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Reconstructing Culture:

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social change in rural western India

This paper focuses on seasonal labour migration in rural India to examine how migrant returnees sought to reconstitute historical and hierarchical social relations in their home villages. I use qualitative research conducted in Maharashtra state in western India from 2014-15 among landowning farmers, landless returnees, and nonmigrant laborers. I demonstrate that for the returnees, an important element of social and cultural change in their home communities was their ability to upend and replace 'residual culture,' based on expectations of continued exploitation and performative hierarchy, with an 'emergent' one. I claim that the mechanics of counter-hegemony in rural Maharashtra includes a struggle for vernacular equality to eliminate caste-based practices of humiliation, including labour exploitation. I show that the attempts by returnees to reconstitute social relations in their home communities were undercut by the limits of cultural politics, in its inability to usher in the change that entails the redistribution of resources and substantive political power. This research contributes to theoretically textured scholarship in cultural geography on contestations between elite and subordinate cultures, particularly on the question of efforts to erase unjust historical practices of humiliation and how spatial, social, and economic mobility of the returnees, in part, enables this effort.

Introduction

In the Global South, the working poor pursue household reproduction through a complex combination of marginal self-employment and wage employment across multiple sites of the social division of labour (Bernstein, 2010). The agricultural sector is not producing adequate employment, thus, displacing laborers to seek work elsewhere (International Labour Office 2011). Work opportunities for unskilled laborers in cities tend to be seasonal and informal (Breman, 2013), while gaining access to the formal economy often requires substantial social and cultural capital (Jeffrey, 2010) that the laborers lack. While rural populations have become more mobile, they find insufficient employment in urban areas, which results in seasonal migration. Simultaneously, improvements in communication have revolutionized access to urban areas and employment even for people from remote regions (Jeffrey & Doron, 2011), thus aiding the mobility of rural populations. In India, nearly 55 percent of the workforce is employed in agriculture (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2011), a sector of the Indian economy that until recently (2018-19) was experiencing a negative growth rate of over two percent in employment generation. This deceleration in agricultural employment growth represents rural employment in India, which is slowing by 0.3 percent (Chand et al., 2017), although this trend reversed during the pandemic (Vyas, 2021). Therefore, India is an appropriate place to examine the seasonal migration of marginalized agrarian populations and its impacts on sending communities.

In India, rural labouring households are among the most economically, socially, and politically marginalized because of the high incidence of poverty and because these households often belong to the 'lower' castes. The Indian constitution renders the thousands of marginalized castes in India visible by categorizing them into groups, such as 'scheduled castes' and 'backward castes.' Mirroring race and ethnicity-based persecutions, oppressions stemming from caste and tribal identities cements tribals (*Adivasis*) and the formerly outcaste

(*Dalits*) at the bottom of Indian socio-economic hierarchies; indeed, these groups together constitute 1 in 25 people in the world, yet are in the bottom of the economic hierarchy and have not benefitted significantly from economic growth (Shah & Lerche, 2020).

In India, 21 of every 1000 persons are seasonal migrants (Keshri & Bhagat, 2013). Seasonal migrants engage in a regular and repetitive series of outward and return movements between an origin and a destination/s (Skeldon, 2012). In this paper, I examine how seasonal labour migration is reconstituting caste-based social relations in migrant home communities, where the laborers find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy within their home communities. This focus on labour flows as an optic to understand rural transformation is inspired by Shanin's observation that "rural problems are inexplicable any longer in their own terms and must be understood in terms of labour and capital flows which are broader than agriculture" (Shanin, 1986, p. 19). I follow the same standards in this paper to identify agricultural laborers as the Indian census.

> "A person who works on another person's land for wages in money or kind or share is regarded as an agricultural labourer. She or he has no risk in the cultivation, but merely works on another person's land for wages. An agricultural labourer has no right of lease or contract on land on which she/he works" (Salve, 2014).

