" as it is a process of constant rethinking and reworking in a world of chance and change—Robert O' Meally & Genevieve Fabre[55]

As I sat in the small entrance hall waiting for the Dalit women who attained land rights in Mastipur to assemble, a small crowd swelled up at the main entrance through which natural light was coming in. Every so often, within the couple of hours that I was in that house, young-looking men would pop in and ask the man of the house, "Who is she and why is she here?" The men inquiring did not appear to belong to the community I sought to interview, and, before I realized, some of them had perched themselves so close to me that I had to ask them to step outside. It would hamper my recording, I offered rather feebly. The young men, meanwhile, stationed themselves next to the door, roughly five feet away, in a way that at least one of them could make eye contact with me at all times. It was intimidating, to state the least. Trying my best to ignore their presence, I tried to listen actively to what was being said in the room by men who were once part of the Bodhgaya land struggle.

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[55] By Robert O'Meally & Genevieve Fabre, History and Memory in African-American Culture (1994: 3)

"Most of them who took in the struggle[56] are dead. Those who are alive, have either succumbed to alcoholism or are no longer heeded by the youth in the community," said the man in whose house I was asked to sit and wait for the women to arrive. He filled me up with stories of how safe the area was at the time of the struggle, as middle-class women would come and stay with his family during the height of the movement, and how things have changed for the worse:

> The entire plot that you see had around 100 houses built by the Sri Lankan Government. Now there are approximately 500 houses. Paswans and Majhis[57] live in this area. There is Rajendra Paswan who people call the new Zamindar (landlord). He gets people from outside to beat up anyone who tries to plough their land. Paswans are stealing and snatching land from the Majhis. Only 15 days ago Charu Devi, wife of late Chanesar Majhi, was beaten up when she went to graze her goats in her field. The Paswans gets false papers made and threaten those of us who are unwilling to part with our land with court cases and jail. If Majhis do not listen to them willingly then they try to intimidate us through violence.

He stopped to acknowledge Charu Devi's presence, who had quietly made her way into the room, and acknowledged that she is among the few who had steadfastly refused to part with her land despite the threats and violence she continued to face from the 'new

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[56] Former bonded laborers who had taken active part in the struggle and form the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS)

[57] Different castes that fall under Dalits – Paswan is considered to be higher up in the social hierarchy of caste than Majhi also known as Bhuiyan in Gaya region.

landlord' in the community. Charu Devi advised me to come the following morning to talk to her, as it was getting late in the afternoon and she had work to attend to before sundown. The following morning, I returned to interview her, but was told by her daughter-in-law that she had left early to work on her fields. Her daughter-in-law said in a muted voice that she feared for her mother-in-law's life, as no one seemed to be cooperating with them. When I tried to reconfirm her mother-in-law's name, she said that she had no idea, as she just refers to her as *mai* (mother). Since the woman was non-committal about her mother-in-law's return, I decided to retreat, as my presence was drawing a lot of attention that I deemed as negative at that time.[58] I no longer lived in the community and did not have a place of refuge near by. The women, too, did not offer to let me sit inside the house.

I was unable to return to the 'site' or to the Dalit women who were at risk of losing land, as after my return, I received several phone calls from unknown people offering unsolicited help with whatever I seemed to be working on. One of the phone calls appeared to be from the person at whose residence I was waiting to meet: Charu Devi. He was in an inebriated state and in the brief time I took to make sense of what was going on at the other end of the phone, I learned that this person was insisting that I come over to his place and stay with his family. He then handed over the phone to another person, who came across as not drunk. As this not-drunk person proceeded to explain

[58] I felt it was unusual that, despite having met the day before, no one came forward to offer any information on when I should return to talk to the lady in question.

how he wanted to help me, I disconnected the phone.[59] Following this incident, I decided not pursue fieldwork in Mastipur further as I felt it was drawing a lot of unwarranted attention and scrutiny which I feared might affect my work at Kaari village, which up until much later in my writing phase was my primary site of research.[60]

However, as I wrote this dissertation to help formulate and further an understanding on women's/ Dalits'/ Dalit women's history, legacy, resistance and agency particularly following their active participation, in the land struggle and the lens of land rights, not including Mastipur, a classic example of 'failure' in conducting fieldwork in a space that was imbued with violence— tangible, intangible, visible and invisible forms of violence— appears as a betrayal of sorts to the very issues I seek to investigate.[61]

The failure to pursue fieldwork in Mastipur, at first appeared as an issue of personal safety, but upon reflection, appears that it could also have been a case of Dalit women deliberately precipitating 'failure' for both of our sakes.[62] The question that needs

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[59] I was told that even Sangharsh Vahini activists do not go in that area as it has now been overtaken completely by anti-social elements. I switched off my phone for a couple of days and then did not take up phone calls from any unknown numbers until the time I was in Bodh Gaya.

[60] No one took my explanation of doing a doctoral research seriously, "Yeah right! I do not understand why you risk your married life to be among these people," or "What is your real job"? "Why do you need to spend a such a long time with them? One or two days is enough" – were some of the questions posed to me in the field. My presence in the village mirrored the coming of the women activists of the CYSV, who despite their frail appearance were able to wrest land from the control of the landed caste as well as Math. The prevalent notion was no one wanted to be caught unaware this time around and therefore I was subject to intense scrutiny. Often time, rumors were floated to sow mistrust among the community members I was working with and or to test my 'real' intentions. There were quite a few who said it would be easy for me to procure of doctoral degree from regional university. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork among Dalits, was also viewed with the suspicion among the landed with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. I realized that it did not matter if I was saying the truth or not, I will remain suspect as I was asking questions pertaining to land, caste and gender.

[61] Personal security was one of the main reasons I had to back out from conducting my research in Mastipur as the place is a far cry from the revolutionary struggle it once embodied, as everyday forms of violence are normalized.

[62] Both Charu Devi and I posed immediate threats, although at that time I felt it was I who was in danger. Charu Devi was for daring to tell her story and narrating the violence she was facing and I for recording the experiences and or

to be asked here is who is to be held responsible for 'failure' in this context of hostility? It increasingly appears to me that the postponement of the interview was a strategy deployed by the women to deflect inquiry (inquisition) in the omnipresence of both insiders and outsiders[63]—none of which deemed trustworthy, primarily due to the fact that land was involved. While the daughter-in-law quietly admitted that her mother-in-law's life was in danger she stated that she did not know her name. While this ignorance could very well be true; it could also be an attempt to shield her mother-in-law from additional scrutiny from those who were after the family land. "Anyone could be acting as a *dalal* (broker) in that place," a long-time Sangharsh Vahini activist had noted. The brief anecdote gives an inkling of the 'perceived,'[64] actual and normalized forms of violence that has come to define the space/place known and recognized in the international scape as a key Buddhist heritage site.[65]

Here, I find Visweswaran's (1994) notion of 'feminist ethnography as failure' instructive as she asks for a foregrounding of not the multiplicity of positions a subject comes to occupy, but rather calls for a focus on how subjects are constituted often, but

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even remotely posing a possibility to undermine efforts to grab land. Therefore, without any state or social guarantee of safety and of freedom to associate and speak with the Dalit women who had fought and attained land the faults appears to institutional and societal—as the institution and society does not appear to be prioritizing Charu's and or mine safety and freedom of association, nor the academic freedom.

63 Here by 'insiders' I mean one's own family members, as instances of sons forcibly selling land against parental wish abound, along with neighbors, relatives and community members. I put myself in the outsiders' category.

64 I say 'perceived' here to highlight the threat I, as a researcher, felt while conducting fieldwork and to underscore the violence that comes with any overt and or perceived efforts to study issues related to land and land rights particularly of the marginalized population.

65 The Mahabodhi temple, (literally means the great awakening temple), a UNESCO world heritage site Bodh Gaya, is a Buddhist temple in located in Bodh Gaya. The temple is one of the four holy sites related to the life of the Lord Buddha, and particularly to the attainment of Enlightenment. For more information see, http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1056.

not limited to, multiple subject positions like caste, gender, class, religion. In this case, alongside with the multiple subject positions, the space/place was reconstituting the subject. I was overlooking how my presence itself was altering the subject, primarily, by drawing in suspicion, speculation and surveillance in an already charged and over-determined space/place— forcing subjects to conduct themselves differently to mitigate violence and buffer adverse impacts that seemingly neutral and altruist act of seeking personal account of the struggle had the possibility to trigger. The rallying cry of "Zameen kiski, jote uski (Whose land? Those who till!)", no longer finds resonance here as the what was once an easily recognizable and namable form of domination in that space/place—namely, the Math— has been diffused— paving way for other forms of power to fill in the void created by the Math's retreat. As the vignette shows, the displacement of one form of power has paved way for new power-relations to emerge that, unlike the Math, acts in a diffused manner, blurring the lines of oppressor and oppressed. The vignette clues us in to several aspects such as: a) one-time oppressed have turned into oppressors, blurring the historical caste lines which divided the oppressor and the oppressed; b) a state apparatus continuing to align its interests with the dominant class/caste; c) a weakening of resistance and collective interests at the margins, due to the ever-increasing class of Dalits having lost control over their redistributed land and a rapidly shrinking number of Dalits still trying to hold on to land;[66] and finally, d) the

[66] Prior to land struggle, everyone was landless however following the land struggle, a significant proportion of Dalits have lost their land, rendering those who continue to and or want hold on their significantly few in numbers. This has severely undermined the ability to organize for a common cause.

inevitability of Dalits losing their hard-fought rights to redistributed land. Attesting to this trend was a conference organized by the former CYSV members where the organization debated the issue of granting Dalits rights to sell their redistributed land to allow them to get proper compensation for the land.[67] "It is a matter of when and not if," one of the members had commented on the looming inevitability that Dalit's will eventually lose their hard-fought rights to land in the area.

In this chapter, I connect the dystopia of Mastipur with the purported vision of the nation-state about Bodh Gaya, to illustrate the processes through which local, subaltern histories along with the subaltern (Dalits/ women) subjects are 'imagined out'/ 'written out' of the national, as well as the liberal-neoliberal, projects of development and empowerment, ringing hollow claims of an ahistorized, liberal rights-based approach (Ong 1996). To do so, I provide an overview of the layered history of Bodh Gaya and in particular, Mastipur, to show that the Bodhgaya land struggle unraveled the power of the Math over the region and paved way for a greater role of the state and other non-state actors in the region who, until then, acted as second fiddle to the Math.

The refusal of the Indian State to heed the long-standing demand of Buddhists to hand over control of the Mahabodhi Temple[68] alongside its recent efforts to develop

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[67] A two-day seminar titled, "Property right for the Poor and Forest Right Act" was held on 16th and 17th September 2013 in Bodh Gaya. Property right in this instance was being interpreted as the government granting rights to the poor to sell and mortgage the land that they got due to the land redistribution initiatives. Currently, the redistributed land cannot be sold and or mortgaged under any circumstances. However, this rule is openly flouted as redistributed land is being mortgaged on long-term leases of 100 years, effectively undermining the safeguard's entire purpose. The MKS leaders in this conference were against the move.

[68] The Bodh Gaya Main Temple committee responsible for management of the heritage site is governed by amended Bodh Gaya Temple Act 1949 in 2013 has continued to rebuff claims to hand over the temple management to Buddhists

Bodh Gaya as a "spiritual capital" that has drawn in investment from the World Bank, and other Buddhist nations calls for a situated understanding of how neoliberal strategies engineered through a simultaneous reconfiguration of space/place and a management of aspirations and expectations of the local population, comes at the cost of eliding Dalit legacies, devaluing Dalit work and suffering in the region. Such a move not only glosses over and normalizes the religiously sanctioned and institutionalized caste-based historical injustices practiced and prevalent in this region as late as the 1990s, but continues to relegate a vast majority of Dalits on the margins, as their skills and knowledge do not find a significant market value in this new imagined space/place.

My questions here are not for or against development and or land rights discourse[69]; rather, it is directed more on the lines of: who gets to imagine a space/place? What gets privileged in this 'new imagination' of a space laden with historicity and why? How has this imagination impacted the local population majority of whom are Dalits? — To understand what has caused almost a complete reversal of the gains registered by Dalits, both in ending the control of the institution that promulgated the practice of *kamiauti*— an institutionalized and religiously sanctioned form of bonded labor and securing land titles for Dalits, both women and men, in the past three decades. A foregrounding of the history of the space/place allows one to get a situated understanding

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who view Bodh Gaya Mahant along with three other Hindu members on the eight-member committee as an instance of continued Hindu dominance and control of what is primarily viewed as a Buddhist heritage site.

[69] The intention and effort here is to not question if land rights for women, in particular Dalit women, is good or not. It would be a largely reductive and futile exercise. Rather, the effort here is to understand why the revolutionary potential of securing land rights by the most marginalized in society has not been realized.

of the basis on which current social and political machinations around the issue of gender, caste and land in the region are being staged. This would also allow for a situated understanding of how and why Dalits, despite having struggled successfully against the practice of *kamiauti* and procured land rights for themselves, have not been able to capitalize over these gains. For almost three decades after the watershed movement, Dalits who attained land rights have either parted with their land-- mostly under extenuating circumstances— and those who continue to hold on to their land are being cajoled and/or forced to part with it.

The majority of the Dalit women in the locality today reported that they were working as day laborers on construction sites during the agricultural off-seasons and take up agricultural work in neighboring villages during the agricultural work seasons.[70] "These are the types of work we are comfortable in," one of them remarked as she went on to detail the kinds of work she was comfortable doing.[71] This statement is critical as it provides insights into the skill sets that Dalit women excel in, which remain consistently devalued in a market driven economy. Apart from indicating that affirmative action designed to address historical caste-based prejudice and injustices does not even come close to addressing the concerns of rural Dalit women who are closely tied to the agricultural land by virtue of their labor, the current experience of Dalit women indicates that even when their labor is actively sought during the agriculture seasons, yet their skill

[70] The women argue that since they or their families no longer hold on to the land, they have to travel sometimes to distant villages in search of agricultural work.

[71] Often women in the community would hitch a ride with me to get as near as possible to their final destinations to save on transportation costs or walking.

sets are consistently devalued. Apart from agriculture, construction jobs, particularly those in brick kilns, appear as overtly visible sites of employment for Dalit women and yet there are stories of exploitation, pay discrimination and wage theft galore. Extremely low levels of literacy, compounded by rampant practice of child marriage, add to the vulnerability of Dalit women. Faced with bleak and ever-dwindling employment choices and opportunities along with the added responsibility of running a family, often single-handedly, the income from toddy brewing and selling comes across little as preferred individual choice but a forced recourse for mere survival. The imagination of the nation-state not only devalues the labor provided by Dalit women in this particular context, but is also actively jeopardizes their chances of survival and of a life with dignity.

Layered scape(s) and legacies of Bodh Gaya

The Buddhist heritage of Bodh Gaya town masks the different historical associations and cultural milieu of a town that is home to a primarily Dalit population. As per the 2011 Census, over 33 percent of the roughly 38,000 people in the Bodh Gaya town belong to the scheduled caste category. Due to a significant presence of scheduled caste population, Gaya has been declared as reserved constituency, meaning only those belonging to minority community can stand for elections here. Any visitor to the city can easily assess that those practicing the Buddhist faith are outsiders and or foreigners, while the majority of the local population identifies as Hindu, of which a significant proportion identify as Dalits. The anomalies of this particular space/place become more situated as one

physically traverses around the Main Temple complex and the space/place bears clues to the layered history of the place.

The Hindu Shaivite Bodh Gaya Math is headquartered in Bodh Gaya and its boundary runs almost parallel to the Mahabodhi Temple complex, which is separated by the bazaar that sits alongside the roughly 10-12 foot passageway. With various shops lining its outside wall and vendors with their wares sitting alongside the narrow lanes, it is easy to miss the Math and its only entrance, from the bazaar. The huge wooden door historically was said to evoke fear among the nearby local residents, who were primarily Dalits belonging to Bhuiyan caste. "The height of the door is suggestive of the grandeur it might have witnessed— elephants, camels, palanquins were said to have passed through this," said my fellow companion, recalling narratives of the power of the Math over the region as I forayed into the Math premises. "The Math was referred to as a *Sarkar* (government), while the democratically elected government in the State needed the prefix "Bihar Sarkar," a Sangharsh Vahini activist impressed upon me in his efforts to convey the absolute hold the Math over the people, primarily Dalits, in this region.

"At the time of the Math, everybody worked for Math and we were his Kamias," a Dalit leader had remarked further impressing upon me the omnipresence of the Math and its central role in structuring society and social relations in the region. As per a 1990 estimate, the Math had established 53 Kachheris or courts that served the multiple purposes of storage as well as the center of control and discipline over its population—

all of which were supposed to work for the Math albeit in different capacities (Khelkar & Gala 1990).

The administrative structure of the math mirrored the established caste hierarchies of the time. The *Gumastha,* or the overseer of different *kachheris,* was drawn primarily from the upper caste; the *Barahil* would be from middle castes or the dominant caste in its vicinity and was in-charge of overseeing the working of a *kachheri*. The *Goraiths* were pulled from the *Dusadh* caste and were primarily responsible for policing and disciplining the population, mainly those belonging to the Bhuiyan community who were considered to be the bottom of the caste hierarchy and served as the Math's *kamias* or the bonded laborers. The villages in and around the Math headquarters were primarily Dalit villages that provided labor for the Math's agrarian enterprise. As the biggest and most influential landholder in the region, the Bodh Gaya Mahant claimed and was given ownership of the world-renowned Mahabodhi Vihar temple complex until the Bodh Gaya Temple Act of 1949 was passed.[72]

The grandeur of the imposing lone door to the Math premises from the bazaar appears visibly and symbolically diminished in the present as it has been rendered obscure by the various hoarding as well as the din of the people and vehicles of all types

[72] The British recognized the hold of the Math over the Buddhist temple. As per the Act, Bodh Gaya temple committee would comprise of eight members— four Hindu members with the Bodh Gaya Math's Mahant as the permanent member on the committee and four Buddhist members. In addition, a Hindu District Magistrate of Gaya would preside over committee and in cases when the Magistrate was not a Hindu, the government would appoint a Hindu member to as the presiding officer for that duration. The Act was amended in 2013 to nullify the requirement that the District magistrate had to be a Hindu to preside over the Bodh Gaya Temple Management Committee.

ranging from hand-pulled rickshaws, polluting auto-rickshaws, and horse-drawn carriages, all competing for space alongside the Math's boundary. Once inside the boundary, the din subsides and one comes across the buildings at various stages of dilapidation and neglect in the Math premises. There is another door that opens directly on the banks of Falgu River and locals often used these two doors when commuting via foot or by a two-wheeler to cross the dry riverbed from Bakrow to reach Bodh Gaya bazaar or beyond— something unimaginable in the past. The Math wears a deserted look in the present and the ruins indicate its former glory. Strewn around the main building premises are numerous archeological remains.

A young Math resident, while offering the history of the place, indicated that the power and privilege of the Math was undermined by a group of people who called themselves Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (Sangharsh Vahini). When asked what he knew about this group, he said they were primarily people with communist and anti-social leanings with vested interests in undermining the interest of the Hindu people.[73] "The Hindus are the worst enemies of themselves," he had asserted. The young disciple was referring to the long history of the Math in the region starting from the 16th century onwards.

The Math was established during the Mughal period, under which it grew and prospered. It survived well past the colonial period into the post-colonial period—up until

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[73] This narrative also confirms the competing ideologies that were working in rural South Bihar at that time to bring about change. It has been reported that sometimes these competing ideologies worked to undermine each other, much to the benefit of the Math.

the late 1970s— the time when the youth group, the Sangharsh Vahini, wedded to the socialist ideology of the popular leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, appeared on the scene and decided to directly confront the Math. The Math had come to symbolize as the most powerful landlord in the region, with religious sanctity and a key source of oppression and destitution in and around Bodh Gaya. As Kaushal Ganesh Azad, a former Sangharsh Vahini activist noted,

> It took us one year to create some faith in the people. Earlier people did not believe in us. The Bodhgaya Math's status was very high, and it was in very high esteem in this area. The people had sort of *astha* (devotion) towards and in the Math, although the Math was involved in all sorts of wrong and illegal doings. The priests were supposed to maintain celibacy, but they had children, all sorts of illicit relationships, exploitation and work.

Contiguous to the Mahabodhi temple premise, is the Samanvaya Ashram established in 1954 by Gandhian Vinoba Bhave, on land granted by the Bodh Gaya Math. The ashram was envisaged by Bhave as the place for spiritual exchange and promotion of harmony among different faiths as well as a place of retreat for Bhoodan workers in Bihar.[74] Bhave's Bhoodan (land donation) campaign, in which landowners were asked to

[74] Although far from its former glory, the ashram continues this tradition under the guidance of Vinoba's disciple Dwarko Sundarani who is in his 90s.

willingly donate land for the landless, was said to be most successful in the state of Bihar.[75] JP, once an ardent follower of Gandhi and Bhave, reportedly, became disillusioned and highly critical of Bhave's Bhoodan movement, stating that it relied heavily on *karuna* (pity) and *daan* (donation) to alter oppressive social hierarchies that characterized rural India and it was this realization that paved way for the call to the youth to form the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini— a youth corps dedicated to the realizing his vision of a ushering in "total revolution" in the heart of rural India.

As if to mark this legacy, the Jayaprakash Narayan Udyan (garden) sits adjacent to the on the west side of the temple and shares the boundary with a mosque, which, too, is separated by a roughly twelve-foot passageway that leads to the neighboring villages, including Mastipur, one of the villages that constitute the Bodh Gaya town. Mastipur is flanked, primarily alongside its boundaries, by international monasteries, hotels and NGOs. While the locals call it a village, those visiting and or outsiders often term Mastipur as an anomaly and or a planned urban slum/sprawl clueing us to the rapid and not so positive transformations that are taking place in this space/place. For, as one moves past these monasteries and hotels one comes across single-storied row houses, whose residents, primarily Dalits, appear to have decent housing and yet face ignominy, exploitation, and destitution. They appear to be an induced obliviousness of the

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[75] As per a recent estimate, nearly 1.5 lakhs of the 3.8 lakh families who were donated land in Bihar during the Bhoodan campaign are yet to gain possession of the land. Also see, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/1-5-lakh-families-yet-to-get-Bhoodan-land/articleshow/45838052.cms

space/place's not-so-distant rich history of resistance and peace struggle— the Mastipur Kand.

Mastipur Kand: Undoing of the Math's centuries old hegemony

The memories of the Bodh Gaya land struggle, particularly of the Mastipur Kand, was rather difficult to access, as those who were part of it talk about it only when specifically probed.[76] However, when they recall, they recall it with much nostalgia, pride and sighs— paralleling the particular time in history as one which held a lot of promise and hope and almost invariably forcing the narrator to reflect on the present at the same time. In August 1978, it was in Mastipur, that the cry for an end to Math's centuries-old hegemony over Dalit lives in a well-encapsulated slogan —"*Hal kholo, jaldi bhago*" (open the ploughs and run fast) gained prominence. Dalits who worked as Math's *Kamia,* until then organized under the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS) by the Sangharsh Vahini activists, staged a protest against the Math's illegal control in nearly 25-30 nearby villages and prevented the Math's men from plowing the land by driving the oxen used in plowing the field away or by squatting in the fields or surrounding the fields. Women, men, young and old, are said to have taken part to prevent the hired men from forcibly plowing the fields.

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[76] I learnt about it when a former Sangharsh Vahini activist visited my rented apartment. The activist noted that given the strong presence of anti-social elements former activists normally bypass the area.

Matters between the Math and the Sangharsh Vahini and the MKS led-coalition came head-on on 8th August 1979, when the Math resorted to firing and hurling of hand-bombs at the peaceful protestors marching towards its Kachheri. Two landless laborers from Mastipur, Ramdeo Majhi and Pachu Majhi, were killed and one (Janaki Majhi) was injured, marking the struggle's first and only such causality in its decade-long presence in Bodh Gaya. The death of two Dalit laborers, instead of intimidating, worked to strengthen the resolve of the landless laborers as exemplified in the song— "*Jaan khoonwa ka badlae mein lelab zameinwa rae jaan*" (In return of blood, we will take away the land). In response to the Math's violence, on 15th August 1979, youth from all over the state and country congregated at Bodh Gaya to express their dissent and express their solidarity with the landless agricultural laborers' struggle against the Math. Jayaprakash Narayan, in his communiqué to the Sangharsh Vahini, expressed his solidarity with people of Mastipur and stated that his ill-health had prevented him from joining the protest in person and that he directs the Sangharsh Vahini youth activists to continue on their path of peaceful struggle.

Praxis of a peaceful struggle

The Mastipur shootings worked to accelerate the Dalit landless laborers' resolve to stake claim over the land held by the Math. To materialize the slogan *Hum ropae hain, Hum Kategein* (we have sown, we will reap), efforts were geared towards sowing the Mahant's illegal land that was either brought under the landless laborers' control or land

that was forced to remain fallow by preventing the Math from undertaking any agriculture-related activities. Activists note that both the Math and the administration[77] would not interfere in the sowing on the crops. However, when the time came to harvest the paddy, Bihar Military Police's 30 units were pressed into service by the Math in the villages that had undertaken paddy cultivation.

Activists state that the Math's Kachheris resembled a barrack and the state police was used once again to intimidate the landless laborers in the process, pitch the state's force against the peaceful agitation and struggle. The police forces started the process of destroying the almost-ripened paddy fields by harvesting the paddy well before its time. The challenges before the Sangharsh Vahini were manifold. One, to remain committed to the peaceful strategies of resistance even as the state uses its violent prerogative and decided to take sides with the Math openly. The second challenge was to devise peaceful strategies to not only circumvent the possibility of state violence, but also allow the landless laborers to reap the harvest they had sown and prevent the Math from once again appropriating the benefits of their labor. A conscious effort was also made to ensure that small farmers who may not have shared the social position as that of the Dalits, but were similarly positioned economically were not alienated or adversely impacted by the struggle's resolve to harvest the crops.

The struggle decided that in places where the small farmers had sowed the crops, two parts of the produce would be given to the farmers, one part to the landless laborers

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[77] Local administration that primarily constituted the police and local state government officials

and one part to the struggle's food grain collection. The Math will not be given any share as they asserted that the land belonged to the village. This move necessitated integrating peaceful strategies with guerilla techniques, including secretly assembling at a predetermined village location in the wee hours of the morning in huge numbers to aid the landless laborers of that particular village to harvest the crops.

The presence of thousands of the landless laborers at a time often served to limit police brutality. Often times it was reported that despite police firing landless agricultural laborers, primarily women, would continue to reap the harvest behind the raised mounds of the fields. The landless agricultural laborers were therefore successful in getting almost half the harvest despite Math-backed police atrocities. Following repeated defeats in harvesting the crops, the Math further intensified its legal strategies of harassing the landless laborers and Sangharsh Vahini activists. However, relief came to the struggle in 1987 when the Supreme Court of India ruled that the Math can have only 75 acres of land in the name of deities and 25 acres of land in the name of sevayat (those taking care of deities) and the remaining was to be redistributed among the landless agricultural workers (Kelkar and Gala 1990: 92).

Mastipur: Dystopia amidst claims of utopia

When I arrived in Bodh Gaya to conduct my yearlong ethnographic fieldwork in August 2011, the town was preparing for the 32nd Kalachakra to be held from 31st December to 10th January 2012. The event was being held after almost a decade in Bodh

Gaya and was to be presided by the Dalai Lama. The town was witnessing a big boom in construction of houses and hotels. The impression I garnered was that anyone with any money and any form of real estate were investing in construction to cash-in on the huge-influx of Buddhist tourists for that period" The locals, anticipating a huge deluge of tourists, disciples and followers of the Buddhist faith had reportedly taken up loans to ensure construction of additional rooms and/or floors before the Kalachakra commenced. The event was the talk of the town, as each member, in their own capacity, seemed to be preparing to cash-in on it. I was told that quite a number of Bodh Gaya residents, including those in Mastipur, would rent out their space and live in tents or move to nearby villages and/or relatives' homes to reap in the profits by renting out their homes during that period.

Needless to say, all these activities and talk greatly added to my discomfort. It made the task of finding a place to stay at a reasonable price a very arduous, sometimes frustrating and costly affair.[78] There were also a couple of those who were willing to offer their rooms for rent at a slightly discounted rate, provided I promised to vacate it during the peak tourist seasons (i.e. October-February). The search got so depressing that I decided to postpone my fieldwork to March 2012--after the Kalachakra. After my return, locals apprised me that I had done well by postponing my fieldwork as during the Kalachakra there was no place to keep one's foot in the town. It is reported that in that

[78] The rooms, some of which were windowless and/or had no proper ventilation, coupled with shared bathrooms, had an asking price that ranged anywhere from Rs. 5000.00 to 20,000.00 per month (~ $110-$500.00)[78]—making the rent comparable to living in one of the metropolitan cities of India. At that time the conversion rate of a dollar hovered between 42.00 to 43.00 rupees.

year approximately 2 lakh people descended over this otherwise sleepy town for the 10-day period. My second attempt to find a place was successful as I decided to heed the advice of a well-respected community member from the area who suggested that I drop my US connection and stress more my Bihari roots and Indian connections.[79] The apartment type arrangement that I sought was located in the heart of Mastipur. The multi-storied-house, belonging to an upper-caste member, was burrowed behind the rows of Dalit homes, built by the late Sri Lankan Prime Minister Premadasa.[80]

Following the withdrawal of the Sangharsh Vahini activists from the region, Mastipur received an unexpected patronage from the Late Sri Lankan President, Premadasa, who was taken aback by the decrepitude in heart of the very place that Buddha attained enlightenment. The Sri Lanka president initiated a 75-lakh Indian rupees housing project and personally handed over keys to the 100 homes built there, each consisting of two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom.[81] The assassination of the Sri Lankan President on May 1, 1993, within a fortnight of inaugurating the residential complex in Mastipur, brought the program to a halt.