To understand the power geometries of social relations in rural India, I draw on Raymond Williams' contribution to Marxist cultural studies, specifically in advancing our understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemony. On the lines of Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan (2003), this research, by bringing a particular cultural gaze, complicates the geographies of migration and work and supplements a wealth of scholarly work on labor migration, processes, and relations in sociology and anthropology of labor and labor economics [for example, see Breman (2019), Rutten (1995), Srivastava & Sutradhar (2016); and Byers et al. (2013)].

Theorizing Cultural Change

Dominant, Residual, and Emergent

Williams argues that 'culture' is the ordinariness of life and expresses a way of life for people. A culture derives its ordinariness through engagement with people and their participation in a shared way of life, not in received traditions (Snedeker, 1993). Dominant groups within a cultural context see and seek to establish their experience of the world and their assumptions as the objective and valid culture of all people (Cosgrove, 1989).

The dominant culture has power over other cultures. This dominance is illuminated in control over means of life, including labour-power, land, raw materials, and capital. The dominant culture sustains and reproduces its power by projecting and communicating across social levels and divisions their image of the world based on their experience and accepted as a universal reality. This is ideology. The reproduction of culture entails the expression and sustaining of power. This process is successful when it is less apparent such that the dominant group's cultural assumptions merely appear as common sense. What is being referred to here is the production of cultural hegemony. Contra dominant groups, historically, subdominant or alternative to dominant cultures, may be divided as residual (remaining from the past,) emergent (which anticipate the future,) and excluded (actively or passively suppressed) (Cosgrove, 1989).

Williams' distinction among dominant, residual, and emergent cultures was his main contribution to the theory of hegemony, and they provided formal analytical tools for his analysis of culture and politics. The three must be understood as an interactive process of struggle. Our institutions and social practices mediate their interrelation and reflect the operation of human agency, power relations, and exploitation (Snedeker, 1993). Cosgrove uses the example of the municipal park of an English provincial town to explain how the dominant group's cultural norms and values – in this case, Victorian middle classes – were

established and communicated widely. The declared aim was social and moral control, expressed as an intent to improve the physical and spiritual welfare of the labouring classes. Traditional pastimes like tavern drinking were discouraged and substituted by public parks with clearly defined rules of conduct. The public parks remain characteristic slices of the English urban landscape, symbolizing the Victorian bourgeoise's ideals of decency and propriety (Cosgrove, 1989).

'Residual' is not 'archaic,' but a reference to available elements of the past whose place in the contemporary cultural process is variable. The residual is formed in the past and is active in the cultural process, sometimes as an element of the past but a significant element of the present. Certain experiences, meanings, and values are lived and practiced based on the social and cultural residue of previous institutions or formations. It is easier to understand the social location of the 'residual' because it is related mainly to earlier social formations and cultural processes that generated particular meanings and values (Williams, 1977/2016).

Emergent cultures offer a challenge to the existing dominant culture and a vision of possible alternative futures (Cosgrove 1989). 'Emergent' refers to the continual creation of new meanings, values, practices, and relationships. However, it is challenging to differentiate elements of a new phase of the dominant culture and the ones strictly in opposition and alternatives (Williams, 1977/2016). I ground this understanding of counter-hegemony in the Indian countryside, where the struggle to displace the dominant caste ideology has meant confronting the residual elements of the hierarchical system by upending performative practices constitutive of the hierarchy and replacing it with an emergent one based on a vernacular understanding of equality. I use 'vernacular' not in the linguistic sense but in the sense of a site of localization (Pickering & Green, 1987), and draw from cultural geography scholarship where 'vernacular culture' as a concept is deemed valid where socio-cultural practices tagged as 'traditional' and 'modern' converge (Revill, 2005), as I explain in the

paper. Other geographical writings on agrarian India that have interpreted 'vernacular' on these lines include a 'vernacular calculus of the economic,' which Ramamurthy (2011) explains as a noneconomistic grid for understanding why *Dalit* smallholders continue certain forms of production despite lost opportunity cost in terms of wage labour. The calculus, she argues, is shaped by the rearticulation of caste in terms of dignity and perceptions of autonomy, which is relevant to the arguments advanced in this paper.

Other cultural and social geography writings in South Asia have contributed to our understanding of this counter-hegemony and emergent culture. Young people in rural India, especially migrants, draw on urban experiences to develop new ways of approaching social life in their villages (Smith & Gergan, 2017; Deuchar, 2019; Gergan & Smith, 2020). In Uttarakhand in northern India, Dyson and Jeffrey (2022) argue that youngsters have been developing urban forms and dynamics to demonstrate how practices locally coded as 'rural' and 'urban' are combined to obtain socio-economic opportunities and improve the lives of villagers who elect to remain in their villages instead of out-migrating. Young people's performance of urbanism is selective in that they select only fragments of the urban to deploy in the village. For example, youngsters drew on their experiences in cities and small towns to introduce urban styles of schooling in their villages. Specifically, these young people offered tutorials, worked part-time in their schools, or campaigned for improved government and non-governmental educational resources in their home regions. Drawing on Willis (1981), Gidwani and Ramamurthy (2018) have theorized efforts by migrants in Delhi (northern India) and Hyderabad (south-central India) to imagine aspects of their behaviour as urban or rural and to combine urbanism and rurality as they cross boundaries as 'cultural production'. Dominant practices and discourses are reflected in the performance of deploying a rural or urban practice in another zone. The vernacular understanding, I explain in this paper, is about

reducing humiliation, essential for reproducing the caste order, and not about equalization in terms of social status or redistributive politics.

Caste and Humiliation

Humiliation may be theorized within local configurations of power, emerging from tensions within the bourgeois public sphere resulting from new and secular hierarchies (Guru, 2011a). Societies with institutionalized humiliation include those based on racial segregation, hierarchical status, untouchability, and the caste system. The common thread in these societies is the treatment of certain groups as undeserving of respect. The occupations available to the groups, place of residence, matrimonial options, norms of addressing others and being addressed, social interactions, and the rhythms of their lives are constrained and made inflexible by social institutions and practices. In such societies, humiliation is integral to the system of domination. The practices and forms of relationships embody contempt for subordinate groups and a relentless attempt to prevent them from developing self-respect. Since humiliation is profound, ubiquitous, routinized, and coded into the language to construct and describe the groups, blatant acts of humiliation operate as recurring reminders of their lesser status (Parekh, 2011).

Drawing on the psychology of humiliation during the Rwanda Genocide, Linder has sketched a typology of honour humiliation (Linder, 2001). Of particular relevance to this paper is 'reinforcement humiliation,' which is the 'master's' use of hierarchy to keep others in place (Baxi, 2011). Yet, change happens when the disadvantaged disrupt stable situations by converting moral indignation and sacrificing their material interests for increased equality (Margalit & Sunstein, 2002). Indeed, groups accept 'reduced modes of being' or positions in institutional contexts to hold power at some level (Taylor, 1989). For *Dalits*, this is a permanent reduction, i. e. the upper castes never see them as equals. Yet, the victims cannot

be permanently reduced; they make intellectual and political moves to surmount this reduction; groups rejected by pre-modern society and social norms (residual) adopt modern egalitarian protocols to attempt to negate their rejection (emergent) (Guru, 2011b).

The data and the argument in the paper resonates well with the central question in emotional geographies on how space affects emotion. Geographers widely accept that social identities and inequalities are relational. We partly define ourselves as what we are not and relations of inequality and oppression bound up the relational claims. Researchers have not generally considered how emotions underpin the emotionally troubling hardships and injustices caused by inequalities and oppressions (Bondi et al., 2005). The emotion of humiliation and shame, which the paper focuses on, stands in opposition to the emotion of pride and self-confidence/self-esteem. Confidence in oneself is about a willingness to act (Barbalet, 2004). It is a 'feeling state' of self-projection; it allows one to go their own way. It is characterized by assured expectation and self-projection, which are connected and necessary affective basis for human agency, which is the ability to make a difference in the world. Human agency is made possible through the action of actors who project their capacities into an extensive relationship. Confidence promotes social action by virtue of its object, the future (Barbalet, 2007). Confidence is a crucial social emotion required for action, grounded in the sense of acceptance and recognition in social relationships, and is future-oriented. These three aspects can help elucidate the successes and failures of any critical social transformation. As a corollary, shame leads to inaction (Barbalet, 2004).