Upon inquiry, I found out that my landlord had bought the land from the Dalit household residing right in front of his newly constructed home. He seemed to be egging

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[79] I promptly followed his advice. I was able to find a place in the heart of Mastipur for Rs. 4500.00 inclusive of all charges. It addressed my financial concerns, as I did not have a grant for the first year of my fieldwork.

[80] I had been to this place prior to the Kalachakra but was glad that I had decided to forgo it at that time, as I would have ended up paying way higher rent than what was negotiated on my behalf. The house seemed ideal as it was built like apartments with each unit having a separate entrance.

[81] See http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/bodhgaya-former-sri-lankan-president-premadasas-housing-project-comes-to-nought/1/265911.html and https://terraurban.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/mastipur-bodhgaya-story-of-an-incidental-rehabilitation-scheme-in-the-land-of-the-enlightenment/

the household members to part with more land. At the back of this building was a huge stagnant sewage pond, which was used by the community to primarily use to relieve themselves, fish and bathe. The narrow balcony that wrapped around the second-floor apartment allowed me an unobstructed view into adjacent homes and was where I conducted most of my interactions.[82]

While neighboring Dalit households offered me homegrown vegetables and badi (lentil nuggets), I passed on gently used clothing, chocolates, books and stationary. [83] Also, each time I moved in or out of the apartment, I would stop by to make small talk or check in on the woman whose door I had to cross to make it to the building where I was renting my apartment. Mangari was widowed at an early age. She had a daughter who was in her early teens probably and two sons, one of which were taken away by a Bhutia[84] on the promise that he would ensure that the son would have some form of education and would also do light household chores. The person also promised that he would send a monthly amount of Rs. 3000.00 (~ $70 per month). I observed that families were more willing to send their male children for work rather than female children, as

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[82] The house was one of the tallest residential buildings in the area.

[83] Bodh Gaya displays the small-town characteristics where everyone knows everyone. My parents and my daughter played a huge rule in this process of familiarizing. For the first month of fieldwork, when we did not have a cooking gas, we had our meals at the street side food vendor run by a lady and her family. They became the de facto nani (grandmother), didi (sister) and uncle. These relations along with the ones I made as I conversed and made small talk with a couple families on my way to my rented apartment proved helpful. My daughter and my parents were key to this process of becoming familiar to the community and familiarizing myself with the community. Also, using the service of the local women like getting my clothes mended for myself and my extended family, seeking help with my household chores and contributing in times of celebrations and hard times, particularly birth and death, helped me make connections. The items that were most in demand from me were warm clothes and bras, which often led to hilarious conversations about size.

[84] The Buddhist monks were referred to as *Bhutia* in the local parlance and were said to be from the Buddhist countries and or monasteries within the country primarily from Shimla and Dharamshala.

that would bring shame upon them. Once Mangari gave away the child, she had not heard back from either the man who took her child away nor has she seen the money.[85] Mangari told that she lost her husband to alcoholism, a fact that characterized the majority of the Dalit households in the area. She supports her family of three by working as a daily wage laborer either on the fields during the agricultural season or on the brick kilns during the off-seasons. She supplemented her income by brewing and selling toddy. All households would brew and sell toddy for self-consumption and or sale. In the absence of work that Dalit women and men could gainfully employ themselves, selling locally brewed toddy becomes the main source of income and tension in the neighborhood. She was upset with her sister-in-law, who she alleged by covertly trying to sell of her share of land as well as keep the proceeds that she would get from selling it.

Now that I begin to write about my experience, I find what I have often described as akin to being submerged in a cacophonous environment for the first part of my fieldwork as very telling. The space/place confounded my senses: visually, verbally, aurally, olfactorily. Any festivity in the area marked a substantial rise in decibel levels to the point that closing the windows was never adequate, as they would normally shudder and visibly shake and or vibrate. Time was never a consideration when playing these songs. The songs played during marriages and festivities were played on full blast with

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[85] Her story is however not unique. During the course of my fieldwork, I was in touch with three women who traced and rescued their three kids from Jaipur and Himachal Pradesh only after paying for their children's release. The kids were found to be working under the most inhumane conditions. Poverty often compels families to send their children away to work. There seems to an established network of people, often times those within the community, who are paid handsomely for providing the children for household and factory chores.

lyrics having double-entendres[86] and tunes that were catchy and raunchy at the same time. At the peak of the marriage season there could be couple of DJ systems playing at the same time and competing to be heard. The beats were monotonous and jarring—almost indicating a desire by those around to be drowned and or stoned by the monotony of it all. The youth, mostly boys, taking part in the impromptu dance that surrounded this jarring performance appeared to be doing so in a state of trance. That year, following the Durga Puja festivities, another level of cacophony was added.

Now competing with the over-the-top audio assaults were the songs played promptly every morning and evening by a newly formalized committee of a temple in the vicinity that had received a boost following a generous donation from a local hotel owner.[87] The once-accessible temple, whose grounds had been a playground for community children and provided the short cut to the city tap for some families, was rendered inaccessible by constructing a nearly six-foot-tall boundary wall around it. Those encroaching upon the temple land were asked to pay up or vacate the temple land. The seemingly harmless act created discomfort and disgruntlement, but no one seemed to openly oppose it or talk about it. When I inquired, one member said any act of resistance would be interpreted as challenging and/or obstructing religion and religious work—"After all it is about *bhagwan* (god). Anything related to God cannot be bad." It appeared that although there was disgruntlement and resentment, no one opposed openly. I believe

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[86] Misogynist forms of reinforcing gender norms and control over sexualities and bodies.

[87] These times were dominated by melodious recorded as well as impromptu *bhajans* sung by adults and children, which I was told were arguably better as it lead to the development of a spiritual being.

it had to do with the support shown in the form of monetary assistance provided by the influential people in the locality.

Also competing for the airwaves were the almost daily acrimonious and sometimes violent fights that erupted in the adjacent homes. The verbal fights irrespective of the cause and or reason normally entailed graphic verbal accusations of allegedly grave sexual misconduct and licentious behavior. The graphic nature of the accusations and the ease with which it was blurted often made me wonder what it meant to share the same geographic space that was marked separate by a mere physical brick boundary— the violence and threat felt intimate yet distant.[88]

Liquor played a huge role in all these altercations as those involved in the squabble appeared to be at different stages of a hang over—a resultant from drinking the night before and or continuing to do is in the morning. The smell of toddy was omnipresent and its production, sale and consumption unrestricted in the area. Almost all Dalit homes struggling to make end meet would brew *Mahua* to make *tadi* (locally brewed liquor) both for personal consumption and sale. I was advised not to venture out after sun down as most residents of the place, including women, took to drinking and

[88] These high-pitched fights that often lead to physical ones would involve exchange of graphic descriptions of sexual acts that more often than not was successful in painting a verbal picture of the act allegedly performed by the person(s) involved.

would be in an inebriated state.[89] "After drinking, people forget the difference between one's own and others," I was cautioned, by one upper caste resident in the community.

My daily alarm clock, however, was this four- or five-year-old boy who was barely three feet tall. He would wake up around 5:30 or 6:00, depending on the season, and perhaps the first thing he would do was pee from the roof of his single floor house while blurting obscenities without giving much thought to anyone or anything around— painting a picture of oblivion that I found difficult to grapple with and yet very amusing and entertaining.[90] He would continue even when it appeared that the surrounding noises had drowned his feeble but, nevertheless, by now, well-rehearsed shrill rant.[91]

However, what prompted me to pry about the space/place was when a particular sight jolted my middle-class sensibilities. It is an image that at first sight had me second guessing until my accompanying partner reconfirmed that it was not a delusion— it was indeed used condoms littered for a couple of yards on a section of the main road. When I shared my experience with other people, I was told that the place has earned a reputation

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[89] The auto person who would come to pick me up for my trip to the village would often ask me how I managed to stay there. There were others who often remarked on the dubious character of the area but I did not quite understand these questions until I was forced to rent another place for the second long session of my fieldwork.

[90] My second-floor apartment started where the single-storied house in front ended, allowing me to get a level view of this little one at work each morning. It is an act that I witnessed so frequently that I would often ask for his whereabouts if I did not hear him in the morning or he choose to wake up in a rather pleasant mood. More often than not this little boy's ranting would drown in the bitter verbal fights between the women. One had to experience a daily assault to one's senses while living there and therefore, it was difficult to make sense of Mastipur until after I left the space/place.

[91] My parents who were living with me to help me with my daughter were very unhappy as they felt that place would have a negative impact on my daughter. They were worried that she will pick up the sexually explicit filthy language from the children and people. My daughter did not pick up the language and quickly forgot the catchy raunchy numbers that to my middle-class-caste sensibilities appeared vulgar and obscene.

for sex tourism.[92] As if on cue, new meanings stepped in to explain my previous interactions with young girls yet to get to their teens— draped in saris and acting as adults, 'being friendly' with foreigners and having their pictures taken for the young boys and/or men who would either be taking pictures of these young girls whom they claimed was family. Most of them spoke multiple languages, and mingled freely with foreign tourists, primarily, I was told, to gain some material favors. During the initial days, when children would accost me asking for favors, their acquaintances would reproach them saying, "Leave her alone; she is not a tourist." I was told that children often narrate their experience of poverty to loosen the purse strings of tourist. More often than not, the items bought by the tourist would be returned to the shop for a refund. On the other hand, with very few exceptions, the shopkeepers blatantly over-charged tourists on even the most basic of items like dairy products and water. The MRP, instead of serving as Maximum Retail Price, worked as Minimum Retail Price in and around Bodh Gaya.

What comes to the fore from the above narrative that the material prosperity that tourism brought to the town continues to mirror the caste hierarchies as freedom from bondage does not necessarily insure a greater share in the windfalls that tourism has brought to the region. Within a generation, the descendants of the formerly bonded laborers are losing land at a fast pace and are primarily restricted to menial jobs at the

[92] Among other things, it helped explain why I got such odd queries when I mentioned that I was renting out a place in Mastipur.

monasteries, banks, hotels and NGOs.[93] Dalits families who received land due to the Bodhgaya land struggle were/ are being forced to sell land willingly and/or unwillingly. To get around the legal restriction on redistributed land that it cannot be sold— most transactions are taking place under what is called a 100-year lease system. Instances of *prashahan* (local administration) looking the other way and often times visibly projecting helplessness and or willfully cooperating to undermine Dalit right to the redistributed land abound. An activist in the Bihar movement of the early 1970s as well as a Sangharsh Vahini sympathizer while commented on the present state of affairs in Mastipur:

> There is no one to fight here. The leaders have left. Only liquor is made and sold due to which people hesitate to come here. Nearly a quarter of the women widowed here are due to rampant alcoholism. In the past couple of years, the land mafia has taken strong hold in this area. There are *dalals* (land brokers) working actively on each and every person who has land. People who had actively taken part in the struggle their sons are selling away land forcibly. What to do? The *prashashan* has decided to look the other way.

The refusal of the state apparatus to take stock of the status of redistributed land among former bonded laborers in the region or to even act on instances of gross violation of appropriation of redistributed land despite the prohibitory mandate is consistent with the

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[93] While numerical strength of the Bhuiyan community went unmatched, they appeared to be at the bottom of the hierarchy. The Paswan or Dushad follow them in numerical strength. Dispersed between these two communities were predominantly the Rajput and Muslim households among various others.

culture of impunity that the state of Bihar has extended to those that mirrors its ingrained bias towards— dominant caste and class.

By juxtaposing feminist critiques of liberalism and neoliberalism (Ong 2006) alongside the observations of Arvind N. Das in the what he calls, "*The Republic of Bihar*" (1992), it becomes apparent how and why the state apparatus meant to the address structural inequalities continue to resist attempts by marginalize group to address those inequalities. The passage from colonial to post-colonial phase witnessed an adoption of institutions that characterize the modern nation-state; however, the feudal bias continues to infiltrate, inform and consolidate in post-colonial phase.

Bodh Gaya, Dalits and 'worlding'

'Worlding' as coined by Spivak depicts the ways in which a colonized space is brought into the world (Spivak 1999). This notion is helpful, as it not only draws attention to the historical and ideological compulsions at work that makes it impossible for subaltern subjects to be heard but also allows one to examine how particular subaltern citizenship is reconfigured following an influx of global capital through an interplay of global forces and the nation-state (Ong 2006).

The process of worlding has taken center stage in Bodh Gaya— a sleepy town that awakens following the spurt in tourist activity primarily centered on Buddhist pilgrimage from October to March. The recognition of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a World Heritage Site in 2002 ushered increased popularity to the place of reverence

for Buddhists all over the world. With the diffusing of the Math's hold over the region, the state took on the tasks of re-configuring the space/place that holds immense significance for Buddhists. Efforts are underway to privilege the legacy of Buddha that had nearly gone extinct in the land of its very origins. It was only in the late 19th century that Buddhist interest in the temple complex was revived (Trevithick 2006). The temple itself remained appropriated by the Bodh Gaya Math who claimed/had ownership of the temple until 1949. Despite widespread acknowledgment that the Mahabodhi temple complex is a Buddhist heritage site, the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949, enshrined Hindu dominance by encoding that the Temple Management committee comprise of four Buddhist and four Hindu representatives with the Bodh Gaya Mahant being the ex-officio member of the committee. An amendment to the Act in 2013 ensures that the District Magistrate to head the temple committee, even if the person is non-Hindu.[94] It calls for a careful analysis of the reconfigurations in power relations that occurred following the undermining of the Math and the withdrawal of the Sangharsh Vahini activists completely from the area after 1986. Bodh Gaya, beginning from the 1970s onwards for almost a decade, witnessed an intense socio-political peaceful conflict that saw the State align with the Math before yielding to increasing public pressure and the court orders to redistributed the nearly 10,000 acres of land illegally held by the Math. The workings of the state and state apparatus during the struggle as well as after the struggle underscore

[94]http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/amendment-allows-nonhindu-to-head-bodh-gaya-temple-committee/article4974856.ece

the tenacity of upper caste/class bias in the state bureaucracy that works to severely undermine Dalit aspirations and or achievements.

Riding on the immense patronage that Bodh Gaya receives from Buddhist nations, the state accelerated the task of reconfiguring the space/place to meet global expectations. Concerted efforts transform the landscape to resemble the Buddhist legacy. Evidence of these efforts is seen through the rapid construction of monasteries affiliated to different countries, sects and regions. Although roads in Bihar are notoriously known to resemble the moon surface, those on the Buddhist circuits impress otherwise. The envisioning of Bodh Gaya as part of the Buddhist circuit has lead to speculation leading to spike in land prices, land grabs and the speculative construction. Visually and otherwise, these rapidly constructed structures appear to circumscribe the local population, predominantly Dalits, as evidenced in Mastipur. The track record of the state, followed by its refusal to take into account local input, has also paved way for guarded optimism and apprehension. For the Dalit population in Mastipur, the worlding practices serves to mask the Dalit plight. Drawing on Aihwa Ong who describes worlding as "a practice of centering, of generating and harnessing global regimes of value (Roy and Ong 2011: 312)"— one evidences a "milieu of interventions" being staged to accelerate a particular vision of that space. The demand for land in Bodhgaya by foreign monasteries, temples, trusts, NGOs and or the hotel industry have lead to an upward-spiral trend in the prices of the land in and around the town. Oral narratives of Dalits, and in particular Dalit women, being threatened rarely get heard even as the memory of the movement appears to meeting the same fate that

Buddha's legacy suffered in the past— until it was recovered in the late 19th century. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's vision for Bodh Gaya to serve as a "civilizational bond between India and the Buddhist world"[95] precludes the possibility of multiple legacies that the physical space of Bodh Gaya enshrines, to co-exist.

Conclusion

In its attempts to link up with the Buddhist world by transforming Bodh Gaya into a 'spiritual capital' for Buddhists all over the world,[96] the Indian nation-state has galvanized processes through which local Dalit interests, history and memory are being systematically elided. Globalization fueled by transnational capital laced with religious compulsions and connections is strangling Dalit legacy in Bodh Gaya, often in ways that are detrimental to the entire community and is reminiscence of the very conditions that the community struggled against and momentarily overcame. As one of the Sangharsh Vahini activists rhetorically asked me, "How do you explain such destitution and depravity at the heart of the town that is world renowned as the place where Buddha attained enlightenment and is being developed as a spiritual capital?"

The bleak picture that Mastipur represents cannot be merely be explained away as the failure of the land struggle or the failure of Dalit women to realize themselves fully as 'women' to exert full control over their redistributed land. The experience of Mastipur is

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[95] http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/narendra-modi-bodh-gaya-to-be-developed-as-spiritual-capital/article7619321.ece

[96] ibid.

rather a reaffirmation of the nation-state's relationship to its margin and in this case Dalits. The refusal to engage Dalit concerns explicitly showcases the efforts of the state to normalize caste-based discrimination and its refusal to acknowledge and therefore address the institutionalized ways in which discrimination (caste, gender and religion) works, thereby perpetuating the view that caste and caste-based discrimination is a vestige of a feudal system that will eventually fizzle out in time with adequate progress and development of the nation-state. This view also justifies State efforts to develop tourism often at the cost of Dalit interests, which primarily resides in the State aiding subsistence farming alongside tourism rather than a privileging of one imagination over the other. The devaluation of Dalit skill sets that are primarily related to agriculture and manual labor in a knowledge-based economy leads to a further dis-enfranchising of Dalit experience in the alternative imagination of the space/pace— in which Dalits take part but are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchical participation. In the Nation-state's decision to privilege Buddhist memory and legacy of Bodh Gaya, subaltern legacies and histories are being overridden.

CHAPTER 2: CONTESTING ERASURE? DALIT NARRATIVES OF A TENUOUS STRUGGLE FOR 'KABZA' OVER REDISTRIBUTED LAND, IN GAYA, BIHAR

"Harijan kae bole, ki saath muri kaat kae, Devi maaiya tohara par chadaibo; aharawa lootaiya nahin debo; aharwa loot lailiyae aur saath go muri bhi bachai lailae"— Maaiya, Kaari Village, Bodhgaya, Bihar

They told us, Harijans, that we will offer seven Harijan heads to the goddess; we will not let the Harijans take over the *Ahara* (irrigation tank); we looted the crops in the Ahara and also saved the seven heads— Maaiya, Kaari Village, Bodhgaya, Bihar

"*Pahele, babaji (Mahant) kae raj rahel*, (earlier, babaji ruled)," Maaiya[97] stated when I asked her about the history of Kaari village.[98] Raising her hand, she indicated that everything we saw from under the groves, where we were sitting, located at one corner of the village, belonged to the Math. One of the oldest living members of her community, Maaiya prided herself for having taken part in what she termed was a '*kranti ladia'* (revolutionary struggle) and having gone to jail to realize her 'haq'- her rights. When asked about her age, Maaiya replied she was among the few '*puranka admi*' (people from

[97] Maaiya, literally meaning mother, was referred as such by almost everyone in her community.
[98] Kaari village is located approximately 18 kilometers away from the Math's headquarters located in Bodh Gaya town and had a Kachheri.

the old days) still alive in the village. In proceeding to narrate the history and struggle of her people and her village, Maaiya took the tape recorder and held it closer to her mouth to ensure that every word she spoke was recorded clearly, noting, "It is important that people knew about our struggles. We do not want our struggle to die with us. We want people to remember our *sangharsh* (struggles),"[99] following which, in a slow and assured voice that paused at regular intervals, she proceeded to narrate the story/ history of her village and her people:

Babaji gosain (Mahant or the Giris) settled my people in this village as his kamias and that is how my ancestors got here. He had a lot of land. We all, including our children worked on babaji's land. In those days, everyone worked for the Mahant, even the grihast (landed castes).*[100]* But we were his kamias. The gorait (guard and messenger) was a Dusadh.[101] A gowar (Yadav) was babaji's *barahil* and he was in-charge of the kachheri. There was a big kachheri here. The grihast have bought the land from babaji (math) on which the kachheri stood and have constructed their houses over it. The kisan at that time

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[99] Maaiya had gotten used to the device and had discovered that if the devise was not held close some of her statements might not be recorded properly. She would often make me playback her interviews which she listened to carefully, as if taking mental notes of what she had said and offered elaborations and or clarifications at places where her voice had drowned in the surrounding cacophony. She was my companion in the village. She accompanied me wherever she could, and at other times asked her granddaughters to keep me company and not leave me alone. Maaiya's main work was tending to the goats and pigs and collect cow dung for making dung cakes that were used when there was a shortage of dry wood or during the monsoon seasons when the wood would be too wet to ignite. I would often accompany her on her chores as it allowed me to both explore the village and talk to her freely without much interruption. I learned that only dung that had fallen on common grounds or in the fields could be picked up or else one could be accused of theft. In addition, dung on the roads, if not picked up almost immediately after the cattle had passed, could not retrieved as the passing motor vehicles would have flattened them into the ground.

[100] The Gowar also referred to as Yadav and the Kahar. Both these caste fall under the Other Backward Caste or OBC category.

[101] Bhuiyans were generally considered the lowest in the caste hierarchy and were subjected to bonded labor. The Dusadh or Paswan as they are popularly known in today's parlance also fall under the category of Dalits but are situated above them in social and often material standing.

(Math rule) however did not have enough land as everything belonged to the Bodh Gaya Math. The kisan would also do majdoori (work) on the Mahant land. All the kisans with very few exceptions had 10 katha of land.[102] No one got more than this amount of land. The kamia got 1 katha land.

Maaiya's narrative treads in-between narrative and counter-narrative because it is not only a telling of a history of the Bhuiyan community in Kaari, but that of the social order in the villages under the Math's control— indicating that the history of the Math is partial without an accounting of the social order under its control. The Math's history has been documented around its affluence and the circumstances under which it took up ownership of the Mahabodhi Vihar in Bodh Gaya, archeologically established as a Buddhist site, a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2002 and revered internationally.[103] While the texts do convey that the Math survived and flourished under three distinct and successive rules— the Mughal era, the British Colonial Rule and post-colonial India i.e. up until the late 1970s (Geary 2013)— the nature and impact of monastic governmentality on the social order in the region is yet to be adequately researched. Maaiya's narrative therefore serves to shred some of the historical silence on the oppressive legacy of the Math. The uncovering of silence becomes an important project as it is not only key to Dalit struggles for land rights in the region but also works to

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[102] Although one katha in Bihar ranges from 750 square feet to 2000 square feet; kamia's were allocated plots of land that were closer to 750 square feet.

[103] David Geary (2013) in his article identifies agrarian reforms and the Bodh Gaya land struggle as main reason behind the decline of the Math that has paved way for the resurgence of Bodh Gaya as a Buddhist site in the international arena.

expose the ways in which caste-mediated gender discriminations gets normalized— and in the process renders those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy as passive and acquiescing subjects.

Prior to the land struggle in the region, a landless Dalit's ability to reside in a village was tied to their acceptance of kamiauti— a form of bonded labor that had religious, social and cultural sanction in Gaya region (well into the early 1990s) to the landlord. A kamia was viewed as the property of the landlord. Dalit women's status under this system was all the more vulnerable because if the Mahant's men did not find the woman subservient enough, they would ask the kamia to remarry and the expenses of the wedding would be borne by the Kachheri (local courts). These kachheri served as sites of monastic 'Panopticon'— performing acts of monastic governance that entailed collecting rents, grains storage as well as undertaking acts of arbitration, discipline and 'monastic justice' through well-honed and established mechanisms of surveillance and violence.[104] The narrative inadvertently underscores the totality of Math's control and its role in structuring social life in the region under its control. The totality of control implies that the constraint put forth by the Math's regime not only informed the nature of oppression but also provides us a sense of what resistance and agency under the given circumstances could look like (Scott 1985).

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[104] The local Kachheri served as both the quarter as well as office of the Math officials. Just like the state, the Math had the monopoly of violence over its subjects and kept the social order intact and/or disciplined through system of surveillance and violence.

Therefore, for the Dalit community in Kaari, 8th August 1978 holds greater significance than 15th August 1947— as freedom from colonial rule did not translate into their emancipation as they continued to serve under the Math, as bonded slaves.[105] Following the Mastipur incident[106], Dalits in Kaari actively sought out the Sangharsh Vahini and with their help staged their struggle for control over Math's land from the late 1970s onwards. Therefore, India's 'tryst with destiny' at mid-night, as the first Prime Minister of Independent India so eloquently tried to put it, was at best selective. Nearly three decades after the *Kranti Ladia* in Kaari, Maaiya's narrative appeared driven by an urgency to undermine erasure and elision— as the two phenomenon that she identified are already in the process of realizing itself and holds the potential for undermining not only their hard fought independence and freedom from servitude but also deny her community— voice, legacy, history and dignity. In this chapter, I detail how the land struggle unfolded in Kaari to help understand the present dilemma of the community— having actual control over the land, they hold the *parwanas* (legal document of redistributed land). This is a feat that can only be achieved 'peacefully' through state-initiated arbitration.

Counter-narrative of the Math's legacy in the region

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[105] The practice of forced labor and bondage was locally referred to as Kamiauti in Gaya region and by no means was unique to Gaya. Despite legislation prohibiting its practice, MKS activists detail that the overt practice continued well into the late 1990s. It will not be a stretch to say that this practice continues to exist in the present, although in varying degrees of intensity and prevalence.

[106] Described in Chapter 1.

The fragile thread of recognition as Math's Kamia that formed the basis for Dalits residing in the village was threatened following the passage of the Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act 1961. Despite the landed elites' resentment to the Act that not only delayed but also undermined its implementation in the state, the legislation nevertheless marked the beginnings of the unraveling of the Math's estate, as well as the brewing of discontent at its margins. The unraveling of the Math's control over its estate allowed for new hierarchies and caste-class mediated power relations and struggles to emerge in the countryside.[107] These observations are in accordance with the findings of scholars working in the region who have noted that it is primarily the upper backwards castes (Yadav, Kurmis and Koiri) who have been the main beneficiaries of state initiated reforms and schemes (Blair 1980; Guru and Chakravarty 2005; Chaudhry 1998) as they constituted the tenants and sharecroppers. This particular legislation, however, marked a decisive turn for the Bhuiyan community in Kaari as the Math's gumashta (Math's agent/manager) secretly handed over control of the Math's land to the grihast.[108]

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[107] The bill was opposed by the first President of Independent India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who was from Bihar. Prasad had also refused to ratify the Hindu Code Bill, which codified "the principles of right to property (for women), the order of succession to property, maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption and guardianship." Following his refusal, the then-Law Minister who had drafted the bill, B R Ambedkar, resigned. The justification given by Prasad at that time was, "New concepts and new ideas are not only foreign to the Hindu law but are susceptible of dividing every family." http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060601/asp/nation/story_6296584.asp

[108] The gumashta enjoys a unique position that allows him to prosper at the expense of the landlord, as he acts on his behalf and is responsible for overseeing bookkeeping records, as well as the sharecroppers/ tenants who must pay the fixed amounts. The barahil is said to be the assistant of the gumashta. As per the Dalit community, a baaban (bhumihar rajput) from Chapra district, Jwaala Prasad, within a year, around the time the of the imposition of the Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act 1961, handed over the control of Math's land to the grihast, for paltry sums of money to get around the new legislation that would allow the state to take control over

Maaiya noted that this single action of the Math dealt a divisive blow on her community as they were served with the choice to either transfer their bondage to the new owners of the land— the grihast— or leave the village. Maaiya says everything happened very swiftly, taking them by complete surprise,

We did not even know that the gumashta was selling the land. Had we known, we would not have let him sell this land. The way we are fighting now, we would have fought then too. We came to know when the *napi* (land measurements) took place. They tried to measure our (homestead) land given to us by babaji. We told them that this is basal zameen (homestead land), how can you sell this land off? You have to leave some land for us. The Math had given the *gharari* (homestead) zameen to his kamias. To this, the state official said that, 'No, there cannot be any homestead land as the zamindar's zamindari is no longer in effect. He (zamindar) has sold all the land so, why will this land remain unsold? *Jab math nahein rahega, tab tum kamia kiska rahega. Tum ab is gaon mein nahin reh sakta hai* (if there is no math, then whose kamia will you remain? You all can no longer remain in this village.)' The Mahant washed his hands of the whole issue by handing over control of the land to the kisans at very low prices.[109] None of the Bhuiyans got a whiff these transactions. We also did not know much at that time. What could we have done? Our entire family survived on 2 *ser kachi dhaan and marua*.[110] The

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surplus land and redistribute among the landless. The Math, in order to minimize its loses, handed over control of land to the grihast with no consideration for the Kamias who were serving under him.

[109] Some paid Rs. 50, some others Rs. 250.00 or Rs. 500.00. In 1960s $1 ~ Rs 5.00

[110] Less than 2 kilograms of un-husked rice or porridge made from it. It was known to cause stomach pain and upset stomach.

kisans have become zamindars now. They tried to assert their control over us by stating that we were their kamias, as the Harijans, had no option but to work on grihast fields. They said, the Harijans have not known anything else and have nowhere to go. We went to the officials but they turned us away. We went to the different parties, but they were not interested in helping us.