Sociologists have explained the relationship between (international) migration and shame/confidence. Through immigration to western Europe, Latvian immigrants left behind shame, challenges to their self-confidence, a sense of 'permanent crisis' in Latvia, and understood the aforementioned clearly. In the west, they found that they were earlier made to feel ashamed without any basis for apparently lacking initiative, a sense of responsibility,

'inferior,' and sharing Soviet identity. In the west, finding jobs, the relative absence of wage theft, and recognition and respect for hard work helped restore their self-confidence and confidence in their host states that were respectful, had a clear mechanism for handling grievances, and offered unemployment benefits and health coverage. Migrants were less likely to return to Latvia, given their experiences at work and with the state, which made them evaluate their experiences in Latvia in a new light. Their understanding of the west differed from those presented to them back home (Ķešāne & Weyher, 2021).

I discuss in this paper how memories of humiliation become grounds for labour counter-hegemony. To that end, my work adds to those of other scholars of labour in South Asia who take culture seriously. In the Bagri region in West Bengal, Rogaly & Rafique (2003) recount that *Adivasi* and Muslim laborers have deeply unpleasant memories of having food thrown at them from a distance onto a leaf rather than offered on a metal plate by the landed upper caste, and the use of cow dung to clean the place where they would sit to eat. In the agricultural plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the migration of lower caste laborers has been triggered in part due to oppressive landlords (Shah & Lerche, 2020). In West Bengal, the landless Lodha tribal communities have avoided work offered by the landed, upper-caste Mahato farmers. Mahato groups disparaged the Lodhas' 'poor' cultivation skills by accusing them of ignorance and laziness, and the Lodha laborers countered this by pointing to declining remuneration given for farm work. The economic exploitation of the Lodha groups worked alongside historical processes of dispossession and denigration that have rendered them as the present-day landless proletariat. The Lodhas' evaluation of their available employment options was affected by histories of their dependence on the Mahatos and being forced to perform humiliating tasks for them. Thus, their reluctance to work for the Mahatos (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). Throughout the rest of the paper, I explain the operation of residual caste-based relations and expectations of the dominant castes and the

emergent vernacular opposition to these norms. I preface the explanation with an overview of rural Maharashtra's suitability for this research and the methods employed for data collection.

Research Methods

I collected data for this research in the Yavatmal district in Maharashtra state.

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1. Location of Yavatmal district in the eastern part of the western Indian state of Maharashtra.

Per the latest national census (Directorate of Census Operations, 2014), close to 80 percent of the district's population of over 2.7 million people are rural residents, close to 55 percent of all workers are landless agricultural laborers, and close to a quarter of all workers are 'cultivators' (landowning farmers or sharecroppers). The per capita agricultural landownership in the district is less than 0.4 hectares (Yavatmal District Collector Office, 2020). Yavatmal's contribution to the nominal gross value added (GVA) in Maharashtra is a little over one percent. These demographic and economic conditions have created fertile grounds for short and long-term migration.

This research is based on two rounds of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations during June and July 2014 and June through November 2015 in five villages. The participants were landless laborers - returnees and nonmigrant - almost entirely from lower castes (*Dalits*, such as *Mahar* and "Other Backward Castes" such as *Banjara*) and landholding farmers (middle and upper castes, such as *Maratha* and *Kunbi*). Returnees are typically rural laborers who migrate seasonally to Telangana state to work as cotton pickers around October, to the southwest within the state to harvest cane for

a few months after that, or work as day laborers in urban Maharashtra in the western districts in late Spring.

Insert Figure 2 here

Figure 2. Seasonal migration routes of laborers from Yavatmal to south-central India, followed by south-western India for cane harvesting, ending with their return to the western cities in Maharashtra and, finally, returning home.

I collected data for this research with the assistance of a local *Banjara* college student who attended a neighbourhood, rural liberal arts college, where I lived for the duration of my fieldwork. In total, I interviewed 52 farmers, 66 laborers (both migrants and nonmigrant laborers, women and men), 14 labour intermediaries (all but one, men), and one agricultural officer of a sugar factory. I conducted one focus group discussion with labour intermediaries (all men, n=16.) I recorded and transcribed interviews and focus group discussions and my notes from participant observation during fieldwork in India. I coded the transcripts by developing a set of analytic codes based on emergent themes that relate to each research question (Cope, 2005). I developed this set of codes based on fieldwork I conducted in the summer of 2014 while remaining open to the emergence of novel responses to the various questions. I also coded using descriptive Nvivo codes (open coding). While other research in Yavatmal has captured changes in gender relations, agrarian class relations, and micro-politics of food entitlements (Rai, 2020a, Rai, 2020b, Rai, 2018, Rai & Smucker, 2016), this research is focused on how labour migration is upending historical caste-based social relations in the district, and the potential of cultural politics to create meaningful change. The fieldwork for this research does not allow for generalizable, quantitative statements; yet, it helps construct 'richer maps of reality' by leveraging 'discursive persuasion' (Martin, 1999).

Returning home, forging change: Returnees challenging caste subordination

Although migration patterns were closely related to caste hierarchies, labourers were contesting these processes in several ways. In the Yavatmal district, landowning Marathas rarely migrated to work as day laborers in the urban industrial workforce. A farmer explained,

> "Marathas generally don't migrate to the cities, but the *Boudhs* [*Dalits*] and others do. They return home to refurbish their home, buy necessities, attend to their family, and return to their urban worksites. These boys do not work for us and are ashamed to work in the fields." (personal communication, July 18, 2015)

Recent scholarship on caste mobilisation in Maharashtra has explained how the migration dynamics are more complex and has clarified Maratha assertiveness in their home villages: agrarian crisis and the liberalisation of the Indian economy foreground the increasing inability of Marathas to assert dominance in their home villages because their family members are unable to sustain well-paying, permanent employment in urban factories while educational and economic mobility of *Dalits* and other lower castes has happened concomitantly (Mhaskar, 2021). Note that while Marathas in Maharashtra, broadly, have historically migrated for urban employment by leveraging well-established caste networks, the opportunities for such employment in factories and government jobs have diminished in recent years due to de-industrialization, shrinking of salaried government positions, and contractualizaton of employment.

Dalits strongly resisted working for their former employers, the landed upper-caste farmers, partly because they were aware of the violent, exploitative histories of farmer-labour relations. However, returnees from the *Banjara* communities continued to work for the farmers. A returnee explained,

"Farmers would force us to work for long hours; they wouldn't even let us have water during work hours. Now, if they make snide remarks about our caste, we approach the police. They cannot exploit us; if they do, we find work elsewhere. We no longer fear the farmers." (personal communication, July 26, 2015)

Echoing these comments, a labourer explained,

"Our generation of laborers does not tolerate abuse. It is easier working in the city; it is just about money. Earlier, when we would have tea at the farmers' homes, we would be asked to clean our own cups after drinking. They would not touch our teacups. Now, there is no blatant discrimination of the sort." (personal communication, October 31, 2015)

Refusal to work as resistance is not unique to Yavatmal. Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) have ably demonstrated from fieldwork in rural India that the body politics that *Dalits* and tribals elect to express dissent entails, in part, accessing alternative employment opportunities to reject their historical position of servitude to the upper castes. A vernacular understanding of equality for returnees centred around dismantling the residual culture accompanied by emotions of shame and a regime of reinforcement humiliation, even if it meant losing wages in their home village. This was both irrational and frustrating for those at the helm of the dominant culture in Yavatmal.

'Hard work' and the cultural performance of labouring

Returnees worked and accumulated savings in cities and other villages and spent a significant portion on consumption in their home village. Farmers complained that the wages demanded for agricultural work in their villages by the returnees were exorbitant. However, as I demonstrate in the rest of this section, the demands were really for a living wage.