In Kaari, the Yadav stood to gain the most from the math's withdrawal while the Bhuiyan community being landless agricultural laborers, were threatened with immediate eviction, if they refused to serve the grihast as a Kamia, like they did under the math.[111] The community alleges that the Barahil of the village, a Yadav by caste, dissuaded the Mahant from granting the, "sixteen Bhuiyan families, 16 acres of land stating that the Bhuiyans in the village grudge when they get 3 *ser kacchi dhan*[112]; imagine what will they do to our women when they get an acre of land." I am told that upon hearing this argument, the Mahant immediately backtracked and the Bhuiyan community was left with no option but to search for an alliance to extract itself out of the current imbroglio. The comment, however, draws into focus the anxieties around retaining purity and supremacy of caste and caste hierarchies achieved primarily through control/ guarding of women's sexuality. The visceral response to Dalit assertion oftentimes gets articulated around the bodies of caste women and forms the justification for denial of Dalit rights.

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[111] In Kaari, the relatively well off grihast, were able to procure control over substantial proportion of math's land by paying off the math officials. However, there were quite a few grihast households particularly those led by widows, whose economic condition was similar to Dalits. They joined the struggle and the Dalits in the village supported their claims to land rights too.

[112] Less than 2 kilograms as daily wages and less than a kilogram as meal

The land grab that ensued following the dissolving of Math's power at the boundaries of its vast estate, allowed some grihast families to appropriate the Math's power in Kaari, which in turn rendered lives of Bhuiyan community increasingly tenuous due to heightened surveillance, scrutiny and proximity of the landlords. This prevented Dalits from seeking alterative routes of survival without being detected.[113] Although, the Bhuiyan community in the village were served the untenable option of either accepting servitude under the new landlords or leave the village; what stands out in the narrative is that the narration does not originate from a place or claim of victimhood under the Math or the grihast, rather, it works to bear testimony to their direct association with the land in question that they were deprived of through a 'sleight of hand' by a Math official and the grihast.

Likening the action of the Math official to "*haath kat dena*" (severing the hands) Dalits in Kaari are perplexed at the refusal of the state to come to their aid. Dalit narrative above, however, ascertains that widespread landlessness among the community, intrinsic to maintaining caste hierarchy, is deeply rooted in naturalized caste-based discrimination, enabling dominant discourse to portray Dalits as devoid of history, agency and resistance towards their dominance. The narrative above also voices the abandonment that Dalits

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[113] Despite everyone's situation being similar, some grihast families, like that of the Barahil, were better positioned than others due to their proximity with the Math agent/manager or having supplemental family income from family members working in cities. Also, the Bhuiyan community noted that they were able to subvert some of the oppressive impacts under the Math regimes due to the laxity in surveillance and monitoring of Kamias that allowed them to 'steal' crops to add to their meager incomes and buffer the harsh socially imposed restrictions. The laxity in control was primarily due to the fact that the produce was eventually meant for the Math and therefore everyone in the hierarchical chain looted in his or her capacity to get by and make the most in the oppressive structure. This was however not the case under the grihast where the production was for individual consumption and sale and therefore higher stakes in managing and controlling the bonded labors.

experience at the hands of the state by treating Dalits as "persona non grata"— bereft of any history, legacy and/or agency.

Contesting 'erasures': Tracing the formulation(s) of Dalit history, identity and agency in Kaari

The silence of the state over the 'sleight of hand' by the Math did not dampen Dalit search for alliance and assertion of land rights in Kaari. Faced with a choice between eviction and servitude— the Dalit community in Kaari was staring at 'erasure'. Parul Sehgal in her *New York Times Magazine* article (February 2016), "Fighting 'Erasure'" defines 'erasure' as a "practice of collective indifference that renders certain people and groups invisible".[114] Erasure therefore encompasses acts of neglecting, looking past, minimizing and ignoring a group of people and/or individuals (Allahar 2005). I use the category of 'erasure' in this chapter to trace the path that Dalits took to realize their struggle for land and in the process illuminate the nature of resistance Dalit assertion face from the landed elite as well as the State. I argue that tracing acts of Dalit assertion and agency simultaneously provides insights into the nature of the postcolonial/post liberal state in Bihar. Dalit legacies of struggle have long remained buried and/or silenced through scholarship that chooses to privilege either land, caste, class or gender as a

[114] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/magazine/the-painful-consequences-of-erasure.html?_r=0 accessed February 16, 2016.

category of analysis rather than viewing them as intrinsically linked with each other. Through documenting Dalit struggle to realize control over land in Kaari, I seek to present a testimony of a community struggling to undermine state backed erasure and silence and in the process is altering social equations and redefining its identity.

State 'silence' over the plight of Dalits:

With their basis for staying in the village threatened, the Bhuiyan community approached the local state officials at the block office who refused to entertain them at all. Bandhuli Majhi, Maaiya's son, who was in his teenage years at that time and went on to become an active member in the land struggle, stated that talking to state officials directly and/or in a demanding way was tantamount to committing treason at that time. "It is said that *sarkari naukar* (government servants) are the people's servants and they are made for our benefit but not for the Bhuiyan and certainly not at that time," Bandhuli said, trying to stress that the state machinery is not experienced in the same manner by all and certainly not by the Dalits. To explain the point further, he shared with me his experience with government officials during the decade of the 1980s,

> If an official came to our doorstep, we would have to get up from our own *khatia* (hand woven cot) and sit on the floor and lower our eyes and keep saying "ji hazoor, ji hazoor" (yes sir, yes sir)! If we did not then the official could do anything he wanted with us. When the naxal *hawa* (wave) caught on, our assertion would be viewed with suspicion and often would be taken as evidence of either being a naxalite or subscribing to naxal ideology.

He proceeded to narrate his experience of fleeing from his in-laws' village after he refused to serve as a kamia to the Rajput landlord of that village. Impressed by Bandhuli's labor, the landlord had asked Bandhuli to accept his kamiauti and in return the landlord said he would give him a kattha of land and also ensure his freedom from the police who were on the lookout for a naxalite who had committed murder and whose description, as per the landlord, matched Bandhuli's. The mere act of refusing to accept the offer of kamiauti (bondage) was reason enough to be labeled a rebel and or a dissenter. All forces—social, local and administrative— would coalesce to reign in the individual to contain the 'perceived threat' s/he presented to the social order of that time. With the advent of the Laloo Prasad Yadav's regime, came a general consensus about the state bureaucracy developing a sympathetic view of the people lower in the caste hierarchy and particularly with the Dalit plight.

> "Lalooji ensured that we could walk in these government offices and be treated with respect. It was during his rule that the officers would ask us to sit and offer water and at least listen to our grievances," was the general opinion among the Bhuiyan community in Kaari. When I pointed out the 'jungle raj'— a term used to describe Yadav's tenure as akin to grave misrule marked by a complete breakdown of law and order— people in the community were quick to point out that law and order was never there for the Harijans/Dalits to start with. "It was for the landed elites and, therefore, when the law did not work for them, they cried foul," Bandhuli's remarked drawing into focus a unique perspective on caste based politics, derided by liberal

critiques, that formed the basis of the long stint of Yadav's rule and hold over the State politics. While acknowledging the problematic of Yadav's rule, Dalits argue that the critiques who characterize his rule as 'jungle raj' or terming it 'as an impending return to the dark ages' – have not only failed to acknowledge the monopoly of upper and landed caste violence that existed prior to Yadav's rule but also normalized the violence as remnants of feudalism. For them the central question was what gets labeled as 'violence'? Dalits asserting the right to live with dignity, is it violence? Dalits peaceful protests demanding right to land, is this violence that merits counter-violence by the state? The conversation had organically moved on to discuss the previous day's (4th March 2014) incidence of police resorting to lathi-charge on their peaceful demonstration and sit-in, in front of the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's residence in Patna and the imposition of non-bailable sections on the leaders of the various grassroots organizations who took part in the protest to draw attention to the plight of hundreds of thousands of parchadharis, mostly Dalits, who have legal titles or parwanas, but no control over the land allocated to them. Several members of Kaari had taken part in the demonstration and accounted their horror at the police brutality unleashed on the peaceful sit-in protest. How else do you get the state to heed our demands, our grievances?" Munia, who barely escaped the police lathi-charge asked rhetorically,[115] "It is going to be nearly three decades since we got the

[115] The Nitish Kumar Government announced that it would speed up the process of providing tenancy to landless Dalit community through 'Operation Basera' and 'Operation Bhumi Dakhal Dehani'. Dalits acts of peaceful protest drew attention to their plight forced the state to form a land reform committee panel in January 2015. According to its

parwanas to redistributed land and yet the state refuses to act. How long should we wait? Another three decades or more?"

Experimenting with forms of assertion: challenges to notion of Dalit agency as passive and complicit to caste hegemony.

The 1970s of Bihar also witnessed a growth in the armed struggle staged by the ultra Left popularly referred to as the Naxal or the Maoist movement. Oral narratives indicate that competing ideologies (Marxist versus Socialist) with the same end goal often led to the contestation of turf, leading to the implicit agreement between the two groups of not venturing into each other's territory. Prior to its association with the Sangharsh Vahini, the Bhuiyan community in Kaari were approached by the 'party,' as it was normally referred to in the region, but following a brief dalliance, the community decided to severe its ties with it, as they did not approve of its *modus operandi*. Discontent was articulated around the time and place of meetings being held by the party and the insistence that only way to bring about change would be through violence. Maaiya proceeded to reason,

We were ready to struggle for land that is rightfully ours but we were not prepared to take anyone's lives. If we kill the *grihast* today then tomorrow they will also kill us. If we spill blood then they will also spill blood. Bloodshed would lead to more bloodshed. We would also have to arm our children. We are fighting for our just rights, our livelihood.

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estimates, there are about 2.3 million (~ 23 lakhs) parchadhari, primarily Dalits in the state who have legal documents but have either been evicted from their land or have not been given full control over the land handed to them. According to the latest data uploaded by the department on the Web, documents of 15.79 lakh *parchadharis* (out of 23.02 lakh) in the state have been located. Grassroots organization however estimate that number to be 3.78 lakhs? Also see, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150404/jsp/bihar/story_12502.jsp#.Vtxme5MrLdQ

We are not fighting to take anyone's lives. For some days, 'party' people harassed us. They would seek refuge with the bhuiyans because of the oppression that was there before. They wanted reform primarily for the bhuiyan community, so they got refuge/shelter in this particular community. Other communities are part of the organization but they do not provide shelter to the cadres. For example, people of all the four caste communities (Kahar, Yadav, Bhuiyan, Dusadh) are members in MCC (party) but most of the activities take place in Harijan tola. So, if food is being cooked, it is Harijan tola; if there is a meeting, it is in Harijan tola. We did not like this. We did not like how they moved about or carried on their business. They would hold meetings in the night and that too in remote and undisclosed locations in the jungles nearby. They would blindfold the men and take them to those locations. The cadres would show up unannounced and anyhow we would had to feed their cadres and house them. A couple of times, they took some of our people to the jungle in the middle of the night. I thought that this organization that works in the night only is not good and that they could get killed or get us killed anytime. We told them very clearly that brothers please leave us to our condition. We are not willing to walk this path of yours. The entire areas here are divided. Where Sangharsh Vahini is there, lal saalam people are not there. Even if the lal salaam people approached those villages under control of Vahini, the people did not support them. Where we knew there was MCC, we did not enter that village.

The seemingly vast landscape I traversed to reach Kaari had visual and spatial clues that helped me understand Maaiya's narrative of spaces being imbued with dominant ideologies of resistance and assertion and how the community used that understanding to navigate and or avoid it. For example, once I veered off the highway onto a narrow, paved, surface road that was riddled with pot-holes, the auto would pass through an upper caste village characterized by brick houses, often with a bike and/or a car parked in their front yards that ranged from Maruti Suzuki to Tata's Indica or Mahendra's Bolero. Trucks and lorries ferrying rocks from the adjacent hills that sandwiched the village were a ubiquitous presence at the entrance point and appeared to be rapidly quarrying and flattening the hills. The legality of quarrying was questionable, I was told. Veering onto this particular turn from the highway felt akin to entering a den or a dragon's mouth. Oftentimes, I was reminded how the location of the upper-caste *tola* was appropriate to monitoring entry and exit of people. Maaiya's daughters-in-law were from around this area and their oral narratives did not paint a pleasant picture of life under these former zamindars.[116] Further down the road was the bhun tola that supplied labor for the vast fields owned by the landlords. As the auto would snake through the vast swathes of

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[116] A dhoti clad elderly man, stood out particularly for me as he carried a roughly 5 foot javelin with an ornate tip and had a peculiar air about himself. He would often hitch a ride with me and disembark roughly couple of miles away to the bhun tola. He irked my auto driver a lot as he was both patronizing and condescending. Once he shoved Rs 2.00 down his pocket noting that he is not paying the fare but offering him bakshis (tip) to drink tea. Ajay later shared that since he was an auto driver, he had to maintain a straight face, as he did not want to incur the wrath of the local community. A village is divided into several tolas, which are basically caste based– so bhun tola would be part of the village where the bhuiyan community resides. Mud houses and thatched roofs characterized this particular space of the village. When the old man would disembark from the auto, the the old men would come forward to receive him as most of the young men in the village nowadays go to the city in search of work. By paying heed to the construction of houses and the overall well-being of the residents, one can safely conclude the caste of the tola.

fields, canals and aharas, I would pass by the village referred to as Lal Salaam (red salute)— indicating that it was once a strong hold of the armed naxalite struggle. I am told that evoking the name of the village elicited fear.

Kaari was located at the very end of this route. The uniqueness of Kaari resided in the fact that it was a small village that on the onset did not appear to have spatial segregation based on caste, as the invisible boundaries are not as well-defined as in other villagers. Also, residents of the village, irrespective of caste affiliation, articulated that they stood united against an outside enemy and that emphasis was put on findings peaceful strategies of resistance instead of resorting to violence.[117] The Bhuiyan community did not condone violence and felt that taking up arms would mean arming one's children as well and living in constant fear. A killing would trigger a series of retaliatory killings, until there was none left to be killed, they reasoned. This however did little to allay fears of being labeled a naxal.

A neighbor of Maaiya, Sikin Majhi, who I was told was referred to as Gandhiji of the Sanghathan, said he always kept Sangharsh Vahini documents with himself during the days of the struggle, least he be arrested on charges of being a party sympathizer. "Such is the mindset: an assertive Bhuiyan, struggling for ones right to live with dignity, in this country (rural Bihar), is often branded as a naxal," he pointed to me. Despite holding on to peaceful means of struggle, he said he could very well become suspect in

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[117] This claim seemed to be falling apart during my time in the fieldwork, as there were increased instances of friction between the grihasts and the Dalit community in the village.

the eyes of law enforcement. Branding a Dalit as belonging to the party was a prevalent way to curb Dalit assertion as well as earn extra income. The law enforcement personal stood to benefit from this entire process as getting someone listed due to personal enmity as well getting one's name off the suspected naxalite list, more often than not, required bribing the local enforcement personal. Sikin said,

> It has been 30 years – neither did we hit the Kisan nor the Majdoor Kisan has been hit. We fought with the help of law. We have not murdered anyone and are not anti-socials that you can take us and lock up in jail. The police are on the look around. We say that we fighting for our rights. Our weapons are hunger strike, gherao, demonstrations, satyagraha. We do not have the desire to use weapons. Where do we get all this to fight? We hardly have enough to get by. We eat only if we earn daily."

Alliance with the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini: Commitment to 'peaceful' strategies of assertion

When the experiments with the party failed, the Dalits in Kaari were getting desperate to get help, as their existence in the village remained tenuous. Dalit recall that they suffered greatly under the kisans as proximity to the new landlords exposed them to additional forms of exploitation. Maaiya noted that she along with the rest of the family spent the entire day at the kisan's residence where her family served under the system of kamiauti, "collecting dung, cleaning grains, drying them," all for "du ser kachhi dhaan and ek ser khaya la (worked all day for less than 2 kilograms of unhusked rice as wage and less than

a kilogram for eating)." She opined that it was beyond their comprehension at that time to think that the Math's rule would ever fade and or come to an end so abruptly. "Land would be laying fallow, but no one dared to touch it or bring it under cultivation, due to the fear of the math," said Bhandhuli Majhi, to reiterate that a spurt in land grabs ensued only after the Math relegated the control of its land to the grihast making the bhuiyan communities existence in the village precarious. In attempting to explain what took the community so long to voice their dissent, Sikin Majhi said,

> We were under his (Math) command primarily because we did not have any idea how to go about demanding for our rights. We did not have access to radio nor could we read the newspaper. We did not know about the rules of the land. However, with increased involvement in the movement, we learnt about these things. Our miseries slowly were coming to an end. Wherever the movement called we went – we established the movement in old villages like Pesra, Purwana, Beeja, Kusa, Lebra, Lai and became enlightened. We propagated our belief— that *Aap log soiya ga to khoyiga, jagiya ga to payeyaga* (sleep and you stand to lose; awake and you become enlightened) — We asked the people to awaken and demand their rights."

The 'Mastipur Kand' had kindled hope and firmed up the resolve of the Bhuiyan community in Kaari. Recounting his experiences of being part of the protest march held the day after the math resorted to shooting at peaceful protesters, that claimed two lives and injured one, Sikin Majhi said,

One time a huge procession took place against the Math. We had gone to bring potatoes and on our way we came to know that Mahant's people had fired and two of our people, Ramdeoji and Pachuji, had been killed. A bullet hit Janakiji's leg and he now limps. It was a huge procession and involved people from Motihari, piparpati, Mastipur, Katorwa, Mahura, Shekwara, Matihani, Sherghati among others. Some 5000 people were at the demonstration. We saw that apart from our peaceful demonstrators, there were the BDO (Block Development Officer) and his bodyguards, and the Math's *dalals* who thrived on the remittances by the Math. We thought that if we are to die, we will die: our two brothers have been killed so what is the point of living? We will move ahead. When the procession was out, around thirty of us joined the procession. On the way to the procession, a Math's tout asked us not to go in the direction of the procession as the police were in that direction and they were resorting to firing. Some of the families left the procession as suddenly the thought of losing life seemed very real. We stuck together and proceeded towards the procession including my wife and me. We resolved that if were to die, we will die, but we will fight for our rights. We went and peacefully demonstrated in front of the old BDO [block development office] and stated clearly that we will not fight with our hands or with arms [swords] but we will fight peacefully. We do not keep arms or roam around with bombs and guns. We will fight with the help of law. This

resolve will either help us or deter us. The issues will not be resolved if we kill your people [Mahant's people or those opposing us] or you kill our people.

Sarju Majhi, only one of the three men alive today, who had actively sought out the Sangharsh Vahini activists noted that he had never before witnessed the surge of the poor, landless people— young, old, children and women, all walking against the Math towards its headquarters, boldly defying the threats that the math's goons posed with their rifles and hand bombs. Sarju Majhi said, that the visual and the slogans had baffled him as he witnessed the resolve of the long oppressed people that marched ahead to the cries of "khoon kae badlae zameen lenge" (In exchange of our blood we will take back the land). Meeting the Sangharsh Vahini activists (considered to be the architects of this unprecedented peaceful uprising that stood in sharp contrast to the armed naxalite movement that existed alongside) proved to be quite a task for the three people charged with the task of establishing contact with the organization. They would have to walk from Kaari to Shekwara, which is approximately 25 kilometers, as the bird flies. After having missed the opportunity to meet up with the activists thrice, they decided to camp overnight.

A smile escapes Sarju Majhi's face as he notes that his worries were resolved the following morning, when the three were offered water to bathe, clothes to change into, a place to rest and hot meals. "Once the meeting took place, the rest was history. We let the leaders know our situation and implored them to hold meetings in our village. This is how our association began," concluded Sarju Majhi. Camps were held in the village

regularly. Apart from land, issues pertaining to domestic violence, dowry, child marriage and sharing of household work took center stage. Symbolic punishments were meted out to those who were in violation of the Sangharsh Vahini codes of ethics that every member, irrespective of gender, had pledged to adhere too.[118] Maaiya recalls those days fondly stating,

> Those days were different. Despite all our hardships we were facing at that time, we remember it as the good and fun days. Everyday there was some meeting or the other and we would all actively take part. We would collect *bihiri* (donations) from the every organization-member's home in the village to go to the meetings or host meetings in our village. If we did not have money, we would sell our utensils and ornaments. I have travelled to Delhi, Patna, Gaya for meetings and have even gone to jail. Bahut maan lagta tha, aab khali baita baithi nahin to ghar sae khet aur ghar (those days were interesting, nowadays it is all about wiling time and going from the house to fields and back).

The Sangharsh Vahini continues to hold a special place in the heart of the Dalit community in Kaari even though they have moved away from many of the organization ideals. Sukri, a widow in her late 50s, whose land has been usurped by a grihast belonging to yadav community eloquently put it for me,

> You ask, why we do not go to other parties? We are not sure what way they (party/organization) will ask us to follow. Are they are going to get us killed or

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[118] Code of ethics were:

spoil our village? We are not sure. Their calculations are like, How many poor there are? What do they have or not have? The other parties just add the badhans/grihasts, but Sangharsh Vahini tries to join the poor with the rich and they want to break the hierarchical structure of the society and pave way for a level playing ground. They talk about breaking the caste system. People say that you are *bada admi* (higher in hierarchical status); but you have become big through us and because of us. Your mother, did she give birth to you along with the land? The land is bearing fruit due to our labor and our hard work, so why is it that you have land and we do not have land? So this organization is about this breaking down of structure? It asks why that person is supposedly big and the poor do not even have a kattha of land? The rich are becoming rich through our labor. In our village, all the land was Mahantji's land. And Mahantji said, the Bhuiyans will till and harvest this land. Now all the yadavs have captured this land. Grihast had 10 kattas land from before. They are leaving their own land and staking control over the Mahant's land. So, you continue to remain rich and whatever 2 or 3 kattas I got, you also took that away. Now can I progress? This is why our organization believes in dismantling the hierarchy and that is what we are with them.[119]

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[119] Sukri used *they* (meaning the yadavs in her village) and *you* interchangeably and I have kept it as is as I found it very interrogating and disquieting at the moment.

The directness of Sukri's language at that particular moment, felt very personal and disturbed the distance that I had put between the perceived oppressor and myself. I detail the logic and understanding of motivations behind taking up a particular struggle to unsettle the notion that Dalits are passive recipients of violence, state welfare, activism. Rather, the experience of Dalit community in Kaari suggest to the contrary. It brings to the forefront a community that is seeking to activate the legal, and more importantly peaceful channels of redress to get their demands heard and met.

Sukri's words forces one to look at the processes through which women's voices—in particular Dalit women's voices are rendered invisible to the state, state apparatus, society, police, law, policy, organizations, movement, and media.

It is here that I feel that the history of the Bodh Gaya land struggle needs to studied carefully— not as a coherent narrative but as an amalgamation of narratives—told from varied, multiple perspectives. In fact, the Bodh Gaya land struggle is the classic case where the outcome overshadowed the processes that made the outcome possible in the first place. The land struggle was not just about land, but it was about upending long-held hierarchies in terms of caste and gender and to envision an alternate reality— a reality that many activists felt were well within their reach. This alterative vision of the youth necessitates a documenting of the narratives of experiences at multiple levels to foreground the varied subject positions that were part of the societal churning taking place in rural Bihar of the late 1970s and early 1980s. For in it resides the unbecoming and becoming of the subject and the structural violence as it lives, permeates, within the

Dalit community in the present. For in detailing their oral histories, Dalit women and men strive to articulate a personhood that is struggling to overcome historically imposed barriers and struggle, yet to be recognized and registered by the state and or state apparatus charged with the task of obviating them— making rendering visible such struggles critical to the project of ethnography.

d. Staking control over the ahara[120]: An Instance of successful implementation of peaceful guerilla tactics

Just like Mastipur Kand was a defining moment for the Bodh Gaya land struggle, similarly the struggle over ahara in Kaari fundamentally altered the relationship between kisan and mazdoor kisan in Kaari. Even though Sangharsh Vahini activists regularly visited Kaari and held meetings and sabhas in the village, members in the village continued to work as Kamia for the grihast and, despite resistance from the grihasts, took part in the meetings as and when they found time.

Maaiya's teenaged sons worked as gorakhiya (keeper of cows) for the Barahil of the village at that time. Almost after a year of meetings and in keeping with the struggle's peaceful gruella tactics, the organization had decided to reap the harvests sown by the Kisans on Mahant land. Sikin Majhi, who was present during the proceedings in which the strategy to take over ahara was chalked out, said that prior to the talking any action, the MKS and Sangharsh Vahini decided to hold meetings with the kisan and persuade

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[120] The most fertile land that is normally used to store up rainwater and used in winters to sow wheat in the winters. During a good monsoon, the Ahara floods up and its water is used to cultivate paddy. The Ahara was Mahant's land that the grihast had taken control over once the Mahant's control seized to exist. This is a local system of water harvesting. Since the land there is stony, people there store water from three sides.

them to give the Dalits a share in the Math land that they had held kabzaa over. Sikin Majhi detailed,

We kept a meeting in our village, where we invited Patna's Priyadarsh ji and Bada Karu. In this meeting the tensions was high. On one side was the kisan and the other side was majdoor kisan. The kisan said you may try whatever tricks you want but we will not give you land even as small as the size of a needle tip. To that retort we replied, we will thread the needle and take land from you.

With the girhast refusing to give Dalits any land, a staged battle ensued on the day the organization had decided to harvest the crops in ahara. One side the grihast stood with their rifles, guns and bombs and their hired goons from outside the village to boost their numerical strength. On the other side, a couple of Sangharsh Vahini activists stood alongside the members of the MKS, including every woman, man, child and old from Kaari village. By daybreak, some 500 people from other Sangharsh Vahini villages showed up to extend solidarity with the Dalits in Kaari and aid them with the harvesting of the crop in ahara. Maaiya's son who had been locked up by the kisan under whom he served as a kamia, remembers that day as a day of freedom from servitude, "I could not tolerate that one brother was going to risk his life and one brother was here locked up inside. So I took whatever tools there were in the room, broke the door and left for the field. That day I quit being a kamia and started actively partaking in organization's work." Bombs were hurled and guns fired even as the Dalit women continued to harvest the crops behind the raised mound of the Ahara. The Kisans retreated only when they saw

the police arrived. The community noted that in that specific period of time, the police were prompt and would entertain their requests, unlike in the present where everything is decided on the virtue of money. It is said that fourteen live bombs were recovered. The harvest was captured and handed over to the state.[121] The police stay put in the *bhun toli* for nine consecutive days to prevent any retaliatory attack.[122] The victory over ahara however unleashed a series of retaliatory measures by the grihasts aimed specifically to make life untenable for Dalits in Kaari and undermine their resolve to take part in the struggle. Grihasts refused to offer work to the Dalits in the village; they covered the lone source of potable water in the village—a well that was constructed and maintained by the Math, with thorny bushes forcing the community to get water from the nearby dry river bed and or from the neighboring villages. Maaiya notes that friction between mazdoor kisan and kisan was at its highest at that time, as the Grihast was not willing to let go off what ever little produce the Dalits have held on to. The threat of violence became more

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[121] "Our understanding was we will not eat it, nor we will let others consume the same therefore we are giving the government. We transported the entire 14 quintals of wheat, bhusa and tesi and some Rs. 50 we deposited to the government" reported Baldeo, who a teenager at that time. He?? [or does this go with the other footnote?] had volunteered to carry the live bombs as none of the police personnel were interested in doing so.

[122] Sikin Majhi who had carried the live bombs on his head to the police station recalled that he was present in Beeja where it was decided in the presence of Karuji and Priyadarshiji that they had to harvest the wheat crop. "We then let the people from neighboring villages, where our organization was strong, to be present for the wheat harvesting time. They all showed up early morning. The Kisans, upon seeing the huge gathering, tried to attack us with all possible weapons— bombs, sticks and agricultural tools. In all, fourteen bombs were confiscated from them. When the police came, they started to run. At that time the people were Nathuni Singh Daroga, Omkar Rai, Chota babu and their munshi. They were all debating how to take the bombs to the police station as each feared for their life. I said, I will take the bombs. They tested one bomb to see it was live and then I took the bombs on my head. Around 16 people accompanied me to the police station. After keeping the bombs we were asked to leave the police station. Afterwards, two dalals of the kisan went to give bribe, but we got hold of one and the other fled. We decided to go ahead and harvest the wheat. One of the police camps was in our village. The police asked if we were going to feed them. We said, what ever we cook at home we will feed you. If there is food we will serve you, if there is not then we cannot. If you ask us to serve special non-vegetarian food, then we cannot."

immediate on women who were left behind as the economic boycott by the Grihast forced Dalit men to seek work outside the village. This, however, did not dampen and or weaken the struggle; rather women found strength in their collectivity and held their ground, as Maaiya notes,

The grihast looted as much produce as they could. They stopped giving us work. So our men went to work outside. The grihast then said that there are only harijan women at home and we can easily take away the grains that they have stored. We said that we have worked hard to produce the grains; we are not going to let the Grihast get it easily. We then ground chili and mixed the powder with sand and kept it beside us when we slept. We said, whenever the Grihast come to assault us we will throw it in their eyes. We were not scared then nor are we scared now. We kept the Grihast at bay through these tactics. They said that the Bhuiyans' are brave. All the women would leave their homes and sleep outside. All of us, we all stayed together. If they came to rape us we would also make them blind. What else could they do? If we throw the ground-chili-and-sand powder then they would be blinded. Bengali Singh, a Kahar by caste, said any bhuiyan who went to the ahara, I will kill them. He was brandishing the garashi (cutting tool). The grihast had petrol, bomb, and lathis to kill us. Now where did their petrol go, the bombs go and where did the guns, swords and *hasuli* go? We have a powerful sangathan (organization), it is not just in one place. After we called, people all over gathered here to support us. I have fought that fight and sitting here. Kachheri, Munshi, diwan, patwari – sab rangadari sae kam kara hai (the Math officials would use force to get work done). My mother

would collect the dung from the cattle and she would get 12 paseri dhan and one saree in a year. My father was a Kamia. My husband died, so my brother kept me here. He said you stay here. I am not going to leave this land. Babaji's rule is over. We are the way we were before. We have done these great feats in Kaari and now wait to die.

The memory of systematic, religiously institutionalized historical abuse is strong in Kaari and the community uses that memory to prepare themselves against 'known' threats, such as rape.

The women viewed rape as a gendered tool of caste oppression and suppression of Dalit forms of assertion. I contend that this overt acknowledgment of rape as form of suppression, allowed for an 'appropriate' response to the threat of rape through strategies that call for a concurrent marking on the bodies of the rapists— that would serve as minders of the act long after the event has passed. The acknowledgement of having the ability to mark the perpetrator's bodies that strive to defile women's (Dalit) bodies through rape allowed for overcoming of fear and of paralysis of action, paving way for strategic alliances that dealt effectively with gendered forms of violence used by landed castes, of which rape formed a key tool. In addition, just as violence against Dalit women was seen as tool to inflict violence against the community and contain it, the reverse was also true where Dalit women's actions that subverted caste and gender hierarchies of the time, even if for a moment, were viewed as a direct challenge and insult not just to the individual concerned, but the community it represented.

Koi sunwaai nahi (no one listens): 'Erasure' of a struggle through state (mis)recognition

It was one of those pre-monsoon hot afternoons that could only be coveted by an anthropologist keen on 'insider' information on the nature of transformation that legal rights to land engendered in their immediate social space. With little or no agriculture related work to do, Dalit women and men who were unable and or unwilling to find work as a day laborer in the five brick kilns in and around the village primarily wiled away their long summer afternoons either playing cards, drinking, laying down in the shade and/or engaging in small talk. The women referred to this time as baitha baithi (sitting around).

Sukri sat on her khatoli (small cot) under the banyan tree adjacent to her windowless tiny room constructed with the help of a government-housing scheme, puffed her bidhi (locally made cigarette) as those of us sitting around her discussed the ongoing heat wave. The idle talk took serious undertones when I conveyed that the monsoons might be delayed further. The news did not sit well with the women. Sukri, visibly agitated upon learning that her current hardships may last a bit longer than she had anticipated, asked her daughter, sitting next to her on the ground, to get the papers. After couple of minutes, her daughter came back with a clear plastic cover carrying what appeared yellow pieces of paper barely holding together. Sukri carefully laid the paper in front of me stating:

This is what you have been looking for all this time, right? This is all I have left of the struggle. We got this legal paper/parwana after our kranti ladia (revolutionary struggle) but now the kisan says the land is theirs. I, alongside my husband, tilled this land for two consecutive years, and then my husband fell sick and my father-in-law, without letting me know, borrowed some money for his treatment. The treatment did not help my husband and he soon died. Soon after, the kisan took away the land and prevented us from stepping even near it. My husband is gone, now do I also need to give up my life? How can anyone take away my land without my consent? I am asking the Kisan to show the papers, but he says he will do so when the time comes. This land that the sarkar gave to me cannot be sold. How much money my husband and in-laws could have taken from the Kisan? I am even willing to pay off the debt incurred by my in-laws but no one pays heed to it. I went to the administrative block but there is no sunwai (hearing). I am the one who pays the taxes on that land. The kisans do not pay any tax on that land. We have gone to the thana-police and Kachheri but there is no sunwai. The sarkar should ensure kabza over the land it gave us. Despite all the darna, juloos and gherao that we have been doing at the collector's office and Delhi and Patna, nothing seems to change. They have all become thethar (stubborn). I have to let go off my wage labor for the day to be present at the meetings. It makes an already difficult situation all the more difficult. But we keep on going. Sitting idle is not an option. Meanwhile the kisans continue to prosper over our hard fought land, while we await the Amin (official in-charge of measuring the land) to help us get kabza over the land we have legal titles for.

Although Sukri seemed visibly upset over the news of the delayed monsoons (as it meant enduring hunger and having to survive on bare minimum, which in turn was supported through borrowed money on high interest during this particular time of the year), she situates her present-day struggles of having to barely survive as rooted in the state and state apparatus refusal to act on the legal document— the parwanas— that clearly mentions that this type of land cannot be sold. However, despite the legal provision, Surki's land had been usurped and the chances of getting it back seems increasingly slim with time, unless the State decides to intervene and effectively adjudicate the situation. The sheer refusal for the state apparatus to engage in matters related to usurping of redistributed land has further emboldened landed castes to forcibly take away land under one or the other pretext.

The brief narrative apart from providing an understanding of how redistributive land policies gets undermined; is also a commentary on the state and its machinery. Vahini activists note that State recognition lead the struggle into a "bureaucratic phase," which ushered itself in the moment the State conceded to the movements demand for the granting legal recognition in the form of titles to ceiling surplus land of the Mahant that Dalits had already physically staked control over. State recognition for independent land rights, translated into a loss in the struggle's momentum as both activists and landless laborers were forced to engage with the state process within its set parameters.

For example with no prior precedence of the State handing over land titles to women except in cases of widowed women, state officials were surprised and unwilling to grant

legal titles to married women. A high-ranking district official bewildered at seeing the proposed list of women beneficiaries to redistributed land titles, had exclaimed, "Are all the women in this village widowed that you are asking us to issue the redistributed land in their name?" Vahini activists recall that lack of precedence had forced them to contend with the bureaucratic apathy that was against granting of legal titles to Dalit women, even in cases where the Dalit men did not have any objection to it. The objection from the bureaucracy did not withstand the fact that the Indian constitution grants equal rights to its citizen irrespective of gender. The state apathy created much anxiety among the activists who felt that pushing for independent titles for women might give the state an excuse to back off its initial proposal to give legal titles to Dalits and therefore settled for joint titles instead.

In addition, the redistribution processes yielded varied results and ranged from having Dalit-agricultural laborers having either full control or partial control over redistributed land. Some women have control over some piece of land but no titles; others have titles, but no control over land. In addition, two or more people have been issued the same plot of land and there are still others who have been granted land that either has been demarcated as village road, burial ground and/or is totally unfit for cultivation. In addition, unlike the redistribution of land in ahara where the administration measured the land and delineated individual plots as indicated in the parwana. The redistribution of land process was riddled with failure incongruities as the local administration did not

conduct a survey prior or after the land redistribution process. For example, for one piece of land, two parwanas were issued.

Also, there were number of instances in which the plot of land held by a family was given to some other family, leading to hostility within its own community members. This fact caused relationships to sour when Maaiya's family had given the legal titles to the land held by Sukri's family. In March 2014, the two old women laughed and narrated to me the nature of their acrimonious fight that lasted for over 5 years and ended when Maaiya's family decided to relinquish stake over Sukri's land and handed her the parwana. "She would curse us everyday, and load us with obscenities," Maaiya laughed as Sukri reasoned with me that she was left with no options, as she was not going to let some government paper override her control over her land. Together, they shift their attention on the kisans in the village who have made rapid progress based on the earnings from the fertile land previously held by the math to note that,

The grihast have not given any malgujari (taxes) and they are benefiting from the fertile land as well as the government. We got parwana from the government but the land is either infertile, jungle or very far off that we cannot go there. Some of us got land in ahara and dhan kheti, which some of us have kept, others have sold it. I have kept the taria-tukuria (infertile land) and have not sold it. I have kept that land, when the sarkar inquires about it, I will let the sarkar know. The kisan let us have the tila-taker (barren land) that did not any irrigation facilities, they said give it to the buiyans so that they leave their struggle. In the taria we neither get water, nor any other facility. Who will

cultivate that land? When there were resources, we grew gobi, dhan, mirchi and other vegetables and then when there was no sadhan (facility), we could not do much. But, we have not sold the land. Let cattle graze that land, but we will not give that land. We also have children: it is for them.

State official introduced discrepancies such as redistributing land that was demarcated as village road or was under someone else's control or trying to redistribute survey land that belonged to small kisans created much confusion and anxiety that further increased the incongruities around redistributed land.

In addition, the varied nature of control over redistributed land introduced multiple forms of hierarchy within a once-homogenous group of landless agricultural laborers, primarily Dalits. The multiplicity of the nature of control over land has introduced conflicting interests as well as a degree to apathy, leading some to observe that, "When we did not have anything, we walked miles. But now when we have food and clothes and a roof to call home, we have been plagued by sukwari (laziness). Was this just a fight to get food? No, it was a fight against the whole system. It was about pariwartan (transformation)." Recognizing that the variance in result due to the state recognition effectively undermined the nature of opposition that the State and kisan faced prior to conceding to the struggles' demands for redistribution of land and initiating the land redistribution process, residents of Kaari holds that state government responsible for promulgating a culture of impunity largely responsible for undermining Dalits' struggle for land:

Today we are unhappy primarily because the government officials are not listening to our demands or helping us take control over the land that was granted to us. This had lead to infighting among us. How can this matter be resolved? This cannot be done by us – there is constant conflict between majdoor kisan and kisan. The people who can resolve this effectively are the Block Development Officer (BDO), Anchal Padadhikari, DM (District Magistrate), SDO (Sub-divisional officer): they will execute the will of the chief minister. They have the power to resolve this matter peacefully. No measurement of land has taken place. We have been staging dharnas, protest and demonstrations and have been assured multiple times that something will be done. In this manner year after year passes by.

Fatigue and frustration has worked its way into what appears a never-ending pursuit of procuring effective control over redistributed land in Kaari. The situation progressively declined once the middle-class Vahini activists withdrew from the region and the link between the state-apparatus and the marginalized Dalit landless laborers appeared severed, leaving them to the vagaries of state official demands for bribes in exchange for empty promises of getting the work done. Despite the hopelessness that the state apparatus continues to perpetuate through its inaction, the community has been consistently trying to get an Amin (an official who measures the land) for the past couple of decades but with little success.

In the meantime, land is being lost to either the kisans or to the state under one or the other pretext. A couple of Dalits lost redistributed land to a nahar (canal) that was built to ostensibly channel water from the river to the villages located in the interiors. The

rationale was questioned by the locals who objected the construction of the nahar on the basis that the land from the interiors was on raised ground and sloped as one moved closer to the river that was mostly non-perennial and rarely flooded in the monsoon reasons. No compensation was offered as Dalit lost part of their redistributed land to the new construction.

The Dalit community in Kaari also claim that nearly 119 acres of ceiling land remains to be redistributed in the village over which the kisans have exerted full control. Kisans in recent years have actively sought to take control over land held by Dalits under some or the other pretext. The refusal of the state to act on its own legal papers has created a culture of impunity that thrives in rural Bihar. While Dalit assertion have significantly altered overt forms of caste-based discrimination, Dalit protests have yet to make a dent on the state machinery that often acts in a manner detrimental to Dalit interests.

In the summer of 2015 when I visited the Kaari briefly, I was told that the Amin did come and yet he refused to demarcate individual plots of land and instead demarcated an entire portion of land that has been redistributed, undermining the entire process. The inordinate delay in handing over control of redistributed land to the Dalits who hold legal titles to it, has paved way for skepticism, Sikin Majhi noted,

Parwana was made to just show people that Harijans have got land, but the land is not in our control. The land allocated to some people falls under the village road, burial ground or is barren land. We organize demonstrations year after year, but nothing seems to be

happening. Six months ago, we gheraoed the Sub Divisional Officer's office; he promised that he will look into it but nothing happened. Similarly, we demonstrated in front of the Block office, but nothing happened. More than twenty-five years have passed just shouting slogans and carrying out demonstrations, nara aur juloos (slogans and demonstrations) sometimes we gherao here sometimes there but nothing seems to be happening.

The irony of the Dalit situation in Kaari is telling here. Scholars have claimed that land redistribution has largely failed in Bihar due to the resistance it received from landed caste that is deeply entrenched in the state machinery. However, what has not been adequately highlighted is that even in instances where marginal farmers and landless laborers struggled and freed land that either fell under ceiling surplus land or belonged to Bihar Sarkar's gair mazurwa land, the state has acted reluctantly and often in ways that have proven to be detrimental to both Dalits and women as they have not been able to realize their control over the land facing resistance from the landed elite. The approach is riddled with contradictions and anomalies, bearing very few instances of exceptional meticulousness in the land redistributive process helmed primarily due to the progressive attitude of the individual officers in-charge at that time. Despite the repeated failures, however, Dalits in Kaari repeatedly revert to the state for mediation as they recognize that trying to resolve the ongoing dispute by themselves would trigger violence and bloodshed. Despite the on-the-ground situation not showing any progress, Dalits continue to exert demand for land as they assert that land is a source of sustenance for them as it

buffers them from extreme forms of poverty, hunger and destitution apart from providing them with the negotiating power both to live within the village as well as determining who to work for and for how much. As Sukri noted,

Remember the last time you went to the field with us, now, in that water we stand, stooped over and do *roopni* from morning till the evening? And then the *Kisans* gives us only 3 kilograms of rice. In that there are 10 people to feed— now can you support 10 people in 3 kilograms of rice? I sold one kg of rice and got Rs. 15.00. Now, what do I get in that? Everything is so costly. So I got salt, oil and some pepper. And then how can you even think of buying clothing for the family in this earning? Should we roam around naked? The *majuri* (wages) did not increase. They asked us to work on their fields while promising us the increased wage of 4 kilograms this year but they did not give us the increased wage. When we asked for our wages, they say, "Who gives 4 kilograms? (~2.2 pounds) Whatever was the earlier wage, take that." Earlier we would get *3 ser kacchi* and now we get *3 kg. pacci* and in that we have to do everything. Earlier we would get *dhaan* and now we get rice. The kisans have become *bada admi*. They have become big through us and because of us. I am good at agricultural work like *roopni* and *katni*. I am an expert in this. Now, I either become a king or remain poor doing these jobs. These are the only kinds of work that is available to us and we do them and try to survive.

Land is a state subject and political will is needed to make adequate reforms to address the growing rural inequality.

The failure of the state to measure and demarcate land has greatly hindered the ability of Dalits in the community to take vantage of their changed circumstances where despite the hard fought freedom from bondage they are yet to escape the grips of social and economic marginalization. Sukri here underscores her expertise as a farmer however rues her inability to make a decent living for herself for lack of effective control over land due to nature of resistance, even seemingly minor Dalit assertion face. Her plight also draws attention to limited availability of alternatives, such as market forces and affirmative action to effectively aid rural Dalit women, in particular those belonging to the Bhuiyan/Mushahar communities, as do not possess the necessary requirements to avail those opportunities/provisions in the first place. The challenges of realizing their struggle seems increasingly distant as the kisans have since gained significant clout through economic progress and the rampant corruption that plagues the state, she further notes,

The munshi/Deevan/official takes Rs 40 or Rs. 50 per parwana even though it is written that the taxes are Rs. 5 per year. Recently, I gave tax of Rs. 40.00 last year it was Rs. 100.00 In this way the official take the money but they do not put in on the receipt. The official signs the receipt but the money is collected by the munshi. They manage to convince that some or the other fee has increased. We are somehow managing both the ones who own land and the ones who don't by working in brickfields or migrating to cities. The wait for the 'Promised Land' continues. It is more than 25 years now. We continue to fight but there is little hope for that land. Now that the kisan have the sarkari

(Math) land, they have become respectable and fat (mota gayil).[123] The people who took part in the land struggle are dying. Our children will be heavily disadvantaged as they already feel that this land will never be ours.

Despite the frustration and relentless nature of the struggle, Dalits do not give up hope as they continue to collect individual funds to support their struggle, like they did in the past. Dalits recognize the futility of fighting directly with the kisans and emphasize,

Why will we fight with the kisans? Our fight is with the government? We continue to contribute whole-heartedly to our struggle, even though if it had meant selling our utensils and whatever little things of value we had. We continue to collect funds today for our struggle as we did in the past. Bihiri lagata hai.[124] We continue to pool our resources so that we can attend the meetings, dharnas and jooloos organized by the sangathan. They would let us know that there is going to a dharna or we have to feed the leaders, and we make arrangements for that collectively. Even though our struggle is not as strong as it was before, we continue to contribute and follow up on the protests that the sangathan organizes.

In this chapter, I have argued that Kaari is a classic example where the state first refused to come to the aid of Dalits when they were forced with eviction, failing to accept the

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[123] While *mota gayil* literally translates into becoming fat, here it means having means those who got land have gained substantially economically and have become influential members who are effectively thwarting Dalit attempts to regain control over the land.

[124] Contributions that the each and every member of the community makes based on their ability to collectively fund their struggle. It is part of the grassroots struggle and the practice has continued in the present, obviating the need to rely on external sources for monetary assistance/funds.

bondage of the grihast; however when it did acquiesce to demands for land redistribution it did so in a manner that not only undermined the struggle but have now riddled it with complexities that cannot be resolved in a peaceful manner unless the state actively intervenes and adjudicates the matter. Any attempt to resolve the land dispute on a personal level has the potential of escalating into violence. Dalits, on the other hand to undermine state complacency, keep "showing up" – through the staging of dharnas, joolos and demonstrations to remind the state of its unfulfilled promise.

Conclusion

In the case of Bihar, caste is the driving factor and alongside gender/sexuality becomes central to understanding experiences of Dalit citizenship as heavily regulated and mediated through the state policies and law. The state in Bihar however makes its presence felt by its marked silence and inaction on subjects pertaining to Dalit interests. Land assumes greater significance in Bihar, as nearly 88 percent of the population resides in rural areas, as per the 2011 Census and the predominant role agriculture plays in the state's economy. It becomes abundantly clear that caste hierarchies are maintained and sustained through the control over land, which assumes greater significance in Bihar; So the question that comes to mind is, Will Dalit rights to land gain any traction in the state? The answer is unclear. While the push and pulls of electoral politics prevents a complete 'erasure' of Dalit demands, rather it ensures that Dalit demands for land are at least given lip service. The shift in perception of land as a commodity poses a greater threat for

Dalit's effective control over land as instances of encroachment and forcible eviction are reportedly on the rise state and nationwide. In the absence of political will and an effective state apparatus that imbibes the very characteristics that the Dalit struggle for land seeks to challenge, Dalit assertion has it best chances of survival through a collective assertion instead of as individuals. In trying to capture the essence of bureaucracy in Bihar, a noted activist commented, "Earlier, files just sat at one place and gathered dust, now the impression is that files move; the Nitish Kumar government has created a perception of movement of files in government officers—some view this as progress."

CHAPTER 3: DALIT 'KABZA' OVER LAND: PRAXIS FOR UNDERMINING SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN RURAL BIHAR

The mapping of identity is superimposed on the mapping of violence of the caste system and the specific ways in which that violence is gendered- Kalpana Kannibiran[125]

"The story of Dehri is over two decades old and begins at the time when the Bodhgaya land struggle was winding up," said Dhyan, who had joined the movement around 1984 and sought the Sangharsh Vahini's help to relocate his community. He found it increasingly difficult to live in the cramped-up space provided by their zamindar, a bannot Rajput by caste, in the Fatehpur division of Gaya District. The small stretch of land was located in between two *nalas* (drains) that would invariably flood following the slightest of rains, leaving residents marooned and forced to tackle diseases that resulted from the deluge. Dhyan said the community requested the zamindar to allow them to relocate but the zamindar did not relent. With no land of their own, coupled with their status as Kamia, their fate at first appeared tied to the zamindar's whims and fancies.

"I, along with others, had suggested the zamindar to give us Bhuiyans the 10 bighas of barren land that fell under his control as it would serve to quell the disquiet within the community that started brewing when the Sangharsh Vahini wave was picking

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[125] See Kalpana Kannabiran. 2006. A Cartography of Resistance: the National Federation of Dalit Women. In The Situated Politics of Belonging. ed Yuval Davis et al Pg. 68.are you using Chicago format? Check citations with OWL at Purdue She details the violence as "the violence of denial, of degrading work, of religion, of atrocity, of aggression on the body of the Dalit woman, of language and abuse"

up in the region," Dhyan recounted. He had tried to reason with the zamindar that following his benevolent move, the Bhuiyans would get busy with their land and livelihood and the struggle that was fast picking up momentum would be quelled, as their demands would have been met. In addition, Dhyan, along with the other members of the larger community, conveyed to the zamindar, "that he [zamindar] keep the fertile land, but allow the Bhuiyan to become sharecroppers on that land as it would not only help him retain control over his estate, but earn the goodwill of the Bhuiyan who would be more than happy to deliver his share of the produce at his residence." To this, the zamindar had replied,

> Look here, Dhyan, *dehiya kae maail debiye nahin, tariya zameenya kahan sae de debae (*when I not willing to give the dirt of my body, how can I give the land even though it is barren)? Others also tried to reason with him (zamindar) but he refused to budge. Today, when he has lost control over the entire land, he tried to get us to agree to the arrangement I had suggested previously. Now, how can it happen? The Bhuiyan's eyes have opened. There is no going back. Look what happened, *unkar khaliya kabargaael (*his skin has been ripped off) [indicating Dalits have taken control over the entire surplus land].

The above conversation took place in April 2014. It indicates a marked shift in the situation of the largely Bhuiyan community that I had encountered when I first travelled to Dehri in the summer of 2009.

Kailash Bharti, a former Kamia and a long time grassroots activist in the region, while introducing me to the people of Dehri had indicated that the practice of Kamiauti was prevalent in Fatehpur region of Gaya up until the mid-1990s and indicated that his organization had actively worked to end the practice of kamiauti in the region. The last such case was reported in mid-1990s when a zamindar attempted to divide his kamias along with his estate among the different stakeholders.[126] Following the success of the movement against the Bodh Gaya mahant, Dalit activists who were at the forefront of the Bodh Gaya land struggle in alliance with the local Sangharsh Vahini activist, Kaushal Ganesh Azad, turned their attention to areas adjoining the Bodh Gaya math, even as the middle-class Sangharsh Vahini activists retreated from the region.[127] Despite my expressed reluctance, Bharti impressed upon me that I should visit Dehri to witness firsthand how the legacy of the Bodh Gaya land struggle continues to inform the present as he asserted with much pride and contentment,

> If you are studying Bodh Gaya land struggle, then you should also study this ongoing struggle as it has its roots in our struggle against the math. In a decade or so following the formal winding up of the struggle against Mahant we took our struggle to new areas. In Fatehpur division of Gaya district we have established 10 new (Dalit) villages in.

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[126] As it was the case with under the Math, a Kamia of a zamindar could not work for any other person.

[127] From 1996 onwards, C. A. Priyadarshi, also a former CYSV activist and as a state representative of the Janmukti Sangharsh Vahini (JaSaVa), took up the work in the region. JaSaVa mainly comprised of the former members CYSV members.

Low on budget, I was hesitant at first, primarily because I was being guided by a proposed research objective that sought to approach the issue of land rights and in particular why land is important to women, by closely looking at social movements around land reforms in Bihar and in particular, the Bodh Gaya land struggle of the late 1970s. Dehri, I thought at that time, did not quite fit the description, as it was technically not a part of the initial land struggle I intended to study. On subsequent visits, I learnt that Dalits, both women and men, in Dehri were yet to get legal titles to redistributed land they had staked their control over by constructing their *katcha* (made of mud*)* homes. Bharti challenged my understanding of what constitutes 'legitimate form of struggle' stating that the first phase of the Bodh Gaya land struggle ended with the victory march in August 1987 but that did not necessarily mean that the struggle against bondage and servitude in the region had ended. Once I visited Dehri, I was struck both by the beauty of the place and the brazenness with which caste-based oppression worked.

The Summer of 2009

Kailash Bharti had asserted, that only a Marshall could take us where we wanted to go—the Dalit homes located at the outskirts of the villages. Marshalls are said to mirror/mimic the ideas of Barney Roos, inventor of the rugged 'general purpose vehicle' or Jeep. The driving rational for the makers of this vehicle being, "Wouldn't a vehicle that had proved its invincibility on the battlefields of World War II be ideal for India's rugged terrain and

its *kutcha* rural roads?"[128] As long as we drove on the highway, I remained suspect of Bharti's emphasis on hiring a particular vehicle to approach 'the field' work site. However, once the vehicle veered off the main road and drove into the interiors, I saw reason and appreciated my decision to go along with his suggestions even if it meant inordinate delays.[129] For what becomes evident at first, as an absence of infrastructure does not adequately sum up the situation: these homes, Dalit homes, do exist but they embody symbols of what it means to be literally, figuratively and in this case spatially abandoned— as the road that ideally should have snaked its way into and beyond the landed caste tolas[130] and lead us to our destination invariably disappeared into dirt and soil, at a point where it became abundantly clear that if one moved further along on that particular path, it will lead to the bhun tola.

Even though it was 2009, there was little shift in the generally held assumption that, one takes the unpaved, muddy and numerous various sized potholed road leading to the Dalit tola, normally located in the most spatially disadvantage area of the village, only if one lives there or has a very good reason to go there. The 'hidden apartheid'[131] (Human Rights Watch 2007) naturalized to the extent that it becomes difficult to even register it at first sight as an instance of systematic and systemic component of village life; it thereby

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[128] http://www.mahindra.com/Heritage/History.html accessed on November 10, 2009.

[129] Although the distance traveled was rarely above 50 kilometers, it took couple of hours to reach these villages. We used to set out early in the morning and return back to the 3-star hotel in Bodh Gaya by evening. The travel was a challenge in and of itself; my body experienced fatigue, bruises and pain from numerous jolts experienced during the to and fro rides to the villages. I mention this to point to the ways in which everyday struggle gets compounded.

[130] Every village consists of several tolas and each tola denotes the abodes of particular castes.

[131] 'Hidden apartheid' refers to the segregation within villages based on caste.

escapes the spatial theorization of violence, that along with other forms of violence, defines Dalit existence in rural Bihar.

In summer of 2009, I was surrounded by thatched mud homes constructed in a somewhat concentric circle, appearing to encompass the land the community had staked control over. The scenic beauty that encompasses Dehri masks the violence its residents have imbibed, endured and are engaged in the process of overcoming. A cot was laid out under the huge banyan tree located in the middle, as it provided adequate shade throughout the day, irrespective of the direction of the sun. Much to the amusement of all, a small snake made its way into the gathering, leading us to scamper away from the base of the tree trunk while some youth actively took to the task of picking up the snake with the aid of a stick and directing it away from the homes and the people. "It is not a poisonous snake," I was assured as I keenly watched it being set free next to the bushes that were located on the far end of the tree and away from the homes.

The snake was the least of their problems, I was told. Their problems stemmed from the local zamindar. He was bent upon making life difficult for Dalit community, who in a show of open defiance to his authority had not only staked control over the land adjacent to the zamindar's residential premises but also migrated from their allocated space/place located in between two nalas, approximately a couple of kilometers away from the zamindar's house, in the process both defying and defiling the prerequisite distance that marked adequate separation and segregation from the zamindar. Their mud homes had moved in close proximity to the zamindar and now stood on freed government

land that was long held by him. "The list of challenges we are facing is long and often devious. The snake will strike only if it is disturbed, but the zamindar is constantly scheming/conspiring to make our lives untenable here. But we are also determined," Dhyan said to contextualize the analogies that were beginning to be drawn between the snake and the zamindar. By the end of my fieldwork in May 2014, the thatched homes had led the way for brick homes, built with or without the support from the state government.[132] The residents noted that some got state support in the form of housing assistance but the village was primarily built with the help of income earned from working as migrant labor. Like most villages in rural Bihar, Dehri wears a deserted look in the non-agricultural seasons. For example, in April 2014, when I last visited the village, there were only five families staying back in the village, of which, three families, were led by women.

Chronicling Dalit assertion in Dehri

A couple of youths from the Bhuiyan community had actively taken part in the land struggle against the Math and when the movement winded down in Bodh Gaya, they brought the struggle back home with them. Those currently settled in Dehri were landless agricultural laborers, tied formally to the local zamindar as his kamias. The struggle here is said to have innocuous beginnings— it stemmed from the fact that the community

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[132] Almost 99 percent of the residents migrate to the cities during the non-agricultural season. Income from migrant labor is used for additional purposes. The produce from land is primarily subsistence, as they do not have proper irrigation facilities.

found it increasingly difficult to survive in the restricted space provided by the zamindar. They appealed to him for additional space to accommodate their growing community and the zamindar relented, but only after much persuasion. The new space being offered, though, was located in-between two huge nalas (drains) that inadvertently flood during the monsoons and maroons the community for days on; it was sufficient to drive a wedge in the community as some its members felt that the zamindar had shown generosity by granting additional space and that needed to be acknowledged and reciprocated by ending requests for appropriate land for them to settle. The demand for appropriate land quelled for sometime but problems with the new place persisted, leading Dhyan and others who did not want to be subjected to seasonal deluge to negotiate further with the zamindar. Their efforts were undermined due to lack of unity among their own community. "*Zamindarwa mein goosh jale tuo zamindarwa kae takat nae baade jale, didi ji*" (when they side with the zamindar, it increases the landlord's strength, sister), the members would often intersperse this comment when sharing their stories of struggle. The division in the community, and its varying relationship with the zamindar, provide key insights into the intangible recourses undertaken by the landed elite to rein in what in this case would be 'errant Dalits' acting out due to influence from the outside/ers: "*koi chada diya hai/ kaan bhar diya hai/ baikha diya hai/hawa lag giya hai*" (someone has filled his ear or he is acting under someone's influence)— invoking the paternalistic relationship that is projected/nurtured in the master-slave relationship. This approach seeks to perpetuate

the notion that a Dalit is incapable of acting by himself and that he is acting under the influence of some people.