Farmers noted particular material and embodied practices of returnees that were often at odds with expected performances of labouring and living in the village. A farmer explained,

> "First, returnees generally don't work for us. When they do, they stare at their wristwatch or cell phones at the end of the workday. This staring at watches and telling us they are getting late to return home is new! They want to leave at 5 PM. They used to work until 6-6:30 PM. If we force them to work beyond 5 PM, they don't return to work the next day." (personal communication, August 30, 2015)

Note that laborers had started to demand the introduction of work hours like on urban factory floors and had the means to enforce it symbolically through their wristwatches, an expensive commodity seldom associated by the farmers with landless laborers. This commodity consumption is not in vain but offers "new sources of social distinction and status…and [can] supply the semiotic elements for a counterhegemonic vocabulary" (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003, p. 199).

Returnees noted other macro socio-economic changes that had weakened landed farmers' control over laborers. These included the option of migration as a livelihood instead of working as long-term contractual laborers (called *Saldars* in western India) with farming families and the introduction of food-based entitlement programs [called the Public Distribution System (PDS)]. A returnee labourer and former *Saldar* explained,

> "I worked as a *Saldar* when I was unmarried. A *Saldar*'s work is backbreaking – we would start at 4 AM and work until late in the evening. We would be away from our families despite living in the same village. After marriage, I quit and started to migrate for work. I dislike working in the village because farmers do not pay us enough and make us work very hard. They also treat us very poorly. We have food now, thanks to PDS, unlike when I was growing up. Because of the wages I earn in the cities, I will eventually support my children's education, marry off my daughter, pay for utilities, and buy more food. I can't earn enough in the village to pay for these things." (personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Nonmigrant laborers attested that agrarian transformations, specifically, changes in crop choice from cereals to monoculture crops like soybeans and increased use of farm machinery (often state-subsidized), had resulted in reduced wage-labour dependence for farming households. They empathized with younger laborers who did not elect to labour in their home village because of the nature of agricultural work and their lack of familiarity with it. A nonmigrant labourer explained,

> "Youngsters prefer to either work as seasonal day laborers in urban areas or as daily-wage laborers here. Doing so is more remunerating compared to *Saldari*. A *Saldar*'s work is backbreaking. Also, they are unfamiliar with *Saldari* because parents want to support their children to stay in school for as long as possible instead of making them labour in the fields." (personal communication, July 30, 2015)

Farmer-labour tensions had emerged in an agrarian context where increased mechanization in agriculture had reduced labour dependence and transformed a wage-labour regime into one based on piece-rate. Lower-caste agricultural workers, unlike landed farmers, preferred piece-rate contracts because it offered them relative autonomy from farmer supervision and in setting work rhythms (Ramachandran, 1990). The methods of employing laborers had also shifted. A farmer explained,

> "Negotiations with laborers start with the laborers asking us to explain the expected work. Earlier, we were never asked to spell out the actual work. If the work sounds difficult, laborers make excuses like unavailability or sickness. Younger laborers are irresponsible with money. A young labourer would borrow money from his parents to travel to the city to work on construction projects, earn a paltry sum, and spend it all on clothing and accessories. What is the point? A month in advance of the yearly (Hindu) festivities, *Saldars* would plead with us for work. These days, laborers bargain for higher wages even when we come to their doorstep to hire them. When they are hired, we must make sure they are happy, so they don't leave work halfway through." (personal communication, October 27, 2015)

Returnees framed these changes in terms of increased awareness of their rights and constitutional anti-discrimination protections. A migrant labourer explained,

> "Farmers thought nothing of laborers – they would mistreat us because we were poor and of lower castes. Now laborers do not care if farmers do not hire us – we can always migrate. Farmers had complete control over our labour. We would wake up early and work until 10 PM. That does not happen now." (personal communication, July 25, 2015)

The emergent culture, accompanied by emotions of self-confidence and pride, was one beseeching a vernacular order of equality based on laborers' refusal to be exploited, increased negotiation on labour and wages, and increased awareness of and willingness to employ anti-discrimination laws. But were all laborers part of this oppositional, emergent culture? Where does the development state stand?