Following their association with the sangathan, 'dissenting' Dalits in Dehri discovered that the land lying fallow between their tola and the zamindar's residence belonged to the state government. The zamindar's primeval resentment can be gauged from the mere fact that, despite the 140 acres of government land lying fallow, he staged aggressive combat to prevent the 'dissenting' Dalit community from stepping out of the space/place circumscribed by the two huge *nalas* (drains). From the narratives it becomes evident that the physical distance between the zamindar's home and where the Dalits were being forced remain confined could very well be born out of caste considerations of maintaining caste-informed notions of purity and economic depravation. Oral narratives of Dalit women and men indicate that the zamindar did not allow cattle owned by Dalits, primarily goats, to graze in the land under his control, claiming that the goats' urine burnt the grass and made it unfit for grazing by the zamindar's cattle. The narratives also underscores that it was common for zamindars and landed elites to take possession over government land classified as pasture land, ponds and public land.

Once land adjacent to the *nalas* was identified as belonging to the state government, the Dalit community tried to cultivate it as it was government land and was lying fallow. This move by the Dalits, however, did not sit well with the local zamindar, who not only sought to oppose their move but also to explore every possible approach to prevent Dalit from making use of the fallow land. The community notes that the old man

tried his best to keep the community holed up in the small area that fell between the two big drains, but could not succeed.

At first the zamindar tried to hand over the land to the forest department by asking them to plant saplings in the entire 140 acres. Munnia Devi, a widow now in her late 60s, was among the handful of people who remained in Dehri year-round, with her two grandsons to look after the fields and cattle that belonged to her three children, recalled that that particular night entire Bhuiyan families, including little children, worked overnight to root out the saplings planted by the forest department and make the land appear like before. When the community confronted the forester stating that the land he was trying to claim as forestland, was classified as Bihar sarkar's *gair mazurwa zameen* (government land), the forester backed off.

The zamindar then tried to bring the land under him by attempting to cultivate it with the help of hired labor from the outside, which the Dalit community resisted tooth and nail. The women stood in front of the tractor and refused to budge. Munnia Devi's eyes lit up while recalling the moment, "*sab janania taar rahei, joti tu kaisa joti, nahin na jote debo*," (all the women stood there, saying we will see how you will plough the land, we will not let you plough the land). By then it had become amply clear to the community that they would have to physically move in and live on the land to foil the zamindar's future attempts to take over the land. Around 46 mud homes were constructed and the village was formally named by the sangathan, replete with a board announcing its name in August 2006.

When I first visited the village in summer of 2009, tensions with the local zamindar were perhaps peaking. The relative ease with which everyday struggles were being shared with me indicated the strength and resolve of a community to overcome the odds together. I was aghast to learn that the community had been trying to install a hand-pump but with little success. The delay was not because the community lacked resources, but because the officials both elected and state appointed decided to openly side with the zamindar until it became abundantly clear that the zamindar could not stop the Dalits from staking control over the land. Women at that time narrated that they had to trek over a kilometer and half to get potable water. The round trip was roughly 3 kilometers and often times on their way they were subject to insults from those allied to the zamindar. Dhyan had noted at that time that, "We have the money to pay for the hand pump and the labor, but due to the fear of the zamindar, no one is willing to come forward and complete the task." It appeared at that time that the entire state apparatus at the local level, including the *mukhiya*, an elected representative who belonged to the community, and the contractor, was unwilling to go against the zamindar. The community got its first hand pump in 2012, nearly 6 years after the village's formal naming by the Sangathan. By 2013, there were 3 hand pumps in the *tola,* putting an end to the water crisis that the community had struggled with following its decision to settle on government land. The significance of the installation of the hand pump increases because it is considered as one of the ways to be formally recognized by the state as the hand pump gets recorded in the government registers.

Grassroots action and mobilization gets further exemplified in Dehri, when struggling Dalits with active guidance and support from the sangathan simultaneously decided to take on the zamindar's attempt to intimidate them through series of false court cases by pooling their resources. Fictitious charges were slapped on the most vocal of Dalit voices in the newly established village. Ironically, none of the cases had to do with the land, said Dhyan, who had at least 5 cases registered cases of petty theft and outraging the modesty of the zamindar's wife lodged against him. In detailing the cases, he notes,

> One case was related to felling of seven trees. The zamindar himself cut the trees and loaded it on to his tractor. Now, I do not even own a cycle, how can I get a tractor to ferry those huge, thick *Saguan* (teak) trees from the front of his house? The other cases were related to his wife, that I had followed her when she was on her way to answer nature's call and forcibly took her goods of value and beat her up. He was also going to file a *balatkar* (rape) case on me but I advised me not to do so as it would prove detrimental to his image. Even when the cases were on, I was on talking terms with the zamindar and would advise him to act in good faith but he did not listen to us.

By 2014 all the cases were dismissed as the community noted that none could hold ground, as they were false and preposterous in nature. However, when the law and administrative channels failed to provide reprieve to the zamindar, he sought out the

party's help to resolve the matter and undo the injustice he claimed that the Bhuiyan had done to him by forcibly taking control over his land. The 'party' invokes much fear and intimidation in the region and Dhyan accounts that, had it not been for the training and experience he received while working alongside the Sangharsh Vahini in late 1984, he would not have stood a chance against this particular move of the zamindar. "*Sangathan hamein boodhi deti hai* (the organization gives us ideas/knowledge). I do not consider myself less than anyone," he said as he went ahead to recount that the party had called for a *jan adalat* (people's court) and had summoned his presence along with other prominent members of his community. When confronted by the Area Commander of the party to concede some land to the zamindar, Dhyan noted,

> I said that we are willing to concede land to the zamindar if they (the party) could ascertain that zamindar did not own land and assets in the form of trees or that he has not sold the land he had papers for, for the purposes of his sons' education, house construction and/or marriage of his daughters, while at the same time eyeing to usurp government land. I told the commander that we had asked the zamindar to show the papers to the land, but he had refused to show it us.

Dalits noted that they were able to narrate the zamindar's objectionable activities and convey facts that he had hidden from the party without fear— a feat they credited to their involvement in the grassroots mobilization and being part of a strong sangathan (organization); thereby forcing the area commander to side with the Dalits even though he was brought in to mediate on behalf of the zamindars.

By the year 2012 it became abundantly clear that the zamindar had exhausted all means to reverse Dalit control over the government land that was contiguous to his residential premises. Sitabia Devi, a grassroots activist in the community, shares that the experience of working with the sangahtan and the fighting the zamindar collectively has emboldened the community to not only take up issues that are of key importance to them, but has also provide an understanding of how to work the local bureaucracy, court, police and other village elected administrative offices; often with varying level of success leading her to comment, "At first we could not approach the officers; now I have no hesitation to ask for what is our right. Also, we have learnt that not all offices/officers are the same, didi." Her comment that not all office/ers are the same was her way of conveying that the state was not a single, monolithic entity and that it is riddled with contractions. Knowing this for a fact, Sitabia let me know that if one part of the bureaucracy does not work, she now approaches the other— "This is how I was able to get a hand pump installed in my courtyard," she brimmed with confidence. One is forced to contend with Sitabia's adeptness as well as the marked indifference with which the state apparatus is able to defer, sometimes indefinitely, the basic rights of the margins. Oftentimes, working the system entails losing a day's work and or having to forgo a significant portion of one's earnings. As of April 2014, Dehri is yet to show up on the map as it has been recognized as a revenue village. When the residents of Dehri approached the circle officer, he expressed surprise at the amount of land the community had under its control and patronizingly asserted, "*bahut accha hai! Koi chinta mat*

kijiyae, zameen apke kabza mein hai, aap jotiya, khaiyae (do not worry that land is in your control, you till and reap the benefits). The community representative reminded him that the lack of legal papers is a cause of worry as they cannot risk thriving on the goodwill of the others and that only legal papers to land under their control can ease their worries.

The talk of regularizing Dalit control over the land has not yet materialized as the community alleges that it has primarily to do with their inability to supply adequate bribes for the process. The community asserts that if they had the kind of money being demanded, they would have bought land instead of vacillating from pillar to post. At what appears as the penultimate stage of realization of their struggle— they are being made to wait. "*Dekhi kab tak? E dharna, joolos chalta hai? Aaj, nahin to kal sarkar ko zameen dena hi padega*" (We will see, or let us also see, how long our demonstrations will continue. Today or tomorrow the state has to give us the land). This expression assumes significance as it simultaneously captures the resolve and the fatigue the state apparatus is capable of producing among those at the margins. Towards the end of 2013, the zamindar, in order to further sow seeds of distrust within the community, facilitated the process of procuring legal papers for Bhuiyan, who had sided with him and had chosen to stay back in the land provided by the zamindar. The legalization of land held by their fellow community members in their previous *tola* has, however, served to provide hope for those settled in Dehri. Sitabia Devi notes that,

> The government says that those who do not have land will be given 5 decimal,[133] but I say that if people have no land then it is okay to give 5 decimals, but where there is land, like in the village where we lived previously, people got papers for the land in their control which was roughly between 25 to 30 decimal, similarly we too should be given the papers for land in our control which is also around 25-30 decimals.

Dalits in Dehri let me know that with the help of the Sangathan, they have divided the total land under their control equally among the families as per their number of children, which included both sons and daughters. Here it must be noted, that the loss of land and/or the subversion of received historical hierarchies in rural Bihar or, for that matter, most parts of India does not get read as merely a loss in terms of economic and/or social clout. Rather, the loss evokes visceral reactions from the landed castes used to viewing the hierarchical and dehumanizing nature of caste as 'the norm'. As was evident in Dehri, the zamindar tried to alienate the community on all fronts, sometimes with the use of bureaucratic apparatus and at other times through invoking the 'outlawed' agents to instill fear and elicit subjection from the Dalits. It so happens that in the case of Dehri, all attempts successively backfired on the zamindar primarily due to the resolve the

133 This scheme was launched in 2009-10 to give 3-decimal (or 1,306.8 sq ft) plots to landless Mahadalit families to build a home under Indira Awas Yojana which was later extended to 5 decimals of homestead gair majurwa land along with other benefits to Mahadalits. A decimal is one-hundredth of an acre.

community showed in dealing with him as a collective rather than as individuals. It is 'normal' for zamindars or landed elites to voice their aversion and intrinsic disdain towards Dalits and acts of Dalit assertion and/or minor transgressions by eliciting analogies of not finding Dalits/lower castes even worthy of their bodily excrement. The zamindar in Dehri expressed his repugnance towards Dalits demanding rights for government land by letting them know that he does not consider them worthy of his body's dirt and that it was far-fetched to think he would ever consider giving Dalits land, even if the land in question was barren and or lying fallow. The loss, apart from being economic and social, also incites feelings of being rendered less than— thereby legitimizing violence on Dalits for staging transgressions of the established social norms that in Fatehpur division of Gaya continued to enjoy impunity, almost seven decades into the post-colonial India primarily due to the nexus of local landlords, bureaucratic apparatus and political parties.

Legislating change? Engendering alternative politics of emancipation from below

It is reasonable to assert that Dalits taking control over land in Dehri appears to be a replay of the modus operandi that was used during the Bodh Gaya land struggle, albeit on a much smaller scale. Nevertheless the struggle was against a key component of the feudal order— the zamindars that, at that time in the region, had held kamias at their

disposal.[134] In fact, Dehri has its genesis in the Bodh Gaya land struggle. While demands of land for the landless during the Bodh Gaya land struggle was framed around the implementation of the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, similarly the demand for land in Dehri is being framed around the Nitish Kumar's administration decision to grant at least 5 decimal land to landless Mahadalits[135], under which Bhuiyan and Dusadh communities have been categorized. While legislation is the focus around which marginalized community mobilized for their rights, it is important to keep in mind the different circumstances that prompted the act of legislating as it provides key insights into the 'microphysics of power'[136] under which Dalit assertion is being staged by drawing into focus the nature of resistance the Dalit assertion face and the exigencies created by the changing nature of state and society.

The Bihar Land Reforms Act was in response to struggle of the marginal farmers and landless agricultural laborers that persisted both in pre and post-colonial India, by a reluctant state apparatus ostensibly committed to the liberal values that sought to be vested in addressing social inequalities by legislating change through a series of restorative rights which had land reforms at its center. Despite the landed caste orchestrated roadblocks to undermine the Act's implementation and impact, the Bihar

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[134] The practice of kamiauti was prevalent in Gaya district up until the mid-1990s as per Dalit grassroots activists in the region, despite existing legislation like the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act, 1976 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 that were designed to specially target this social menace.

[135] As per the 2011 Census of India, Schedule Castes constitutes 16% of Bihar's 104 million populations. There are 21 of 23 Dalit sub-castes classified as Mahadalits - Bantar, Bauri, Bhogta, Bhuiya, Chaupal, Dabgar, Dom (Dhangad), Ghasi, Halalkhor, Hari (Mehtar, Bhangi), Kanjar, Kurariar, Lalbegi, Musahar, Nat, Pan (Swasi), Rajwar, Turi, Dhobi, Pasi, Chamar and Paswan (Dusadh). Paswan caste was initially left out of the Mahadalit category. It is the caste of Ram Villas Paswan which played an important role it its inclusion.

[136] See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. 1977. Pg. 26-27

Land Reforms Act along with the Land Ceiling Act 1961 is credited for undermining the hegemony of the upper and landed castes and a widening of a social base of control over assets through an inclusion of those belonging to the middle castes, which in Bihar, primarily meant the Yadavs and the Kurmis. Here again, it bears remembering that even as we show that Dalit assertion to redistributed land spread out from Bodh Gaya to Fatehpur and Mohanpur divisions of Gaya what has not changed significantly is the state and state apparatus in Bihar. As Yuval-Davis et al (2006) points out, "change itself is contingent on older, deeply entrenched structures that are resistant to change for instance the law— jurisprudence and practice, "(7) and in this case, one would argue it would be the entire state and its apparatus— the police, bureaucracy, legislators and law— that is infused with ruling elites' ideology and interests.

The case of legislation formulated by the Nitish Kumar-led government that promises 5 decimal of land to those landless that fall in the newly constituted Mahadalit category requires an understanding of the changed political situation in Bihar, crafted to perfection by Kumar, through a social engineering of caste equations. The deftness of Kumar has not only undermined the hegemony of dominant castes in Bihar, such as the Yadav, but has also served to secure his own social base and political survival. The phenomenon is, however, not unique to Kumar; his predecessor Laloo Prasad Yadav was able to rule the state for three consecutive terms[137] by securing the support of Muslims

[137] Laloo Prasad and his wife Rabri Devi ruled the state from 1995 to 2005.

and Yadav, popularly referred to as 'MY' combination.[138] Prasad's rule has been acknowledged as result of undermining of the upper-caste hold over Bihar. Similarly, Kumar is credited with undermining the dominant castes' hold over Bihar by carving out a separate category of what is normally considered as the 'left out' castes that have not been able to rake in the benefits of reservation and development. In a society/state where caste considerations play a critical role in retaining and holding on to political power, social engineering of caste by allows for an effective undermining of numbers, majority and dominance key to deciding electoral fate. Kumar has created sub-groups within groups and forged an alliance of extremes like the 'Extremely Backward Castes' (EBC) among the 'Other Backward Castes' (OBC) category, Mahadalits among the Dalits. Although on the surface, social engineering appears to have reinforced and hardened the caste lines and divide, the move does allow for an acknowledge of heterogeneity within a caste and or a religious group, as well as render visible normally silenced sub-castes, and groups that until now were not of much importance due to their low numerical strength are now key in any political effort. The yoking of castes that have so far been unable to benefit from development as well as the reservation process now creates the opportunity, however limited, to undermine the hegemonic control of dominant castes in Bihar. The particular attention to marginalization to primarily secure an allegiance of a social base

[138] As per the 2001 census, Yadav constitute 20 percent of Bihar population while Muslims formed nearly 18 percent of the population

and fortify one's electoral prospect has allowed for the centering on the concerns of the caste groups who until now were relegated to the margins.

The key aspects that I want to highlight here is that through the act of legislation the state at its best acknowledges that not only is the problem of landlessness acute in Bihar, but also it is intrinsically connected to caste. Even though I am attentive to the frail possibilities that severely compromised legislation implementation in Bihar presents, ethnographic evidence suggests that even compromised implementation of legislation has the ability to present avenues for Dalits for staging assertions and articulating dissent. Successive legislation around redistributive land policies continues to invigorate the dialogue around the unresolved issues of land ownership in rural Bihar by centering the uncomfortable reality of skewed land ownership patterns in rural Bihar. The very issues that the landed gentry are eager to brand as untenable and therefore best aborted. In the case of redistribution of land rights, the subsequent legislations and welfare programs not only breathes fresh life in the overall objective of land reform but also paves way for new forms of mobilizations to emerge that appropriate the language of the legislation, reinvigorating the basic unmet demands for redistributive justice around productive assets in rural Bihar, thereby forcing shifts, however miniscule, to occur. It is critical to remain vigilant to ascertain these small shifts and changes in miniscule spaces that often serve as sites for engendering new forms of Dalit assertion. Dehri is an example of coalescing a struggle around legislation to affect change in one's own condition— charting processes of both becoming and belonging.

Plurality of Dalit forms of assertions in rural Bihar

As per Omi and Winnat (2015), "A politics of becoming in the present context, is a project that attempts to also interpret, represent and explain racial dynamics, while simultaneously underscoring the need to reorganize and redistribute resources along racial lines," (57). I read Omi and Winant's understanding of "politics of becoming" along with Kannabiran's (2006) who asserts that fundamental to the politics of becoming is that it is a 'self-conscious movement' that entails an arrival at a space/place through a questioning of the foundations of both culture and solidarity. Kannibiran's emphasis on the 'self-conscious' underscores the agency of the historically marginalized subjects and draws into the equation the notions of power and hence violence that are critical to understanding any form of marginalized existence be it in the form of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. Her focus on 'self-consciousness?' adjudicates agency to the subjects at the margins of the society, stripped off and or silenced in any dominant discourse of the margins. To reiterate, that change in power relations is not a benign or benevolent act that the state or ruling elite undertakes on its own volition, but rather the process of altering power equations and undermining violence is often driven by the margins, in which alliance and solidarity plays critical roles. The insertion of the 'self-conscious' in the politics of belonging facilitates a questioning of the dominant logic-ideology that forces the margins to continue to be the margins. Going by this reasoning, a theorization of the 'kabza' of land by Dalits in Dehri would precipitate a crisis in the widely held notions of caste as a functional, widely accepted (stripping away the idea of

resistance to caste even as a possibility), religious and social system. As one sees in Dehri as well as at other villages where Dalits have asserted control over a key material asset such as land, material resources is key to retaining landed-caste-based gendered hegemony. Dalits in Dehri are driving a transformative process that not only fundamentally challenges and alters historical caste based gendered discriminatory practices in the region but are demonstrating news forms of being and staging assertions centered on collective strength, alliance and a willingness to scrutinize received histories of caste-, gender- and class-based oppressions. Therefore, while attempting to transgress the conditions of subjugation, the Dalit experience in Dehri becomes demonstrative of how control over material conditions has been intrinsic to caste-based land hegemony in Bihar.

Second, while liberal critiques might disapprove of the use of social engineering on caste to take advantage of vote-bank politics in Bihar, I contend that the seemingly regressive political politics have had some unintentional liberating potential. Even though social engineering of society based on caste, it is widely viewed as a ploy of the ruling elite to stay in power; in Bihar, it also serves some rudimentary goals such as acknowledging that caste is the structuring principle that the electoral vote-bank politics strives to capitalize on. Second, it renders the notion of caste and caste-based groups heterogeneous by offering new forms/space/platforms and providing hyper-visibility by exposing the workings of the 'micro-politics of caste' that exist within the broad categories of upper, middle and lower caste hierarchies. This recognition opens up public

and bureaucratic space for acknowledging how caste-based hierarchies is not always top-down, but is rather diffused as it exists laterally. For example, carving out an EBC category out of an OBC category might appear politically expedient, but it also makes for an economically expedient case, as castes that fell under EBCs were unable to take vantage of the affirmative action policies as dominant groups, such as Yadav and Koeri in Bihar, largely appropriated it.

Lastly, the strong co-relationship between caste and economic status in Bihar defines grassroots mobilization around caste-class considerations. Dalit narratives understand the push and pulls of democracy and try to compensate for their social and political disadvantage by showing up as a collective to negotiate with the state apparatus. Dalit narratives prescribe how they find strength in their collectivity to undermine the powerful local power structures, for instance, to successfully take kabza over land that, per state directive, should be distributed among the landless and yet continues to held by the landed elites. The uniqueness of the collective's effective mobilization, however, resides in its ability to be attentive to individual needs of its members. Therefore, even when gaining legal control over the land is central to the struggle in Dehri, Dalits use their collectivity to highlight irregularities in accessing government welfare schemes and partake in activities that allow them to be in alliance and solidarity with other forms of struggles in Bihar and the nation-state. What we therefore demonstrate in Dehri is that kabza has facilitated Dalit attempts to belong, through a process of becoming that fundamentally challenges all forms of decent-based discrimination and exclusion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, through Dalit narratives I have shown how caste-based discrimination defines everyday life in rural Bihar and that the process of transforming and/or challenging such deep-rooted hatred rests in fundamentally altering control over material assets. Using this logic, I have argued that Dalit assertion and their successful undermining of deep-rooted, caste-sanctioned practices call for an explicit acknowledgement of caste as well as a re-theorization of caste that makes an analysis of power, violence and control of material assets intrinsic to its definition. The tracing of events in Dehri are similar different processes through which former kamias created a Dalit identity that forced the zamindar to revisit his initial visceral response of refusing to forgo even the "dirt of his body" and then attempting to wager a form of arrangement to enable him to retain control over the Dalits. These events effectively prove that in an agrarian setting, a redistribution of productive assets such as land is not only critical to redress historical injustices, but also fundamental to altering caste mediated gendered relations, and to improve agricultural productivity in the region, buffering marginalized communities from absolute forms of poverty.

More importantly, ground realities suggest that the biggest challenge for land redistribution is the opposition from the landed elites. In the case of Dehri, Dalits have, through a long and peaceful struggle, identified and wrested land formerly held by the landed elites. The task of the state here is to affirm the struggle by granting them legal titles to land under their control. The hesitancy of the state exposes its bias and the

different levels at which Dalit assertion are met with resistance. Nevertheless, the case study of Dehri, a village struggling to gain official recognition since its establishment with the help of the Sangathan (organization) in August 2008, is critical for understanding how ground situations are shifting in rural Bihar. The experience of Dalits in Dehri underscores the need for the state apparatus and governance to recalibrate its approach towards redistributive land policy as it continues to remain the source of contention in rural Bihar.

CHAPTER 4: CONTESTED HIERARCHIES? DALIT ASSERTION OVER LAND REDEFINE SPACE/PLACE

"It is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too" -Dorren Massey

abb harijan badjan bangail hai, aur badjan Harijan[139]

The Harijans have become the landed caste, and the landed caste have become Harijans

- A Dalit woman in Kaari village

Much of the discourse on the Bodh Gaya land struggle has been around its ability to gender the "land to the tiller" slogan both at the grassroots level of organization and mobilization as well as at the level of policy drafting and implementation, thereby bringing into sharp focus the obvious assessment of the nature and scope of gendering the issue of land rights in rural South Bihar in particular and the Global South in general. To answer this question, I draw on my fieldwork in Kaari, where nearly 40 women belonging to both Grihast and Dalit communities got legal titles to land. Here it needs to be noted that the decision to grant land rights to women was hotly contested not just by the state, but also by those within the struggle. The outcomes ranged from there being a

[139] The quote points to the irony of the Dalit situation in the present in which landed elites are faking their identities.

number of villages in which men refused to accept land titles, independent and/or joint, in the favor of their women, to villages like Kaari, where the men actively adopted, supported and advocated for land redistribution in their women's name.

Discernable qualitative shifts in Dalit lives due to the land struggle

Sangharsh Vahini activists, both women and men, who lived among the Dalit community in the late 1970s early 1980s and worked closely with the community noted,

> Chetna: The Mahant would give only a bowl of watery rice for food. There was more of water and less of rice in it. I do not think they (referring to Dalits who were at Math's Kamia at that time) would have seen anything better before. Now I think that they might have seen people who were better off than them but they could never have imagined that they too could become so – it was not even in their dreams. Next to them were animals that lived with them. They were staying with the animals. Their houses were of mud. Both men and women would drink liquor. So it was very different. Now I remember all these things, but at that time I did not pay heed. But yes, I had not seen humans living in such humiliating conditions before.

> Kanak: Their (the Dalits who were at that time Math's Kamia) conditions were imaginable. I found it very difficult to tolerate a lot of things, but I would keep my heart/emotions in control. It was difficult for me, as the pigs would live along

> with the families. I/we had not seen a pig before in my life. It is very unlikely for middle-class women to pass through a Harijan basti (locality) in the city. Also, we were eating only rice, cooked in the morning, for days on end. I had read about their (Bhuiyan) lives but I had never imagined or understood what it really meant until I came and lived with the Bhuiyan families. Their situation was beyond comprehension.

The above narratives gives us insight into the life of Math's Kamias as witnessed and experienced by middle castes while living among the Bhuiyan community, between the period of 1977-1986. The narratives echo the observations made by colonial administrators when documenting the land tenure system in the region decades earlier—indicating the caste-sanctioned institution of bondage, and destitution was as old as the history of the Math itself. Colonial administrators noted,

> In Gaya the agricultural laborer lives really from hand to mouth?, is worse off, perhaps, than anywhere in the division…the higher class of people are as opulent and contented? as any I have come across. They are healthy self-loving people whose wants are due to more to their false ideas of luxury than to natural causes. The mass of people, however, who till the soil are in abject state which is to be expected in a country where ignorance prevails, and where wealth and influence

> are vested in the hands of a very few… Among the laboring class the remnants of slavery are still discernable being almost confined to Kahar and Kurmi castes.[140]

It is this legacy of servitude, which Maaiya referred to when she said, "*Badlau* (change) is a very big word for me. It was beyond our imagination that there could ever be an end to the Math hold over their lives." Although the watershed moment of land redistribution appeared to be a key to their lives, it proved to be a short celebratory phase in what she terms a long struggle to realize a politics of becoming and belonging,

> Of course there has been change: earlier we were starving on a regular basis and did not ever have enough to cover our bodies. Our kids would roam almost naked well into their teen years. Today that is not the case. We are free to work for whomever we want to and wherever we want to. No one can force us to do anything. Instead of *teen ser kacchi* (less than three kilos of un-husked rice), we now get teen kilo *pacci* (three kilograms of husked rice) for a day's work. We are now demanding that the agricultural wage be increased by a kilogram to four kilos. But some of the grihast who had earlier agreed because we refused to work on their fields is now reneging from their own words, after their work was done.[141] But there is always the next year, we will see where they will go to get

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[140] As cited in Kelkar and Gala 1999 on Pg. 87

[141] Delayed monsoons that year had made the Dalit women in Kaari anxious as it meant loss of the agricultural jobs that they were deft at and comfortable with. The demand for a wage hike by a kilo of grain was agreed upon by the *grihast* in the village after much resistance and reluctance. Threats of a total boycott by the Dalit women from working in *grihast* fields along with the fact that there was a shortage of agricultural labor and women received much higher day wages in neighboring villages and villages near the cities of Bodhgaya and Gaya forced the *grihast* community to relent to the Dalit women demands for increase in daily wages. This was perhaps the first wage increase since the late 1980s.

> labor for their fields. So, yes, we have benefitted but not much. We (the women) got land in far off and infertile areas. In the *taria* (infertile land) we neither get water, nor any other facility, how will we cultivate that land? When there is facility (adequate water) we grow *gobi, dhan, mirchi* and other vegetables and then when there was no *sadhan* (facility), we cannot do much. But, we have not sold the land. Let cattle graze that land, but we will not give that land. We also have children and the land is for them.

Maaiya's narrative forces a reconsideration of what constitutes a 'struggle' and how we recognize that it is over. Her narrative acknowledges change but concurrently underscores the tenuous and marginal nature of the change that has taken place—undermining the celebratory aspect of change and calling for a scrutiny of the nature of resistance Dalit assertion face in the present. Therefore, while the widely held perception is that the Bodh Gaya land struggle effectively ended following the redistribution of land titles among the landless and marginal farmers; for the Dalit community, the redistribution of land marked the end of one phase of the struggle that formed the basis for the staging of several other forms of struggle.

The struggle for Dalits in Kaari has therefore shifted to drawing attention to the poor quality of land redistributed to women, raising questions of how policy continues to marginalize women as they fail to see themselves as independent farmers and how it adds on to their difficulty in realizing their full potential of land ownership. In addition, the payment of wages in kind, especially when we compare the marginal increase in wages to

the inflation and food prices, points to the ways in which landed elites have buffered themselves against market fluctuations while severely limiting Dalit choices when it comes to how to use their wages.[142] In this context, the Bodh Gaya land struggle can be best viewed as an enabling moment in Dalit history and lives in rural south Bihar. In an interview in 2009 a Sangharsh Vahini activist noted,

> I went back to the villages in 1989 and saw that things have changed drastically. There was at least enough food. Earlier, when we (activists) would go to their villages we would eat with them (Bhuiyan households primarily). We would then take vegetables and spices with us. But now, I see that their diet is more complete. Apart from rice, they served us with lentils alongside chutney, *mirchi* (chilli) and salt. These are small things. The hair was combed and oiled, they had big *bindi* (circular mark) on their foreheads, women wore saris and men were wearing white dhotis. Also making the hair of their children and thinking about educating them— all this was not even imaginable when we first went there. The land is theirs. They use their hard work to produce good crops. So when there was sufficient to eat, they started thinking about educating kids – the demands of the women have changed. I never imagined that. They were telling me that they do not have a school nearby and their children travel far to go to school. Also, women were asking about family planning methods. They were saying that they have seven kids and there are no effective birth control options available to them.

[142] Payment of wages in kind buffer the grihast any inflationary considerations.

> The private hospital charged around Rs. 2500.00 - 3000.00 (~$50-$60) for the operation that necessitated rest for a couple of days that they could not afford to stay. These issues had started to come up. The Mahant's bonded laborer was all gone.

In the context of the struggle, redistributed land has served as a metaphor for both 'becoming and belonging' as these two concurrent phenomenon, that continues to be highly contested and resisted by the State that overtly aligns with the landed elites and continues to pose significant challenges towards realization of Dalit interests in the region, are systematically etching away forms of 'hidden apartheid' emblematic of rural India and, more so, rural Bihar. Ownership of redistributed land leveled the highly lopsided nature of social hierarchical relationships in rural Bihar that is primarily sustained through effective control over productive assets.

Marking the shift, Maaiya noted that, "We continue to struggle. However, not for food and clothing, as it is not a major concern of ours like it was in the past. Our struggle is not just for land; our struggle is for our rights, for good education for our children. *Sarkar* (State) is sending everything in our name and the *badjan* (landed castes also referred to as *grihast*) are taking it all away." Contestations over resources continue, as landed elites in the village more often than not significantly appropriate government aid and assistance meant for Dalits, leading to a popular phrase used by them, "*Abb harijan badjan bangail hai, aur badjan harijan* (now the harijans are Grihasts and the Grihasts

are posturing as Harijans)." To further drive the importance of the resistance Dalit assertion face, I was told the story of an upper caste village principal of the school who would tell his Dalit students, "No matter how many seats the government reserves for you; you can only avail them if I let you successfully graduate from here" implying that access to resources meant for Dalits continue to be through the landed elites even as these hegemonic controls are to be contested by through everyday acts of Dalit assertion.

Blurring of social hierarchical boundaries: Mapping change in Kaari

Almost three decades after getting rights to redistributed land, the narratives I ended up collecting from the people, I interviewed in the 'field' were narratives of abandonment, betrayal, deceit and despair and of continued landed-caste resistance to even the most basic of Dalit assertion. The Bodhgaya land struggle appeared to be reduced to a mere footnote in the lives of the Dalit women and I stood corrected. "Our struggles are far from over. Our struggles with the state/government and the society are the level of the everyday," one of the women who got title to an acre of redistributed land had remarked. A course on anthropology and study of conflict allowed me to put Foucault's notion of power, Eyal Weizman's notion of the 'architecture of violence', Dalit literature and the Dalit narratives of abandonment and betrayal from my fieldwork in conversation with each other – and it motivated me to think about the "architecture of Dalit violence" – what is the architecture around/ surrounding Dalit existence? And how does it perpetuate

circumscribed existence of Dalits? Has getting legal titles to land changed the architecture of Dalit existence? If so, how and what does the changed architecture resemble and or facilitate? In trying to answer these questions, two things increasingly stood out for me – the normalcy of discourse around Dalit existence and the desire to make visible the 'hidden apartheid'[143] characteristic of Dalit existence to allow for fresh perspectives and interventions to emerge in what largely comes across, in strange and disturbing ways, as given and/or set discourse on the Dalit condition in India. I wanted to map the shifts, the changes that redistributed land enabled and challenges to Dalit assertion in the present. I gravitated towards geography to look for possible answers to visualizing social space occupied by Dalits. I dabbled albeit very briefly with GIS and GPS and learned how to mark waypoints and use them to make personal maps. However, what appealed to me and felt doable as part of my fieldwork was asking the Dalit women themselves to make maps of their immediate social space.

The purpose of mapping was to grasp how space occupied by Dalits had changed over time as they got legal titles to redistributed land. Mapping would facilitate an analysis of how forms of caste and gender based discrimination changed over time? How did Dalit women view/understand their immediate space? What was their relationship to the space they have come to occupy? How did they navigate their immediate as well as the neighboring spaces? The expectation was that the mapping exercises would generate

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[143] See Smita Narula, Broken People: Caste violence against India's "untouchable" (1999) and Hidden Apartheid Caste Discrimination against India's "Untouchables" Shadow Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2007. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/india0207webwcover_0.pdf

a sense of Dalit women's everyday lives. It would show what paths Dalit women took for their everyday activities like collecting potable water, attending to the fields, etc. and in the process generate conversation about what routes they preferred or avoided on daily basis and why? What has changed since they got the titles to redistributed land? What activities took most of their time and why? How and when did redistributed land figure in their mapping process? How did they view their relationship to redistributed land? What was the nature of their involvement with land? What connections they made between their home and their redistributed land?

The social mapping process

For example, in the preparatory mapping sessions, Dalit women, normally in groups of 3-5, were asked to hand-draw maps of their village indicating the location of their homes with respect to the landed caste people's houses, village amenities like schools, community hall, potable water, electricity, etc. Using symbols, they were asked to denote the types of houses (mud, thatched or brick). Even as we collectively struggled to get the physical representation of the village on paper, the process itself yielded key insights that could not have been captured by any other method. For example, Dalit women proceeded to map out the village by drawing one house after the other. Their houses, in particular, were depicted as small circles. Fine lines depicted next to each house indicated the narrow pathways in between the homes that they took to carry about their everyday routines. For the women, the main roads of the village almost appeared incidental to the

mapping process of the village. They also drew the village in sections and displayed great familiarity with their own part of the village while relying on collective inputs to chalk out areas occupied by other castes. Also, while drawing the village map on the ground appeared relatively easy to the women, the transition to paper was not easy. Women also felt a certain sense of pride when holding the chalk or pencil as historically they have been denied right to education. Despite the setbacks, the women remained firm in their resolve as they appreciated being asked to perform mental and intellectual labor.[144]

While the women took time to gather, those already present would clean up the space so that the chalk markings would stand out clearly. In the first session, the women were hesitant to pick up the chalk and I had to prod them a bit to take initiative and start drawing. I offered that process of mapping was similar to getting a *godhana* (tattoo)– that all of the married women had it on their bodies with varying degrees of elaboration or it was similar to the elaborate mud wall illustrations of floral patterns made from white

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[144] The women took to the task of mapping with full enthusiasm although it waned significantly over the course of my research. The initial excitement I suppose was partly driven by the fact that they were asked to do something new and different and partly because they thought that it might aid their struggle to gain control over their redistributed land. One of them had remarked that they were never given a chalk or pen before and that even though they did know how to read or write it was a good feeling. Through their conversations, I also picked up that the mapping process was more about making their mundane afternoons interesting while supposedly doing something interesting and seemingly/probably important. It was a legitimate reason to take a break from their everyday tasks and the men or other members of the household would not object openly. It was an escape from the backbreaking chores, as it did not involve using physical strength. I could sense a relief of sorts when they were in-charge of telling me rather than me asking them. It was hard to elicit descriptive answers from the women and the mapping process provided a way for them to talk without really having to respond to my queries directly. The process put them at ease, as the women collectively determine what they wanted to represent. Social mapping, I felt was the most non-obtrusive way to get to know the caste and gender dynamics without having to ask direct questions. In the first phase we only used chalks to draw maps on the ground and the focus was entirely on getting the women used to the process, as none of them were familiar with the written word. However, upon review, I found that this phase provided some key insights into the Dalit women's lives that continued to be corroborated, in the later phases.

paste for their home gods. Sikin Majhi, the local leader, was roped in to further explain what I meant and even demonstrate what he understood by the process. When one of the landed caste man made a proverbial remark that translated as asking for the impossible from the women– the women dismissed him by saying that they may not have held the pen but they certainly have seen people hold it and acquiring the skill was just a matter of time and practice. Sukri, the most vocal of the women and often on the forefront, got the process started; others picked up one or two colored chalks and grasped it, probably for the first time.

The first marking on the ground by the group was that of circle to depict a Dalit house with a marking meant to indicate a house with its doors open. In slightly over two hours, Dalit women initially were able to map only the part of the village in which they inhabited. The focus almost always remained on the houses and the discussion ensured that no one went unrepresented even in the practice sessions. It generated a lot of discussion, comments, ridicule, sarcasm, cursing and storytelling. Relatively younger women sought approval from the elder women before marking a house or a tree or a hand-pump on the ground. Although I had requested for only women's participation, the men and children took part as well by either making suggestions on the work that was being carried out by the women folk or by making their own maps on the side. Once the women finished the mapping process, I interviewed them about the mapmaking experience. I asked questions like: What was the process like for you? What did you try to depict? Can you help me understand the map? What does this symbol mean? Why is it

important to you? Why did you choose this color for this particular community? What were some of your challenges?

Challenges encountered in the social mapping process

I had reasoned prior to fieldwork that mapping the immediate surrounding with the help of stick, stone or a chalk would be easier for the Dalit women, whose relationship to the written word or the act of writing was a negative one, because the process would be viewed as akin to making floral patterns on the mud walls. However, as the fieldwork progressed, I found myself questioning and refining the purpose of the social mapping process itself. Even though the initial efforts were geared towards producing maps that indicated: a) change over a period of time by visually representing caste based distribution of homes pre and post land redistribution; b) location of various village amenities in relationship to Dalit homes; and c) life paths of Dalit women who got redistributed land— I had to shift my focus from the actual act of mapping one's surrounding to what the process generated in terms of conversations and dynamics it produced within different caste women and men.

The talk that the mapping exercise generated, clued me to the shifts in Dalit subjectivity in Kaari due to the unraveling of the oppressive system of bondage that led to negotiated shifts in caste and gender boundaries. Despite the resistance from landed elites, Dalit assertion were putting pressure on the age-old hierarchical and exploitative

relationships forcing shifts—sometimes so small and marginal that it would prove to be difficult to discern to the untrained and uninitiated.

After summer of 2012, it became increasingly difficult to find time to do the mapping sessions. The Dalit community in the village found themselves dealing with a series of death, health and financial hardships. The situation further worsened with poor and delayed monsoons in the successive seasons. In the absence of work in their own village, coupled with poor yields from their own fields, Dalit families were forced to either migrate to the cities for work or look for work in the neighboring villages. Over the course of my fieldwork, I also learned that it was impossible to do mapping at any other time other than the afternoons. Even though I stayed for successive nights in the village, afternoons, everyone agreed was the best time to undertake an "intensive exercise that required much concentration and *dimaag* (thought/brains)." We could not map in the night as there was not enough light.

Even when we did arrange for the lights, rampant alcoholism made it impossible to undertake the activity in a small group. With very few exceptions, both men and women had taken to drinking the homemade liquor *mahua*. Baring a few, almost all Dalit homes either made liquor for personal consumption or for sale. Caste people from the village, as well as, neighboring villages would come to drink liquor at the Dalit households. The concern expressed was that the women, too, had taken up drinking and in some cases were worse than their male counterparts. Brawls were common and venturing out after

sunset was considered risky by my hosts who insisted that I be back in the house before sunset to avoid getting caught up in them.

Lastly, despite the animated conversations the process generated, the familiarity women exhibited with their immediate space verbally did not quite translate on to the ground or on to the paper cueing me to focus more on the process rather than view the maps produced, as an end in and of itself. I therefore shifted my focus to the conversation that the mapping process generated which proved to be highly instructive.[145]

In addition, the Dalit women continued to engage in similar kinds of conversation around a particular event/ site while undertaking the mapping process and almost consistently ended up mapping only their section of the village in relatively greater detail along with the sites that held importance to them. This was despite the fact that the village was small in comparison to other nearby villages, both in terms of number of castes that lived in the village and the population of the entire village. More importantly, change in the location of the mapping session as well as the members mapping brought in fresh perspectives, histories and nuances to the mapping process. Towards the end of my fieldwork, I was working primarily two of the three women who had shown promise from the start of the mapping process. Ruby and Kanchan Devi, two young women,

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[145] This concern could have been addressed with regular practice but the social economic condition of the women did not allow for a systematic review of the activity as time always remained a constraint and I did not have adequate funds to compensate the women for their lost income. Despite the challenges women participated as and when they could. Also, later on the process, I noticed that women aptly drew their life paths and relatively quickly devoted additional time to make their representations on the ground look more realistic and colorful.

chalked out their own life paths with the help of their school-going daughters and sister-in-law respectively.

Analysis of maps, the mapping process and narratives that the process elicited

The analysis of the maps and mapping process coincided with what Wood and Fels (1986) would term as 'analysis of form' and 'analysis of practice'. Analysis of form, involves analyzing of representation of physical features like houses, roads, farming plots, village amenities, boundaries, etc. that are related to one another by contiguity and distance, and one that in this case uses the characteristics of inclusion and exclusion to understand shifts. Analysis of practice goes on to include the views of the mapmakers and their culturally specific ways of thinking and looking at maps (Orlove 1993). The women traced the path on the map by moving from one house to another. It was established very early on that Dalit homes would be indicated by the circles and in bright yellow and red colors while those of landed castes would be indicated using white and black and a cross perhaps. They were very familiar with their own space but had little information on the space where the landed caste homes were.

Each landmark elicited a narration on how accessible or inaccessible it has been to them, thereby jogging their collective memory of the struggle. The process of marking a symbol onto the map paved way for a story. For example, the *Devistan* marked on the map in Kaari village was the place where the decisive struggle over the land had taken place. The *mazar* (Muslim place of worship) at the *Devistan* allowed for the telling of the

two Muslim families who were in the village but had left the village around the time of independence as they felt they were in the minority and would be attacked by the majority Hindu community of the village. Every year, however, before the harvest season, offerings were made at the *mazar* to seek blessings for a good harvest.

The marking of the old well, constructed by the Math onto the map generated a story of the nature of Dalit marginalization in the past. "It was the only source of potable water in the village during Babaji's (Mahant, abbot was often referred to as such) time. We had to wait for someone to fetch water and pour it in our containers," an elderly woman had remarked. I was told that when the struggle was at its peak, Dalits were prevented from accessing the well. The landed castes had cordoning it off with thorny branches and threatened to retaliate with violence should Dalits defy their diktat. Women spoke about walking miles at a stretch, thirsty and often on an empty stomach, to take part in the movements programs but refusing to get deterred to the landed castes. "When we were hungry and thirsty we walked miles. Nothing could stop us. Those harsh days are behind us, but that zeal is no longer their. Now that our stomachs are?? filled, we have become lethargic," the elderly woman remarked about the present state of affairs. The marking of the old well also generated narratives of number of hand pumps that had been installed in area occupied by Dalit households as if to mark both an overcoming as well as record the shifts in Dalit marginalization.

The trees that they marked on to the map were integral of their being. For example, fruits of Mahua (Madhuca longifolia) tree were used to make toddy in almost

all Dalit homes and were a key source of income while the *Peepal* (Ficus religiosa) tree was held in high reverence and was worshipped by all in the village. The maps for the most part did not contain the landed castes homes – upon prodding I was told that only those who worked in those homes would be familiar with their exact location. It was apparent that Dalit women were primarily confortable chalking their everyday paths and there were still parts of the village that they seldom had reason to be in and therefore did not exhibit or were hesitant to map those areas. For instance, Mangari Devi, a young woman with five children adeptly chalked out her everyday path from her home to her fields, but expressed lack of adequate information to chalk out the landed castes areas of the village. These visual representations of their immediate social space when analyzed alongside the conversations it generated, helped trace the spatial shifts in the practice of 'hidden apartheid'— the villages are segregated along caste lines. The mapping of the villages' pre- and post- Bodhgaya land struggle showed that even though segregation persists along caste lines, the distances between caste homes have significantly reduced. In some instances, the boundaries have been blurred and, in rare instances, landed caste and Dalit houses share common boundaries.

Women and Men map/view the same social space/place differently

Although not directly intended, another key insight that the preparatory phase of the social mapping process yielded was how Dalit men differ in their approach to mapping their social space/place from Dalit women. For example, Dalit men started the

mapping session by marking the main roads/routes of the village and then proceeded to indicate where these roads led. After an outline was in place, the last thing to show up on the map would be the homes that lined alongside the main routes they took to travel outside the village. When asked to describe the map drawn on the ground, the conversations normally would focus around the directions and where each route would take me and where the boundaries of their village stopped and that of the other village started. Visually, the maps would be less artistic and less detailed than the women's hand drawn maps. Also, men depicted a much greater area in a relatively small space while women would often run out of space or go beyond the demarcated space just trying to map out their own section of the village. Also, younger women were more likely to depict larger area of the village than older women, indicating that the younger women take on tasks like collecting firewood and fieldwork that require them to travel further from their homes. A map drawn by the oldest women in the community depicted her house and the extended courtyard that went on to include her sons' and neighbors' homes, which lived almost adjacent to each other. The depiction matched the space where Maaiya, as everyone called her, spent most of her time. Men also finished the task of mapping sooner than the women with almost little or no discussion among themselves. On the contrary, Dalit women debated if it would be ethical to indicate just the houses or the total number of households within each house. They took care to depict the small pathways or the short cuts they took to navigate their immediate space. They decided to demarcate each household even though it was time consuming, by dividing the circle or

squares. Women ensured that each house was represented in the map— perhaps an indication that homes are more important to the women than the men. The women were also more artistic and paid great attention to detail like marking the hand pumps, the electric poles and the trees. The maps still did not contain the landed castes homes – upon prodding I was told that only those who worked in those homes would be familiar with the landed caste homes. It appeared that unlike the past, Dalit women no longer worked at Grihast homes and rather worked primarily in the Grihast fields either as day laborers or as sharecroppers.

Insights facilitated by the social mapping process

The outcome of the redistribution process had varied results, with some areas seeing completing reversal of the gains made during the land struggle.[146] I also had to contend with my own assumptions about what a Dalit woman who had taken part in a historical struggle, would be like. For example, I had assumed that Dalit women who had taken part in the land struggle had a strong sense of self, particularly in relationship to gender-based discrimination and no longer worked on grihast fields or in grihast households as they had their own fields to attend to. However, I was far from the reality. Barring a couple of Dalits in Kaari, almost all attended their own fields after the work on other

[146] Grassroots activists belonging to the Janmukti Sangharsh Vahini and Mazdoor Kisan Samiti in the round table discussion, referred to as *Janmukti Vimarsh,* on land rights and property rights and what it meant for the poor observed that the Dalits are losing the hard-fought redistributed land at a rapid pace to *dalals* for paltry sums of money. Since the redistributed land cannot be sold, Dalits are mortgaging it or being forced to mortgage it for paltry sums of money at a lease of 99 years. The market value of the same land is far greater than that amount it is leased for.

grihast fields had been completed. It was not uncommon for Dalits to trade one's labor for tractor services or pair of bullocks to plough one's field or for seeds and fertilizer. Irrespective of the nature of control over one's land, Dalit women continued to work as agricultural laborers on grihast fields to supplement their household income. The mapping exercise also helped clarify that idea of women getting land titles met with resistance both within and outside the struggle and that Kaari was among the few Sangharsh Vahini villages where this issue of land rights for women was welcomed.[147] In addition, I learned that the land redistributed to Dalits, particularly in Kaari, was not the land that Dalits had struggled for. In Kaari village, the state government's *gair mazurwa* land was redistributed among the Dalit women. This land was not as fertile as the Math lands and/ or was barren and lacked proper irrigation facilities making it difficult for Dalits to produce yields, equivalent to the effort they put in it. The acre of land was also not adequate to support all the needs of the family. The inter-dependency and informed choices that Dalits made in Kaari made it hard to overtly discern Dalit resistance from coercion, compliance, assertion and or situated and informed negotiations. Therefore, to understand the transformations in space and place that have been engendered due to the land struggle and Dalits procuring legal rights to redistributed land due to the struggle, I present here four stories that give a sense of the possibilities that have arisen in Dalit women's lives due to the land rights. This chapter theorizes how Dalit women perceive

[147] In some villages, men men refused accept joint titles along with their wives.

themselves and exercises their agency in different contexts and what implications does it have in larger efforts to gender the land rights issue.

I have a stake in my village: Early days of my fieldwork were spent in Bedamia's courtyard in *bada bhun tola*[148], the part of the village where those belonging primarily to the Bhuiyan and Dusadh community lived, where I conducted social mapping, which entailed hand drawing the physical map of the village on the ground with colored chalks and recording the various narratives that the process generated.[149] The process helped me get a sense of the community that was rarely asked to account their experience at length. On one such occasion, a visibly angry Mangari headed our way, blurting obscenities. Upon seeing me, she smiled and tried to rein in her verbal onslaught and explained, "Didiji (sister), my goat had strayed into the Yadav field and he began yelling and blurting obscenities and so I had to retort back. I let him know that I too have land and that the next time his cattle stray into my fields, I will not spare him either," she said. Amazed at her feisty rebuttal that had worked to silence the male member of a dominant community in the village, I asked her what facilitated her bold and affirming position.

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[148] The Dalit primarily the Bhuiyan community in the village were earlier relegated to one end of the village, but following the land struggle they have moved out and constructed their homes in what is referred to as the *Bagi* (garden/orchard) that has housed Math's cattle.

[149] May was ideal for the social mapping process as the ground was dry and allowed for the chalks marks to be easily visible and second it was the time of year that entailed *baitha-baithi* (sitting and or idling around)— as there was nothing much to do. The agricultural activity would pick up after the onset of the monsoons. It was in May and listening to heat-related deaths in and around the village and reading the news gave the impression that people were dropping dead like flies due to the ongoing heat wave. The women had chosen this spot because it had an extended thatched roof adjacent to an open courtyard that had couple of tress that provided shade and cool breeze and gave us a much-needed respite from the heat. The women also felt that the spot was secluded and provided a sense of privacy from the members of the landed caste and their menfolk. Taking advantage of the time, I undertook social mapping activities among the Dalit women to get to know the community better. The activity, however, was used liberally by the women and men folks to bring me up to date with the workings in the village, primarily via gossip, banter, and sharing of personal experiences.

"If we did not have land, these people would have made our living in this village very difficult and perhaps by now would have thrown us out over the some or the other pretext," Mangari clarified, while the others chimed in to ascertain her claims. That day, I learned that Mangari belonged to the Dusadh community and even though her caste status allowed her family to have a relatively favorably positioned under the Math's rule,[150] Mangari's family became landless and, despite tenuous relationship with the Bhuiyan community, joined the Sangharsh Vahini and took part in the land struggle. Mangari only had a part of the redistributed land under her control. In addition, her husband was given Bhoodan land. She had also been successful in clearing the nearby forest and making some additional fields of her own. Mangari also claimed that she would inherit one-fifth of an acre of land belonging to her mother-in-law, who had entered into a sharecropping arrangement with other members of the village to avoid being taken advantage of by her sons in her old age. What became evident through this incident was that threats to evict Dalits from the village was a thing of the past as having land, even if just on papers, allowed Dalits to push back and counter arbitrary claims made by dominant castes in the village.

b) Arbitrariness has paved way for 'situated' negotiations: The first showers created a flurry of activity in grihast households in Kaari as the well-to-do grihast hired tractors to

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[150] Her *badka sasur* (great father-in-law) was the Goraith of the village under the Math and was entitled to roughly 6 bighas of land that had been pilfered away by his five sons by mortgaging the land to sustain their drinking habits and eventually losing control over the land given to her family by the Mahant for her *badka sasur's* services.

plow their fields and got it ready for paddy transplantation.[151] There was much excitement among the Dalit women as the first *roopni* (planting paddy saplings in flooded fields) in the village was about to begin.[152] However, when we reached the field, the grihast became very angry upon seeing us. "I had requested only eight, not nine women. One of you must return," he roared with a disapproving look towards the women.[153] However, to his (and mine as well) surprise, all the Dalit women who had shown up to work in his field, without saying a word, staged a walkout and went and sat on the raised ground adjacent to the grihast field. The standoff went on for about an hour or so and ended when the grihast changed his stance and amicably requested them to begin their work. The women then proceeded to pour a small glass full of raw cow's milk in the field that the grihast's daughter had got for this purpose. Instead of asking her what the milk was for, I asked the daughter if she was there to take part in the first *roopni*. Offended by my question, she replied, that it was only the Harijan women who labored in her fields. The women laughed at her response and gibed that it is their labor that makes the land yield such rich crops. "Try standing bent over in knee-deep water for sometime.

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[151] The *girhast* women would normally come to the *bhun toli* or the *bagi* in search of *majdoora* (day laborers) to plant the rice saplings in the hastily prepared fields.

[152] I realized that it was very difficult to access the fields in the monsoons. While the women trekked with ease, comfort and grace, I dawdled along as I was having difficulty keeping my foot on the mounds that demarcate the fields. Almost with every step my foot would sink in the soft slushy mud in the field, making it difficult to extricate it and take the next step. The women joked about my weight and the comfort I am used to and if I felt the need to run away from all this. My presence in the field drew much curiosity and my clumsiness on treading the muddy fields, much laughter, amusement and undue attention and unwarranted comments from the grihast families. I, however, picked up on the nuances, albeit slowly. The narrow *dharers*' (raised muddy mounds that runs around demarcating boundaries) had become soft and mushy due to the rains. The key was to tread on them lightly and walk at a certain pace that prevents the weight from being on one foot for more than couple of seconds. Also where applicable to plant one's foot on the grassy parts where the ground was a bit firm.

[153] It appeared that the grihast was acting out his dominance in a rather exaggerated manner due to my presence.

You will not last an hour," one of them remarked. I could not have agreed more.[154] Since it was the first *roopni* in the village, the Dalit women were given all the ingredients to make *kheer* (a sweet rice pudding), as an offering to the gods that was to be consumed by them. These customs were important for the grihast, Maaiya had told me earlier. The grihast believed that it wades off evil spirits and protects their crops. To underscore the importance of these rituals for the grihast, Maaiya narrated the story of an errant grihast who proceeded to plow his field without having the Bhuiyan perform any of the customary rituals. To his dismay, his bullocks died while plowing the fields.

Undermining of caste based sexual exploitation: As the festival of colors, Holi, approached closer, Sukri expressed her apprehensions over my desire to celebrate Holi in Kaari. Holi was one festival that she detested. When I probed further, Sukri indicated that in the past, which usually meant before the land struggle, the caste men would drink at the Dalit households and misbehave with the Dalit women. Even though, things have changed for better and no one could touch Dalit women like they did in the past, the festival continued to create much anxiety for the women folk as they felt the need to remain vigilant and careful. Sukri's way of ensuring safety of the women in her household and ensure that they do not become the reason for the fights or altercations was to remain locked indoors the entire day. When I returned a couple of days after Holi, I asked Sukri if all was well. Sukri said that indeed all went well and there was no fight

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[154] I might have lasted for several minutes only as the paddy saplings kept floating and refused to anchor in the ground. It being a grihast field, I was asked to sit aside and watch and listen to them sing.

that involved the women in the household. However, the neighboring Yadav had tried to pick a fight with them in his inebriated state. He wanted the *soogar ka bakhor* (pig's sty) removed from the proximity of his house. The women folk in the household tried to lock him up but he had managed to climb the thatched roof and when attempting to jump to attack her husband, slipped and fractured his legs. "He tried to harm us but ended up having to spend more than Rs 20,000.00 (~$ 400.00) to fix his leg. Now he will remain bed-ridden for the next 6 months" Sukri said in manner that reflected that she felt vindicated.

Intimate violent private spaces: It was late evening when women who lived close to Sukri's house[155], with whom I stayed during my fieldwork, were talking amongst themselves about how badly Anchi's husband beat Anchi up. Sukri, who I stayed with during the fieldwork, let me know that the violence had started around noon over food and has continued since then. Anchi's husband was scheduled to leave the next day for the city in search of work. He was heard repeating, "*bina haldi lagaille na jayeb*,"[156] as he went door to door in search of Anchi and in the process picked up fight with his relatives and neighbors whom he suspected might have given Anchi refuge or were

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[155] Netaji drank almost every day but he seemed to be in control during my entire stay, baring couple of times, but his family took care of the fact that he either went to sleep or was taken away from my presence. He would normally return late in the night and make himself comfortable on the floor quietly. In the 6 foot by 8 foot windowless room, I along with Sukri's entire family would be cramped up. I would share a barely 5 by 4 foot *khatuali* with the youngest daughter while Sukri would sleep with her little son and her elder daughter on a slightly wider *khatia*. Netaji would sleep on the floor or on the sacks of grains that were kept on one side to be distributed under the public distribution scheme. It was an economy of space. In the summers, I along with the entire family would sleep out in the space adjacent to the room. The kids, along with netaji, slept on the bare mud floor.

[156] It meant that he intended to inflict severe injuries that would compel Anchi to apply turmeric paste on her wounds in order to heal and deal with the resulting pain.

withholding information about Anchi's whereabouts. Some said Anchi had fled to her parents' place while others reported that she was hiding in the nearby jungles as she would not leave behind her little girl who was seen crying since noon and is in the house. As we sat there discussing the plight of Anchi, Sukri, who was facing the door, quickly got up and before we realized, let Anchi in and immediately shut the door. Those of us sitting on the cot huddled closer to make space for Anchi but she dropped herself on the spot left vacant by Sukri and said, "Didiji, look how he beat me up," and removed her sari over her shoulders, back and breasts to reveal the deep red, purple and brown marks. She was sobbing but there were no visible tears. Sukri left to get water for Anchi and asked if she would have food now, as she might be hungry. Anchi replied in a matter of fact tone that water would do for now. Seeing the marks all over her body, I got angry and asked her why she was so helpless against her husband. To which she replied, "Had my sons been here, my husband would not have dared to touch me. Ever since my husband came back from Himachal, he has been drinking and squandering away his money by gambling. Now that money has exhausted. He continues to make demands for good food. How can I make chicken and meat when there is no money left? He has squandered away all his earnings by drinking and gambling. I have to look at my children and grandchildren too. He wants me to sleep with him in the night? You have seen our house, haven't you? We have to sleep outside and there is barely any privacy. The hut is crumbling down. Our children and grandchildren are all grown up now and yet he continues to make advances. If I resist, he alleges that I am having an affair with so-and-

so. Now you tell me, does one live to hear all this at this age? Now, there are my daughters-in-law and grandchildren in my house. Does all this suit me?" It was difficult to accurately judge Anchi's age but she might have been in her early or late 40s.[157] She said her youngest was a girl and was about the age of my daughter, nearly six-years-old. Anchi's story was however not an isolated one. I asked Sukri if she, too, faced similar situations. She said, "*tab, marad aurat per hath chodna aam bath hai*," (Yes, it is common for men to hit women).[158]

Dalits in the village felt that once the State recognized their rights to land and gave them titles they became caught up in attending to their fields. The Sangharsh Vahini's influence receded and things went back to "being normal"— the drinking and

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[157] Anchi had seven children, the youngest being 10 years old. (I thought she was 6?) At the time of the land redistribution due to the Bodhgaya struggle she might have been in her early teens. Given that the event took place around 1986, she should roughly be in her 40s now.

[158] As I have this conversation with Sukri, incidents that occurred early on in my fieldwork came rushing back to me— the women concerned had made all possible attempts to declare it as benign and or as a result of a freak accident. For example, I had asked Bedamia how she got the injury on the face that was completely swollen on one side only. Whatever the source of the blow--- it seemed to have barely missed the eye. With the area around the eyes and cheek being blue and black, she complained of excruciating pain in her jaws and had difficulty swallowing. Bedamia, however, tried to cover up by saying that the cow had kicked her when she tried milking it. However, as soon as she left, the other women narrated how Bedamia was reluctant and ashamed to tell me that her husband had beaten her up the previous night. Bedamia, like Anchi, owned and had full control over her acre of redistributed land. In fact, her husband had to settle down with her, instead of the other way round, because she, too, owned land. Bedamia was the only child of her parents and therefore inherited the redistributed land from her mother. Bedamia's husband was a truck driver and therefore was away from home most of the time. The women said that Bedamia often received beatings from her husband over minor altercations even though she bore the prime responsibility of taking care of the children as well as attending the cattle and the land. Almost every woman's fate in the village was similar irrespective of whether they owned land or not. One night while taking refuge at Sukri's place from her husband, Boodhni revealed that her husband was not good and eyed other women and abused her mercilessly. She was quite drunk herself that night and this presented the dilemma of whether I should record her at all as she was not in a position to give informed consent. I therefore took notes on what she said with the intention of verifying it later. Boodni's husband's "wayward" ways were the talk of the village and Dalit women normally avoided him. Despite Boodni's protestations, her husband had leased the parceland to the brick kiln owner in the village. While Boodni was concerned about that the fertile soil of the field would be taken away, her husband was more interested in getting the Rs. 10,000.00 (~$200.00) on which the deal was decided. However, much of this money had been previously loaned. Boodni said, she had tried to reason with her husband but he would not listen to her. She was hopeful that once her sons return, this deal would be reversed and that her husband would be bound to comply with her wishes.

wife-beating returned and so did other social malice, like child marriage and dowry. Sukri said her husband only stopped beating her when her son protested. "One time, Netaji grabbed my hair as I asked him to find the comb for himself as I was busy with other work. My son who had returned from the city saw this and demanded that he leave my hair immediately. I think men do not like to be confronted by their sons. Netaji, fumbled and just left my hair and walked away. I suppose he did not want to be challenged by his son. From that day onwards ,he has not put a finger on me. But before that, it did not take much to anger him," Sukri elaborated.

As she finished her story, her husband walked in. I asked him that as a leader of the community why he does nothing about the issue of domestic violence. He said that, "earlier people would listen to me as the organization was strong in the village. Now, everyone does his or her own thing. If you protest, chances are the wife might say, he is my husband and he may choose to do whatever he may want with me. They might even accuse me of having illicit relationships with their wife." The irony around domestic violence struck me when Sukri justified her son's action of beating up his wife. "She is very stubborn and thinks she is the man in the house. My son was left with no option but to beat her up and remind her of her place in the household," Sukri said. Maaiya had nodded her head in agreement indicating that she approved of her grandson's action.

Increasing dissonance between past ideals and present practice

Maaiya reminisced that at the time the land struggle was gaining momentum and active in the village; domestic violence, alcoholism and other social ills were not tolerated and people not only openly spoke up against it, but socially chastised and ridiculed the offending culprits. In fact, on the day of the meeting held by Sangharsh Vahini or the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS) there would be an outright ban on drinking. "No one could show up at the meeting drunk. This rule was strictly followed and enforced," she noted.[159] Several men and women from Kaari village had held leadership positions in the MKS and were active until sometime after the land redistribution had taken place. The intensive meetings and discussions that took place during the struggle had enriched the community and together they struggled for a different future/possibility. However these ideals ceased to be practiced in letter and spirit as the movement slowly ebbed away in the areas where land was redistributed and middle-class Sangharsh Vahini activists, particularly women activists, stopped visiting the region. While visible gains have been made in the area of Dalit assertion and resistances— the Dalit woman/ gender question seems to have been largely subsumed and/ or relegated to demanding land rights in the name of women. The critical perspectives that allowed men and women to become comfortable with the then-radical idea of women owning land no longer is in vogue.

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[159] It was then that I realized that during my initial months of fieldwork, people would refrain from openly drinking or smoking and, in fact, would take great pains to avoid being caught by me. Some would excuse themselves early or just not show up stating illness, others would avoid taking the routes in the village that I would normally take. During my stay in the village, I had often noticed people trying to put the bottles or *bedi* out of the sight if they noticed I was approaching them. However, all that changed with time and people became more "at ease" in my presence. Women who smoked and drank did so relatively more comfortably and with time became open about sharing their stories of everyday struggle. This was not the case earlier.

With the state accepting that land will be given in women's name, the entire issue of gendering land rights has been normalized and the radical idea co-opted or/and muted in its effectiveness. The demand for land today does not generate the dialogue that is needed at the grassroots level to effectively address the secondary position women continue to occupy. Even as present-day struggles continue to rely on Dalit women, it no longer poses serious threat to deep-rooted patriarchal practices, like it did in the past. The women I worked with did not necessarily view themselves as independent subjects. Rather they saw themselves in relationship to their father, husband and/or son. The fact that the land was in their name seemed to have less importance than the fact that that once they got the landm their family will have some form of security and some say in the matters of the village. While caste oppression has being actively contested, gender oppression no longer is seen as an issue.

A thousand such revolutions are needed for change in women's lives

I once asked Sukri why Dalit women were comfortable demanding land from State but not from within their own families. She did not say anything. A long silence proceeded as we both sat and pulled weeds from her fields. The challenge is how to interpret that silence. I put forth the same question to Sangharsh Vahini activists and they likened the land struggle to a *diya* (lamp) that briefly lit some dark patches in our society, but was unable to dispel the dark and powerful veil of patriarchy that tries to snuff out any form of challenge to its established hierarchy, at the earliest sign of weakness. A sustained

struggle is needed to challenge deep-seated established hierarchies— and the Bodhgaya land struggle should be viewed as one of the foremost among t many to come, hopefully. What we see today is that despite being one of the first struggles to have effectively incorporated gender in its mandate— its ideals did not find strong roots and hold. Women, in this case, Dalit women in rural Bihar, do not necessarily view themselves as independent subjects/identities. Rather, they viewed themselves in relationship to their family— their husband, sons and children. When asked why women and men consented to getting land in women's name, both men and women articulate that it was something the Sangathan proposed and therefore they agreed upon it. Men specially articulated that they felt that given women's lead role in the movement, they deserved to be rewarded and acknowledged. However, beyond this gesture, there was no mention of continuing the trend or challenging societal mores.

Getting legal titles to redistributed land no doubt have enabled Dalits to a break away from overt forms of caste-based and religiously sanctioned discriminatory and dehumanizing practices of the past. However, the land struggle here is far from over— it has moved on to the bureaucratic phase. A phase said to have the capacity to dwindle hope and crush mobilization and resistance. Despite protests, repeated assurances from district and state officials, getting a *sarkari aamin* to come to the village and officially measure and demarcate the redistributed land proved to be an uphill task. In the two and half years of my fieldwork, Dalits in the village made several attempts to the get the

sarkari amin to the village and conduct napi (measurement) of the redistributed land and demarcate the individual plots.

Mapping continuities and discontinues from the Past

The narratives indicate that even though there have been severe dilutions in caste-based discrimination, the same could not be said for gender-based discrimination. Irrespective of the caste affiliations, the dominant notion in the rural Bihar is that women are subservient to men. This gets reflected in almost all aspects of village life. Husbands continue to be referred to as Malik (owner/ master).[160] Despite widespread acknowledgement that women made decisions that were more in the interest of the family and children than their men, women subscribed to the idea that they were inferior to the men. The village rubric subscribes to and nurtures this belief further. For example, only men get invited to social events. The practices through which the Sangharsh Vahini had sought to challenge patriarchal attitudes and beliefs, like having similar seating arrangements for both men and women, washing one's own utensils after a meal, shunning dowry and religious practices and encouraging education among women and children were no longer being followed.[161]

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[160] It would unsettle me when women or men would ask me about my *malik*— where is your *malik?* What does your *malik* do? Is your *malik* okay with the kind of work you have undertaken? I could never make peace with the usage and until the very end of my fieldwork tried to first give a disclaimer that, "I did not have a *malik*. However I am married and my husband/ partner does not oppose my research work."

[161] This was evident in the manner in which women conducted themselves in relationship to their husbands or other men within and outside the community. The secondary position that a girl/women occupied was evident in everyday activities around the household. While small girls hardly 4-5 years of age cleaned and scrapped huge utensils or pots??, the boys were free to play. Deference was showed to men by women/girls by eating after the men in the

The above narratives are also indicative of a sharp public private divide that feminists have long struggled with. The purported violence that Dalit women faced in the public sphere no longer could take place with the brazenness that it did before the land struggle. However, irrespective of the legal rights that women had over land, violence against women in the private sphere continued unabated. Although the violence is primarily blamed on the excessive consumption of locally made brew liquor, it also stems from the cycle of poverty that Dalits are being forced to endure. This forced poverty can be best summarized in what Akhil Gupta (2012) theorizes as, " a direct and culpable form of killing made possible by state polices and practices than as an inevitable situation in which the poor are merely 'allowed to die' or exposed death" (5-6). Gupta argues that politics of care, "is not itself arbitrary; rather, it is systematically produced by the very mechanisms that are meant to ameliorate social suffering" (24). However, in the case of Dalits, the arbitrary aspect of the 'politics of care' transforms to a near certainty, especially when it holds transformative potential for Dalits to overcome hierarchies of caste.

Conclusion

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family had had their food, getting up and making way for the men to sit on the cot while they seat themselves on the floor, and doing the entire household work along with working on the fields. It is the women who are almost solely responsible for collecting firewood for cooking. Girls as young as 4 or 5 years old take on household chores like cleaning utensils and cooking. Although education is sought for both girls and boys, it is the boys who get preferential treatment when it comes to education. Given the dismal level of education at the village level, girls suffer the most, as parents are hesitant to send their girl child outside the village for educational purposes.

In this chapter, I explored how Dalits, having both legal titles to redistributed land and effective control over all or some of it, are redefining their intra- and inter- caste and gender relationships in their immediate social space. Given the difficulty in getting Dalit women to talk at length about their experiences, I used social mapping as a method to access these sites of contestations and ruptures, as they serve as points to the collective memory and oral history of the community, as well as the individual. In addition, the sites of ruptures works to expose the manner in which power relations operate within the community and make evident the different subject positions available to Dalit women, in the present, primarily due to land ownership. While it is clear that rights to redistributed land has provided Dalit women with a voice, it proved methodologically difficult to discern the scope of that voice, particularly because of how the women positioned themselves when it came to demanding rights. While Dalit women had no hesitation in putting forth their demands to the State and partake in activities like *gherao* (cordoning off), *morchas* (demonstrations) and *juloos* (ralies*)*, they largely remained silent when it came to asserting the same within the family.

The state has also remained silent for the past three decades on the issue of effective control of land. I contend that the state's secondary treatment of women, and in particular Dalit women, affirms its non-committal nature on ensuring effective control over land rights to Dalit women and thereby significantly undermined Dalit women interests. The 'silence' and 'inaction' of the state in three different sites of peaceful struggle underscores the neoliberal state poses a threat to both Dalit mobilization and

Dalit assertion. The undermining of a peaceful struggle by the state and state apparatus can be argued as feeding into growing disenchantment in the rural areas. Finally, by focusing on caste dimension of gender, I have been to render visible some of the gains that Dalit women have made despite the non-realization of effective control over the redistributed land. The shift from feminist/women-centric objectives has opened up opportunities to understand the landless Dalit women, who were integral to the Bodhgaya land struggle and an integral part of Dalit history and Dalit assertion in the region. Locating Dalit agency and resistance becomes more of a political project rather than an academic one when the dominant perception remains that Dalits are passive and easily influenced subjects.

CHAPTER 6: CONTESTED BELONGING? MAPPING CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF DALIT BECOMING

Dalit historiography 'is a history of white pages' - Kancha Ilaiah[162]

The oral history of domination and violence is an atopic narrative- Feldman[163]

Intrigued, I had asked Bikhari Ali, how he got his name. [164] Ali explained that his father had named him after a popular performer of his time. He however changed his name to Bikhari Ali following his association with the Sangharsh Vahini to indicate his rejection of received hierarchical categories and markers of caste and/or religion. He notes that his name reflects his identity and marked a becoming[165] that has been primarily shaped through his association with the Sangharsh Vahini, the socialist ideals of JP[166] and his active role in the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti (MKS) since his teenage years. To further

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[162] As cited in, Toral Jatin Gajarawala. 2013. Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste. Pg. 170

[163] Allen Feldman.1991. Formation of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland. Pg. 15

[164] Asking someone's name in Bihar or for that matter in any part of India is not a benign act. People insisting on "poora naam" or full name are more often than not engaging in an exercise meant to size-up the individual's status alongside the caste hierarchies. Information gathered from the name would then determine the social interaction that would or would not follow. If one's name does not yield much information, the person requesting information would ask for the names of the person's father, grandfather until the hierarchical position of the person in question is determined. My then 4-year old daughter, who attended school in Gaya, noted that her entire class had the last name as Kumar or Kumari (a strategy that altogether obfuscates caste) and that she alone had a different last name.

[165] He confesses that only recently he came to know about the works of Baba Saheb Ambedkar and is trying to understand him.

[166] Gandhian turned socialist leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, popularly referred to as JP.

contextualize the politics of naming that seeks to counter hierarchy through a privileging of an identity (imagined and or realized), Ali elaborates,

> "Earlier people in my community named their children after days and seasons. For example, a girl born on a Friday would be named Sukri and I find this very beautiful. But, violence towards my community begins with speech itself. Society normally resorts to name calling when it addresses us. All communities have climbed on our shoulders to make progress including those communities that fall in the category of Dalits like the Pasis and Dushads and none will hesitate to insult us. For example, if there were shortage of food at an event, the person would not hesitate in saying, *kya samjha hai re, Bhuiyaan bhukar, je kam laile hai samaan*! (What do you think of us, are we Bhuiyan that you have skimped on items for ceremony/event? We have always been named from above. It was political that Gandhiji made us Harijans[167]; Ambedkar made us Dalits and in English we are called SC (schedule castes) and the newly appointment commissioner, recently made as Mahadalits. I won't be surprised if they named us maha gadha (great donkey) tomorrow. Why not choose names such as *maha bahadur* (brave)? We have not been given the chance to even name ourselves.

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[167] Although Dalits often used the term 'Harijan' in their everyday conversations in my research villages; community members also expressed that they accept and use the term to be rendered legible-visible to the state-society even as they remain overtly critical of the term that denotes "children of the god" arguing that it insulted their sensibilities and considered it condescending.

> How long should we remain Mahadalits? If you say a person has TB (tuberculosis), then that person normally would know how long it would take to cure the ailment. Every disease has an expiration date. I want to know for how long should we carry this certificate of Mahadalit? In what ways are we Mahadalits? We are laborious people. We are not behind anyone due to our own volition. We are struggling for our rights. We are behind because there is manuvad and Brahmanvad here. [168] The Mahadalit category serves as a bowl of loot. Mahadalits continue to remain so as the key (to their emancipation) is being held by someone else."

The above narratives unfolded following a 'simple' question about the history and reasoning behind taking up a particular name— a name that obfuscates both the patrilineal caste and religion of the person. The process of naming individuals in South Asia normally has caste information coded in it. In rural Bihar it meant that names was a sure shot way of assessing where the person stood in the hierarchy of caste which further determined how the person would be addressed and or engaged with.[169]

Speaking truth to power

At about 6 feet, Ali was taller than most of his colleagues. His peppered beard, thin frame, long hair coupled with white kurta (flowing shirt) and a white parallel flowing

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[168] Manuvad and Brahmanvad are the dominant social and cultural ideology of caste that subscribes those lower in the caste hierarchy a lower status and justifies their dehumanization by robbing them of their dignity and self-respect.
[169] See http://www.caravanmagazine.in/essay/doctor-and-saint#sthash.ZPQcYIcR.dpuf

pant served to blur his identity and worked to add to his charisma. He could easily be mistaken as belonging to the minority Muslim community or a practitioner of Sufi faith, particularly due to his appearance, use of language and his way of conversing, which often drew upon references from multiple faiths and beliefs. A sharp observer with a poignant critique of the perils of ignoring caste as a key structuring principle in rural Bihar, Ali reminds me of Gramsci's idea of the "organic intellectual"[170] whose insights stemmed from his early life as a bonded labor and his activism in the Bodhgaya land struggle and beyond. Ali, like most of MKS activists, rejected the dominant norms of naming in the South Asian context that normally entails a first name and a last name that corresponds to the patrilineal caste name and religion.[171] While one can read the rejection of the dominant norms of naming as a way to mask and/or circumvent hierarchy and in the process undermine some of the negative effects of casteism; I argue that Ali's narrative indicates a form of Dalit assertion that entails a refusal to engage in hierarchical contestations which in and of itself is rather limited in scope and proves to be a self-defeating purpose, as the process of masking remains circumscribed by the very structure that one seeks to oppose (in this case Manuvad and Brahmanvad).[172] Rather, Ali appears to be vested in positing forms of identity that exudes with possibilities—imagination(s)

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[170] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (1971: 5) where Gramsci argues that every social group coming into existence creates itself organically one or more strata of intellectuals. While, Ali lacks formal education his understanding of the present is shaped primarily through the lens of caste more so than class as it remains the principal structuring agent of society in rural Bihar.

[171] Here it must be noted that members of Sangharsh Vahini too reject the dominant way of naming and instead have adopted secular names that masks caste and sometime, religious affiliations. However, due to their privileged caste-class position the implications, motivation as well as outcomes cannot be argued to be the same.

[172] Dominant Hindu ideology that subscribes to the dominance of the upper caste and naturalizes caste based discrimination.

bereft of the hegemony that is vested in keeping his people "in place". Ali's oral history is therefore instructive not only in understanding the transformation that the Bodhgaya land struggle engendered in Dalit subjectivity; but also in questioning the passive timelessness of the Dalit social condition that informs the predominant reading of Dalits as passive, compliant and/or bereft of resistance which works to naturalize caste based hierarchies as natural. Ali comes across as straddling/reconciling between JP and Ambedkar— while JP through his call for 'total revolution' provides a blueprint for a utopia where equity is the central organizing principal of a society; Ambedkar's realism, particularly through his life and works, in particular "Annihilation of Caste" (1936), in which he ascribes that caste is intrinsic to Hinduism and cannot be adequately addressed without renouncing Hinduism. He argues that caste as an institution inherently seeks, creates and perpetuates hierarchies. Both JP and Ambedkar are committed to just societies and are radical in their own specific ways and views. The difference in their approach is however rather subtle. While, JP in his call for total revolution emphasized the need for the individuals to change who then would take upon the task of changing society, Ambedkar asserts that a prerequisite to change in a predominantly Hindu society was a complete disavowal of Hinduism and through it caste. It is this recognition that allows Ali to assert an identity that while seemingly appearing as independent of hierarchies remains cognizant of its limits. Despite the challenge posited to the named and identified hegemonic cultural tropes— manuvad and brahmanvad; there is a simultaneous recognition of the omnipresence of the processes through which the Dalit

subjugation takes place in society. Ali, therefore chooses to foreground, particular forms of Dalit labor that is both tangible and essential, to question why even as Dalit labor is fundamental to building society— Dalits social conditions yields to change at an excruciatingly slow place. He argues that this timelessness of Dalit condition is not due to Dalit's own volition or that of an inherent lack of within the Dalit community—as the proponents of caste-class hegemony would have us believe; rather it is the hegemony of the landed castes that continue to marginalize and disenfranchise his community through an appropriation of their labor.

Knowledge as contested, Knowledge as situated

Life history accounts of Dalit activists who were former Kamias reveal a discernible synergy/desire to claim one's own past and be able to write/chart ones future. Here the received categories of caste do little to underscore the intrinsic violence endemic to it; instead they often work to normalize and or even mask the nature of "social death" that those, particularly, at the bottom of the hierarchy experience. Apart from normalizing violence experienced by Dalits, caste also masks the everydayness of violence it perpetuates by posing as a marker rather than a determinant of everyday lived experiences, particularly in Rural South Bihar. Ali's narrative indicates that the genesis of violence directed towards Dalits, who have been robed of their ability to name themselves, has roots in the purported lack of history. To prove his point, Ali asserts that only a non-Bhuiyan vested in keeping the Dalits "in their place" would have the

propensity to ascribe negative connotations to his community. For example, dominant meanings ascribed to the Bhuiyan community are either "lowly" or a community of "rat-eaters". However Ali argues, that Bhuiyan also means closely connected to the land—after all, "it was my ancestors who through their labor converted the rocky ground, characteristic of Gaya region, into fertile land, fit for cultivation. We as agricultural labors were close to the soil and are adept at cultivating and growing crops and maintaining the aharas (artificial water tanks) and hence the term Bhuiyan should ideally be taken to mean related to soil," he reasons. He also posits that although the Bhuiyan community is often conflated with the Mushahar community, Bhuiyans are unique to South Bihar and are descendants of Khol-Bhil kings, who were captured and forced to perform manual labor for the upper castes primarily, Rajputs and Bhumihars in the region. To back up his claim Ali draws attention towards the abundance of archeological artifacts, primarily of mud forts, dating to the time of the Khol-Bhil kings in Gaya region. While making a distinction between the term Bhuiyan and Mushahar castes, Ali's echoed what couple of other grassroots activists from the Sangharsh Vahini and academicians associated with the movement had asserted in personal communications and interviews—Bhuiyans and Mushahar caste are not one and the same; rather Bhuiyans appear to be descendants of the Adivasis as evident from their culture and even appearance. Ali joked that I should pay careful attention to the facial features of his people as their "cut and make up" are markedly different from the local population and bear close semblance to the Adivasis population of the state. However, even while asserting a difference, Ali

challenges the widely held notion that Mushahars primarily means rat-eaters. Going by the same logic of upper castes/class ascribed negative connotations to everything pertaining to the Outcastes, he provides an alternative meaning, "Mushahars means those who kill rats. Mushahars kill rats that are a threat to the standing crops on the field. However, instead of recognizing the contribution of the community, they are ridiculed and ostracized. There is little recognition of the circumstances and the factors at play that forces them to eat the very rats they kill." In this instance, we come across oral history as serving to bridge the dissonance generated by dominant narratives and the lived realities of people. In contesting meanings assigned to those lower in the caste hierarchy, by above higher up in the hierarchal relation, Ali foregrounds power that is central to the politics of naming as well as the power that resides in practice of ascribing meaning. The exertion of a positive cultural difference can be aptly explains through Badri Narayan's (2006) reading of imagination and memory constructed out of myth and history as being fundamental to creation of an "identity, self-respect and social existence of the marginalized communities in an age of power, conflict and competition," (13). I draw upon Dalit literature's critique of dominant history and historiography to argue that although Ali is vested in cultural resurrection of his community, he views this resurrection as an instrument of engendering and countering the challenges within his community rather than address directly the politics of representation or offer revisionist account of history to produce a subalterns history. What makes this position of mine tenable is Ali's take on the contemporary Bhuiyan politicians, who while occupying

positions of political power, take comfort in merely posing allegations of being discriminated against. For example, Ali asserts that an appropriate response to caste based discrimination experienced by then Chief Minister of the State, Jiten Majhi, who alleged that a Hindu temple was washed and purification rituals performed following his visit, was not to cry foul but undertake grassroots mobilizations like the ones Babasaheb Ambedkar undertook to make public spaces and facilities accessible to Dalits. He argues that caste hegemony in India has not been undermined out of charity or goodwill of those higher up in the caste hierarchy but through active contestations and struggle staged by those below who were adversely impacted by it. Unfortunately, he rues, "the electoral power has not benefitted the community" primarily because the system remains hostile to Dalit acts of assertion, making it difficult to accommodate Dalit interests. He remarks that affirmative action in electoral politics has created a small section of Dalit elite, who in their desire to hold on to power has been co-opted into the system. The elected Dalit leaders, he remarks have been rendered servile to dominant ideologies and has therefore significantly undermined the challenge the community could pose just by virtue of their numerical strength. Ali too had dabbled with running for electoral office and contends that although he lost the electoral contest; he was placed second and did not lose the security deposit like other contenders fielded by major political parties. I asked him if he stood for elections under the name I knew him as or the name that was given by his parents and his response was both— "my poster read Bhikari Ali urf (aka) Bhikari Majhi"— rendering the narrative of transgressing and transcribing to come full circle at

that instance. The impetus to revert back to using one's caste name, both momentarily as well as concurrently, in this particular context, underlines caste not only as the structuring principle of polity and everyday life in rural Bihar and but also showcases the limits of identity (real and or imagined). For Ali, the need to revert back to caste-based forms of identification does not signify a paradox rather it provides a commentary on the society and state. It implies that the terms of recognition and engagement are set and if one does not conform to those terms, chances of meaningful engagement that is largely dependent on recognition, gets rather limited. Also, he ascertains that the fetishism with caste is not fueled from below as Dalits have little to lose; rather it is one that is imposed from above, as it functions as way of marking and retaining cultural hegemony by preventing inter-caste marriages which is the litmus test of Caste as a system showing signs of being undermined in society at large.

Struggle for freedom from Kamiauti (servitude/ bondage)

Never to lose perspective, Ali frequently puts on the anthropological hat as he goes on to emphasize that despite being relegated to, figuratively and literally, a peripheral space of the society, Dalits are not devoid of culture. He emphasizes that the Dalit culture has been constituted in opposition to upper caste-class resistance to Dalit assertion and oppression. "It is culture" Ali, asserts, "that distinguishes humans from animals and Dalits are no different. Even though we lived with and among animals we developed a rich cultural tradition of songs and music. The sound of the *maner* was loud and attracted

crowds worth taking note of. People would know a Bhuiyans wedding was taking place." *Maner*— a clay percussionist instrument is said to be intrinsic to the Bhuiyan community.[173] The draconian prohibitions imposed upon the community, Ali argued, did not curb the Bhuiyan creativity rather it found ways to flourish even under the most inhumane of conditions.[174]

> My ancestors were illiterate. Despite my talent, I was only allowed to perform during the non-agricultural season when there was no work to be done on the Math's field or for the Math. I realized very early on that my talent and popularity could help me earn good money but at no point could it help me overcome my caste limitation. No matter, how good I was; I was ultimately defined by my outcaste status. For example, while performing we could only sit on wooden cots but not on the *khatia* (a hand-woven cot). It was reserved only for the upper castes people. Even at our homes, if a person above our caste showed up at our door, we had to abandon the *khatia* and sit on the floor. So, there is definitely change although it is not at the pace and nature we would want it to be. Like animals, Bhuiyans were made to carry people on palanquins and live like and among animals. Our mud houses not only housed us but also our pigs and

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[173] Ali noted that in the old days, everyone in the Bhuiyan community had at least had one *maner* in their household. However in the present it was extremely difficult to get a clay *maner* as the caste involved in leather tanning, used to cover the head of the shallow mud shell, have quit their profession due to stigma attached to it. Due to paucity of demand and supply, a *maner* made of mud costs around Rs 1500 (~$30.00). I was told that the wooden *maner* is preferred these days, even though its sound does not match that of the clay manner. The popularity of the wooden *maner* was due to fact that it lasts longer and is relatively cheaper compared to the clay *maner*.

[174] The rich repertoire of songs and dance can also be understood as a form of Dalit oral history that documents the nature of Dalit marginalization and survival.

> chickens. Bhuiyans were viewed and treated like animals. Today, if you ask any Bhuiyan youth to do so, there would be a lot of protest. Freedom from bonded labor has resulted in Bhuiyans, both women and men to seek work outside the village. There is no restriction on the kinds of work we can do. This was unimaginable during the time of the Math. Also, Bhuiyans have started to access the courts and other government institutions that earlier seemed/were inaccessible to them. We can wear proper clothes and shoes, which was not possible during the time of the Mahant.

Drawing on Dalit literary critiques that asserts that individual Dalit narratives forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest both explicitly and implicitly the 'official forgetting' of caste oppression, struggles and resistance (Rege 2006: 13-14); I argue that Ali's narrative too blurs the boundaries of self and society and depletes the 'I' of bourgeois individualism by the replacing it with the collectivity of Dalit community to assert that throughout what is understood and presented as history—Dalit marginalization has been rendered so 'everyday and normal' that the discipline of history constituted primarily through 'spectacular' events and dates fails to capture the systematically rendered 'mundane' everyday, institutionalized ways of caste subjugation. Scholars have argued that Dalit narratives, particularly, in the form of testimonios, exists as counter-narrative to history and often takes on the dual role of being supplemental as well as corrective to dominant history (Rege 2006) or that history from the perspective of Dalit subaltern reflects a persistent effort to convert Dalit structural negativity to a

positive political content and to render Dalit marginalization as "an inaugural political-ethical subject" (Rao 2009). As per Badri Narayan (2006), imagination and memory, which may be constructed out of myth and history is, "the foundational requirement for identity, self-respect and social existence of the marginalized communities in an age of power, conflict and competition" (13). Ali's narratives however are not directed towards an acceptance, rejection or an acknowledgement. Instead, Ali reckons that caste based discrimination is not something that can be addressed by Dalits alone; rather it would require reflection on the larger part of the society that continue to exist in denial about the lived effects of caste at the bottom of the caste hierarchy let alone acknowledge the injustices perpetuated through caste-based discrimination. Ali asserts that his belief that caste is here to stay has firmed up over the years, as there has been no letting down in the stigma and resistance that persists around inter-caste marriages involving Dalit and non-Dalits.

The process of becoming

Ali describes himself as an artist and a grassroots activist and asserts that the Math's oppressive rule did not end by itself or due to progressive legislation rather it ended due to the struggle staged by the Sangharsh Vahini in alliance with the MKS whose membership primarily comprised of members from the Bhuiyan caste— as this caste was singled out to serve as Math's Kamia (bonded slaves) in the region. "Other castes whose economic conditions were equivalent to the Bhuiyan too joined the struggle but the bulk

of the support came from the Bhuiyan community," he notes going on to assert that despite being barely in his teens he, "joined the Sangharsh Vahini not due to any fear or obligation but because of my own volition. I left singing and dancing, as I was eager to break the generational shackles of bondage and slavery." Ali recounted that his father's opposition to his decision was not against the struggle or freedom from servitude per se, but was due to the fact that even though his entire family worked on the Math's land, their collective income was still barely enough to keep off hunger. Life under the Math was not easy, Ali notes as he sought to explain the struggles he encountered in his childhood,

> "I am an artist and used to perform what was at that time known as the *launda nautch*. I would dress up as a girl and perform for the audience. The audience would get happy and throw money at my performances. My father ensured that I trained regularly and properly. He was a very strict disciplinarian. At that time I would think that my father was unduly harsh towards me but today I realize that he actually had my best interest in his heart. I have come to realize that any form of art requires a certain discipline. When I was not working on the fields of the Math, I would either be training or performing at private functions such as weddings, child birth ceremonies etc. The rich and powerful have devised ways to entertain their selves; In the Mughal courts too there were courtesans. I am sure people at other places came up with their own forms of entertainment. People in Gaya came up with the idea of having young boys from lower castes perform, as

> the culture here did not allow girls to perform publicly. I had heard about my father's performance but never seen him perform, as he was quite old when I took to performing. An ardent admirer of Bikhari Takur, my father named his sons after the renowned performers of his time. Bhikari Thakur was a prominent artist of Bihar credited with discovering the Bidesiya style. My father was very versatile and had taught himself to play the Sitar. I do not know where he learnt it from but music and dance came naturally to him. My father primarily trained me. He would also send me to other performers of his time to receive training. Today I use my talent to both earn additional income as well as spread awareness on social issues in the village like child marriage, girl child education, dowry and alcoholism. Apart from JP (Jayaprakash Narayan), I also came to know about the works of Babasaheb (B. R. Ambedkar) who wrote India's constitution."

Ali's life history is also an account of the formation of the Dalit political subject that has not only successfully overcome bondage and stigma but also provides key insights into the society that he inhabited and experienced. His shift towards Ambedkar in the present is significant and indicative of the incomplete project of Dalit emancipation.[175] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the architect of Indian Constitution, not only put the Dalit question on the national scene but was also the first Dalit leader to assert that the notion of equality in

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[175] The region was for a long time under the Gandhi's influence that may have been further reinforced through his disciple, Vinoba Bhave who started the Boodan movement. Even JP was a Gandhian also he did later became disillusioned by the key Gandhian principal of non-violence struggle modifying it to peaceful struggle where there was a scope of responding in self defense. The Gandhian legacy also comes across through the prevalent use of the term "Harijan" – by both Dalits and non-Dalits.

the Indian context cannot be achieved without ensuring equality of castes, as caste-based discrimination remained intrinsic to Hinduism. Peeved by the new category of recognition pushed upon Dalits by the state government— Mahadalit, Ali questions the logic of the state's engagement with the community that is largely dictated by the state. Critical of incentive programs run by the government, Ali like others in his community assert that such forms of assistance serves as a tool for managing dissent and securing electoral prospects even as the measures ends up enriching the coffers of those responsible for disbursing government assistance meant for Dalits. Real change, Ali asserts can come with education, as has been the case with the Ambedkar, the Dalit who wrote the Indian Constitution,

> The government says that it is ensuring that schools run effectively, now if you go to the school, you will not even find 5 children there. They say they are giving food and clothes but food and clothes do not ensure empowerment. They are meant to entice children to come to school but teachers' are doing for these children have no form of accountability. This aspect is grossly neglected. I was saying to one of the elders of this village that if these 3 teachers really worked hard on the 5 children who come to school due to the incentives, it would change their lives. If these teachers cannot teach effectively the five children who come to school, how can they be expected to teach 50 children. The government needs to ensure that school functions properly. Instead what we see is that the schools serve kichadi (rice pudding) as incentives and children play with their plates the

> rest of time by drawing on their plates. You see the hands should be practicing how to write on the blackboard, instead all the children are playing with their plates and bowls, rotating them in a roundabout manner and the teacher simply watches.

Peeved at the state government's short changing of the Dalit community on all fronts that could ensure empowerment of the community, like education and effective control over land, Ali's asserts that Mahadalit category ostensibly created to design targeted programs to better integrate his community into the mainstream is in reality a mechanism to regularize loot commissioned in the name of Dalits. Terming the move as equivalent to instituting a '*loot ka katora'*— (a bowl of loot) Ali, questions intent of those who profess to work for the Dalits. He asserts that the Mahadalit category has rendered his community Mahadaridh (poorer) as economic assistance based on castes undermines the community interests as it takes away scrutiny from community driven demands that are fundamental to exerting an independent Dalit identity,

> We are encouraged to spread our hands so that the government can give us some money or incentives. So you see the government are making us beggar. How is this monetary incentive helping us? People use this money to drink. To uplift the Harijans[176], education is the first and foremost requirement. If the Harijan children get good education then they can find the means to move ahead in

[176] The MKS activists too used the term and I am inclined to infer that this is the vestige of the Gandhian legacy in the region that is gets challenged as and when the familiarization occurs with the works of Ambedkar.

> society. This should happen. Instead they say that give them a colony (a one room house made of brick) or so and so thing. Now are these things from which you can uplift the poor? I do not think these are means of uplift. Take the example of the colony, they normally construct the four walls at a height of my knees, and assert that they did something to uplift our masses. Or when they give land, they give it on papers only, the government did not assure that the land is under our control. The government did not give us kabza over the land. The land has been given only on papers. What uplifting of the Harijans have they done? I do not understand how they are uplifting us. Now the government gave us radio so that we can listen to the news. But how can we listen to the news, as we hardly get time from labor so that we can feed our family and ourselves. When the person leaves work and comes back home, he is normally drunk so when will he listen to the radio. While radios are being distributed, it is simultaneously sold away. What development is happening? I do not think the government has any idea how to uplift the Harijans.

His questioning of the subject-position of those trying to aid Dalit communities are rather a questioning of the structures of dominance that perpetuates subservience within his community and brings into sharp focus the resistance that Dalit assertion continue to face in the present. Acknowledging that it was the systemic and systematic prohibition of knowledge that restrained his community from accessing and staking control over productive resources, such as land, Ali identifies his decision to join the Sangharsh

Vahini as perhaps the best decision he could have taken. The Bodhgaya land struggle for Ali resulted in freedom on multiple levels— it is not just the bodily freedom from servitude but also the mental freedom from servitude. He credits the popular socialist leader who helmed the ideological underpinnings of the Sangharsh Vahini towards a society that is built on the principles of equity and his committed fight towards the social evils such as those he finds his society grappling with. However, I contend that it is his increasing acquaintance with Ambedkar's work that allows him to be cynical of affecting change in a society that avowedly subscribes to caste ideology. This recognition forces Ali to focus inwards,

> I received very little education but I have educated my daughter and my daughter-in-law. Their education aspire others in the community. I believe that getting associated with the Vahini allowed me to broaden my horizon and gain tremendous self-respect and honor. I realize that if I earned my living singing and dancing then I would have lived an individual life, a life that was dictated by the constraints of getting food on the table. But joining the Vahini enabled me to charter a new direction in life. The recognition and respect I get among my own community as well as people from other states as well as abroad could not have come by. Had I continued to live the way my father wanted, I may have been more successful financially and or at an individual level. But I recognize that my work has impacts on my community. I have become an agent of change in my community. Had I continued my dance I would be dancing for money but today I

> put my art to a bigger use and cause? Also my association with the CYSV allowed me to travel places and hold important positions which otherwise would not have been possible. My mental development has been tremendous. Today I use my training in the arts to both educate and entertain my community and spread awareness about the social malice that continues to gain control over the Bhuiyan samaj (society). However, as per my view, four detrimental aspects have engulfed today's Bhuiyan samaj: religion, political affiliation, capitalism and fashion. Immersions in these four forms have severely limited the progress of Bhuiyan Samaj and in couple of instances significantly reversed the gains we made during our peaceful struggle. I work against superstitions; girl child education, dowry and all this work of mine bring in tremendous satisfaction and prestige. There have been some big changes in the past couple of decades.

Highly critical of mindless pursuit of what Ali terms 'modernity'— he asserts that dissipation of Bhuiyan culture that allowed his community to survive trans-generational ignominy stands threatened due to the mindless pursuit of forms of modernity that actively seeks to replace Dalit forms of cultural expressions that had developed in resistance to caste dominance. He attributes the threat to Dalit culture, to lack of education and a cultivated sense of disenchantment among Dalit youth that stems from the perceived timelessness of the Dalit condition. Dalit youths therefore prefer to toil under demanding conditions in the cities as it grants them the anonymity of caste and caste based discrimination. Ali's concern primarily denotes the Bhuiyan youth's

seduction with materialism and DJ culture that thrives on loud, jarring music and absurd lyrics that rarely speak to the Bhuiyan reality, rampant alcoholism and an unmatched proclivity to take up the social ills of society rather than the good.

Blurring the Margin-Center discourse

On one occasion Ali had come to visit me in my research village and one of the questions he posed was: "Why are you studying us. First your ancestors enslave us and now people like you, their descendants come to ask us, why we (Dalits) are the way we are? Should you not be talking instead to your own people, because of whom we have been historically marginalized and continue to remain marginalized?" Even as I tried to muster up a response, Ali stated that Dalits have been ever willing to take on any name to become legible and visible— be it in the form of Mahatma Gandhi's paternalistic naming of his community as Harijans or the move by the then Bihar Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar, as Mahadalits. However, what they have come to realize is that the zeal to change nomenclature with reference Dalits is rather an ostentatious move taken to merely create a semblance of addressing Dalit issues; the play with the name and/or naming process has little to do with the desire to bring about actual change in Dalit material and social conditions. "To effect change, you have to immerse yourself in the problem, just like to fix a leak in the ahara (artificial tank constructed to hold rain water and specific to Gaya region), you have to step inside the ahara, as one cannot fix the leak from the outside," he noted in his attempts to assess the attempts made so far when it comes to caste based

discrimination. The marking of the community as Mahadalits for targeted state intervention purposes while at the same time refusing to address its long standing demands of ensuring effective control over redistributed land, Ali remarked was akin to trying to fix the problem from the outside. Without ensuring effective control over redistributed land, Ali asserts, that any attempts to engage Dalits, is at best superficial and indicative of tokenism. His emphasizes the skills that Dalit women and men possess and argues that they are capable of transforming their own social situation provided the state ensures that we have the means to do so. For Ali, the term Mahadalits carried the assumption that Bhuiyans were backward due to their own volition and or inherent lack of. In addition, he asserts that little is being done to ensure that the state support reaches those for whom it is intended as more often than not, the state aid gets appropriated by those in influential positions, thereby failing to make a dent in the established status quo in rural South Bihar where Dalits, particularly those belonging to the Bhuiyan community continue to scrape by despite a whole gamut of government schemes and policies targeted towards their welfare.

Much, Ali says, has to do with the government reluctance to give land to the landless agricultural laborers— who disproportionately belong to the Bhuiyan community in the region. Even in places where Dalits struggled for their rights, the state apparatus did everything in their ambit to undermine the process, such that even today there are a considerable number of Dalits with legal titles to redistributed land and yet do not have any control over it. Ali notes that in his village, 35 people got land but the land

was not what they had struggled for. Instead, the state apparatus in an effort to wade off the pressure created due to the Bodhgaya land struggle conceded to grant the barren land classified as *gair mazurwa* (land owned by the state) land that were not connected to any irrigation system like the ahara (artificial water tank).[177] Stating that the alliance with the middle class youth was crucial to overthrowing the Mahant and the redistribution of the land under his control, Ali notes that withdrawal of the middle class youth was a significant blow to the efforts of addressing caste based social inequality in Gaya region. He notes that the middle class youth not only took the difficult task of consciousness raising exercise but also modeled an alternative to the oppressive structures that characterized a predominantly Hindu society by challenge caste and gender hierarchies in their everyday lives. The Sangharsh Vahini complemented the MKS by adeptly accessing the state apparatus and holding it accountability by activating different forms of governance such as the judiciary and or the media and through it garnering public opinion in favor of the landless laborers. The state bureaucracy and the police were unable to 'act out' in their traditional ways due to the media glare and the need to adhere to judicial rulings.

During fieldwork, the critique that was often voiced by MKS activists was, "Sangharsh Vahini was able to undermine the Bodh Gaya Math influence in the region but it did not put substantial efforts towards sorting out the discrepancies that resulted following the government decisions to hand out legal papers on the land freed by us, on a

177 Gair mazurwa land does not have irrigation facilities and is solely dependent on the rainwater. More importantly it is not connected to the Ahara as are the land that fell under the control of the Math.

case by case basis. So even today we have the religious institutions like the Kajwatti Math, Jani Bigha Math and Bodh Gaya Math selling land that are under Dalit control to different parties." Based on this input, I met up with the Mahant of Bakrowr Math, which fell on my way to the fieldwork sites. Bakrowr Math is located on the river Phalgu and directly opposite the Bodh Gaya Math premises and the Mahant of this Math confirmed that the High court had ruled that Bakrowr Math did not fall under the Bodh Gaya Math. The ruling implies that the land that was held under the Bakrowr Math could not have been redistributed paving way for new litigations to emerge on the land that has already been redistributed. The Sangharsh Vahini has totally turned its attention away from the Bodh Gaya Ceiling land and is currently focusing on the Forest Right Act 2006. As Ali put it, "all our activists from the MKS have taken the FRA 2006 as an issue of prestige and we are mobilizing around it to help our people stake claim to land provided under this Act."

Conclusion

This chapter details the life history of a Dalit man, Ali. In keeping with the genre of Dalit testimony, his oral narratives makes evident that the narrative is not just an individual narrative but also a narrative of the community and works to highlight both the explicit and implicit forgetting of histories of caste oppression, resistance and struggles. It seeks to propose an alterity that serves to fill in and navigate the dissonance generated by dominant narratives about Dalits. By underscoring the violence inherent in the act of

'being named from above', the oral history questions normalized forms of violence directed against historically marginalized communities and the obfuscation of Dalit assertion. Oral history works to inadvertently foreground the limits of received history that thrive on silencing voices at the margins to maintain the status quo of the center and the margins. Ali's oral history denotes the struggle to create an identity that escapes hierarchy, hegemony, definition and categorization. However, even as he is ready to denounce the received categorizations, he deploys them from time to time to become recognizable to the society that uses these categories to read individual actors/subjects. Looking closely at the active refusal and strategic acceptance of identity markers by Dalit subjects, this chapter tries to understand the cultural construction of a political subject and its linkages to history which results in political agency as an embedded force (Feldman 1991). Dalits express that their desire to be read and recognized by the state is critical to reconfiguring received spaces, histories and subjectivity even as they recognize and understand that perils of that recognition often undermines and appropriates their agency in overcoming dominant ideological tropes.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation uses social mapping in conjunction with ethnography and long-standing questions pertaining to land, caste and gender to undertake a spatial analysis of the long-term effects of legal rights to redistributed land among Dalits, to rethink what land means to Dalits and how it has transformed their immediate social landscape and Dalit subjectivities. It does so by closely following the long-term impacts of the Bodh Gaya land struggle—that for the first time in the history of social movements in South Asia— resulted in primarily Dalits, including women, securing joint titles along with their husbands. The three key arguments that the dissertation makes are first, ownership of redistributed land has allowed for a politics of becoming (Kannabiran 2006) to emerge that actively opposes efforts and practices that perpetuate social exclusion of Dalits. Dalits through kabza (actual control) over state owned land, previously under the control of the landed castes/elites, are effectively undermining century old practices of Kamiauti or servitude in the region and questioning olds ways of caste mediated gendered relationships. Second, the dissertation highlights that despite the mainstreaming of gender and land rights issues, the state bureaucracy continues to act as 'machines for the social production of indifference' (Herzfeld 1993) toward the Dalit community. I have argued that the 'bureaucratic phase' of the land struggle is characterized by the bureaucratic inaction that has worked to not only intensify social suffering (Kleinman, Das, et.al 1997) of the Dalits, but also has jeopardized the viability of peaceful forms of mobilization and resistance. This observation assumes significance because Bihar is one of the Indian

states that falls in the 'red corridor' and is struggling to undermine the armed Naxalite movement in rural areas of South Bihar. Finally, this dissertation uses social mapping to render visible the nature of transformation that has taken place in Dalit lives due to the land struggle. For example, to render visible what has been called the 'hidden apartheid' of India, wherein villages are segregated along caste lines, the social mapping process—in which Dalit women sat down and chalked out their village pre- and post- land struggle, showed that even as segregation persists along caste lines there is a marked shift in the spatial arrangements. The distance between landed caste and Dalits' households have been reduced, and in rare instances their homes share common boundaries. Social mapping process therefore allowed for a questioning of the purported 'timelessness' of the Dalit situation that helps understand the nature of resistance that Dalit assertion face in rural Bihar. While theory on space/place allowed me to view the social as spatial constructed and vice-versa (Massey 1984); the act of hand drawing one's immediate space/place allowed me to tap into memories and the lived experiences of the past as well as the present.

The everydayness of the Dalit struggle

According to Kailash Bharati, President of the Mazdoor Kisan Samiti, there exists a meta-narrative about the Bodhgaya land struggle that justifies the celebrations of radical outcomes—such as the struggle serving as a prototype of peaceful grassroots mobilization among the marginalized—and an excellent example of how critical inquiry

of axis of dominations in society, such as gender, caste and religion at the individual level, served to strengthen the movement rather than undermine its feasibility. However, just like the Dalit women who assert, that "our struggle with the *sarkar* (government) is far from over," to really understand how the struggle continues to inform the present in Dalit lives, one needs to pay close attention to the "situated local" narratives of the struggle. The disjointed picture that these two narratives present represents the disjunction of what is considered as "end of the struggle" by the Sangharsh Vahini activists and the Dalits in the region. For the Sangharsh Vahini activists, the Bodhgaya land struggle ended with the victory march held in August 1987, following the Supreme Court ruling in favor of the movement; but for the Dalits in the region, the struggle is ongoing.[178]

This dissertation has been a documentation of the 'situated' local narratives of the struggle to enable an analysis of how legacy of the Bodhgaya land struggle continues to inform the present. Apart from highlighting the fact that the struggle was staged on multiple levels and unfolded in myriad ways across a region that was under the influence of the Sangharsh Vahini, it suggests that the outcome too has been mediated by local factors and influences. A spatial analysis of how the struggle unfolded in three different villages provides key insights into the nature of the post-colonial state as it progresses from the liberal into the neoliberal phase. The first three chapters discuss the distinct

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[178] The struggle continues as an alliance between the MKS and Janmukti Sangharsh Vahini (JaSaVa). The members of JaSaVa are primarily members of the former CYSV who had to quit CYSV due to membership age restrictions by the organization. Although the movement lacks the momentum and the popularity that the Bodhgaya land struggle enjoyed, it nevertheless constitutes one of the main forms of Dalit mobilization in the area.

phenomenon that emerges from a spatial analysis of how the struggle unfolded in three distinct locations in Gaya region.

Chapter One of this dissertation is illustrative of the outcome of the first phase of land struggle, where Dalits freed Math land and got legal papers to it; but today have either lost, or are under significant pressure, to part with their land. The experience of Dalits in Mastipur shines a light on the neoliberal nation-state that does not recede in the background. The state's projection of Bodh Gaya as the "spiritual capital" and the nation-state's connection to the Buddhist world is in keeping with the global demands led by Buddhist countries and tourists; the move significantly undermines Dalit interests.

Chapter Two describes the Dalit experience of the land struggle in Kaari, where land acquired by the Dalits faces significant threat due to the inaction of the state that refuses to make good on its own promise. I refer to this phase as the 'bureaucratic phase,' describing how the state apparatus induced discrepancies and inaction and continues to undermine Dalit assertion in the region— underlining its hollow claims of working toward Dalit empowerment. While the dominant view perceives land as a commodity, Dalits who comprise the bulk of agricultural labor and continue to be heavily dependent on daily wage labor, view land as a source of sustenance that buffers them from absolute poverty by meeting their subsistence needs. It also provides Dalits with a sense of bargaining power that was absent when they did not have any control over land.

Chapter Three provides an example of Dalit assertion in the present that employ the praxis of the Bodhgaya land struggle of the late 1970s and early 1980s to stake

control over government land. The ethnographic investigation in this newly established village suggests that the state continues to prove the major hurdle in refusing to act on Dalit demands for legalizing their control over land that they have themselves freed and redistributed equally among women and men. The refusal of the state to act on Dalit demands, following Dalits overcoming all challenges through peaceful means, raises questions about the state's role in undermining peaceful struggles that in turn creates conditions for violence.

While the first three chapters show that the various ways in which the state and the state's apparatus frustrates legitimate and constitutionally guaranteed demands of Dalits in rural Bihar, Chapter Four stresses Dalit experiences to posit that despite limited success in holding on to the redistributed land, the land struggle fundamentally altered Dalit subjectivity by undermining the monastic governmentality that had radically limited the scope and manifestation of Dalit expression for several centuries. The undermining control of the Math created space for expressions of Dalit assertion that challenges older tropes of caste and gender hegemonic ideals in the public sphere. I also show that the state, by failing to aid Dalit women in realizing their control over the redistributed land guaranteed to them, has helped perpetuate the notion of secondary status of Dalit women within the household.

Chapter Five of this dissertation contends that one of the ways in which Dalits undermine hierarchical relationships predicated on caste is by transposing hierarchy with identity—be it projected, lived and/or imagined. I draw on oral narrative here to argue

that the Dalit subjective in rural Bihar is in flux; because although there is self-identification with the Gandhian terminology of Harijan, there is also a simultaneous recognition and questioning of its patronizing and debasing characterization. JP's youth army, epitomized in the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (CYSV), appeared on the scene to provide an alternative—where the markers of hierarchy are actively sacrificed. In between these extreme positions—an acceptance of caste and religion and the complete rejection—Dalits argue that their goal is no longer an overcoming of caste-based discrimination, but an undermining of it. For a complete overcoming requires a general recognition and acceptance of caste as perpetuating social inequity, which appears impossible to achieve given the nature of resistance even seemingly benign acts of Dalit assertion face—both from state and those higher up in the caste hierarchy; undermining of caste is something that can achieved through everyday acts.

A marking of shifts in organizing and voicing dissent

Almost all issues that the Sangharsh Vahini, along with the MKS, tried to tackle through the Bodhgaya land struggle—and had briefly overcome—have returned to the areas in which it once had great influence, leading one to question the long-term achievements of the struggle. Although former members of the CYSV have revisited the region to work on the Forest Rights Act (2006), the struggle is far from its initial momentum. Much has to do with the changed context in which mobilization takes place. Recognizing the limitations of working under the rubric of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs),

former members of CYSV, while acknowledging that the phase of the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a strengthening of grassroots mobilization, also note that post-liberalization there has seen a spike in NGO culture, which in turn has muted dissent and radical transformation of society through a management of expectations—by stepping either in places where the state-apparatus fails or at times instead of the state. Chetna Gala, a former member of the CYSV, and now founder and President of Mann Deshi Mahila Sahkari Bank, a micro finance bank, which lends to women in rural areas in Maswadh, Maharashtra observes:

> Movement's achievements are big but you cannot put it on a paper. For instance, in 10 years our women have got land, but you cannot predict that, it can take 15 years or more—it is a movement. But NGO culture dictates that what you have said that must be your achievements. That is how the funding is based or released. So you take up issues that seem achievable, possible and that which you feel is in your hands. So one sees that movements have started ebbing way and there is more of institutionalized work. Once you get within the framework of institutionalized work then you cannot appear to be challenging the society. So on one hand you can see that you do not have the money to do the kind of work you want to do and on the other hand you also see that actually you cannot do what you want to do. You require a different type of skill of preparing a project like writing grant proposals. Of course now we can do very easily do all that but at that time I said that it was not something we could do.

Kaushal Ganesh Azad views the NGOization of the grassroots mobilization as a neoliberal move to undermine change and transformation in society. He argues that NGOs eventually end up becoming about grants and commissions and in the process become agents of the state; contending that these agents cannot work to question the state. However, former CYSV activists seek to buckle the trend of NGOization by continuing to mobilize at the grassroots level in which the members of the organization contribute through membership fees. C. A. Priyadarshi, who continues to head JaSaVa in Bihar, while acknowledging the challenges that grassroots mobilization face today, affirms that the success of the Bodhgaya struggle lit a small flame that temporarily undermined the deeply entrenched hierarchical structures in the society; and in the process posited a template for successful mobilization. He notes, "age-old structures of patriarchy and casteism, cannot be dismantled with a single blow, several revolutions like the Bodhgaya land struggle will be needed to undermine these deeply entrenched biases in society." Reflecting on the achievements of the struggle, Kanak Srinivas, who continues to take part in at least a couple of yearly workshops held for women associated with MKS, notes:

> We (middle class activists) came and we left, the issue was not of land alone, there were several issues tied up to the land, we could have followed up on buying additional land, developing framework to enable women to retain control over land, to address social evils like child marriage and alcoholism. We essentially came forward for transformation of society for *parivartan* (change), not for giving

> land —that work has not been achieved by us. The issues remained, as it is, how can we expect women to come forward when there is no longer the space being provided for them? Activists are not made in classrooms or through reading books— experiences of a struggle make the activists. It is the experience of the movement that produced strong Dalit women activists, now once the struggle ended, the women retired. Their girl child did not get that experience.

However, despite the gloomy picture and the disgruntlement, both with and among the Sangharsh Vahini and MKS activists, it cannot be denied that the Bodhgaya land struggle engendered a politics of becoming for Dalits in the Gaya region, who— equipped with the experience of struggle— continue to use its repertoire to effect change in their immediate surroundings.

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