Migration produced difference between returnees and nonmigrant laborers. A key area of contention was the laborers' willingness to work, their terms of negotiation with farmers, and their appearances. A farmer explained,

> "Nonmigrant laborers still work for us. They are happier in the village, living and working with their families, and are satisfied with the wages. Returnees are greedy and inquisitive. When we seek to hire them, they enquire about the nature and amount of work; they while away their time playing cards in the village square!" (personal communication, August 30, 2015)

Another added,

> "Returnees wear better clothes and are more informed. They rarely work for us. Nonmigrants dress and talk like villagers should!" (Personal interview, October 26, 2015.)

Farmers suggested that, unlike nonmigrant laborers, returnees had limited their work hours to create rest and recreation time. For farmers, the distinction was not merely about the

production of new labour subjectivities but a more extensive social crisis. A farmer explained,

> "The [returnee] youth act like city goons and tough men; some are brash and blunt in their conversations with us – this is detrimental to village peace." (personal communication, October 30, 2015)

The production of the returnee labour subjectivity was splitting laborers into those who met farmers' expectations of conformity to behaviour in a context of social hierarchies, i.e., constitutive of the residual culture saturated by emotions of humiliation and shame, and those who were actively working against these structures and expectations, propelled, at least in part, by emotions of self-confidence and pride.

Farmers blamed state-sponsored food-based entitlement programs for exacerbating the kinds of tensions I have highlighted in this section. A farmer explained,

> "Because they have food now, laborers either refuse to work for us or demand unreasonable wages, and they do not buy food grains from us." (personal communication, July 18, 2015)

Returnees contested farmers' characterization of the entitlement programs in several ways. A returnee labourer explained,

> "Farmers want the entitlement program scrapped so laborers can be forced to become dependent on them for work, but that will not happen. Babasaheb [Ambedkar] made provisions for the oppressed in the constitution. He made everyone equal – men and women." (personal communication, July 26, 2015)

The invocation of the late author of India's constitution, a national-historical *Dalit* icon, and a native of eastern Maharashtra, "Babasaheb" Bhimrao Ambedkar, who enabled many of the constitutional protections of lower castes (Omvedt, 1994/2011), was a means to use the

language of legality and permanence to frame entitlements that the farmers in Yavatmal could attack but could do little about. Yet, there are limits to this counter-hegemony.

Limits of cultural change

The limits of labour politics outlined here are the limits of cultural politics lacking the potential that revolutionary change may have. A farmer explained,

> "Returnees dress like city folks. They act like city folks, but this lasts for as long as they have savings. After that, they are back to their old village labourer selves." (personal communication, July 17, 2015)

Farmers were aware of the limits of entitlement programs to transform labour lives and livelihoods. Subsidized education cannot ensure that school students who lived in poverty and whose lives were disrupted continuously by seasonal migration could earn a diploma that could create meaningful employment prospects in the labour market. A farmer explained,

> "Laborers support their children up to high school. Most fail to get a high school diploma. So, they return to the fields to work for us. A few graduates seek a college education in urban areas. There is not a huge labour shortage." (personal communication, July 19, 2015)

I argue that it is crucial to identify the depth and nature of social transformations by returnees. Still, it is equally essential not to naively celebrate these efforts to introduce a new culture without attending to its limits. I do not intend to confuse *Dalit* assertion with a summary swapping of dominant and dominated caste groups and social locations. However, I recognize that the dominant culture and ideology that reproduced a 'common sense' devoid of any semblance of equality and assumed exploitation and abuse for granted was largely in a vestigial state in rural Yavatmal, though, by no means eliminated.

Conclusion

This paper focused on seasonal labour migration in rural western India to explain how migrant returnees had sought to reconstitute historical and hierarchical social relations in their home villages. Drawing on Raymond Williams' theorization and my long-term research, I demonstrated that for the returnees, a vital element of social and cultural change in their home communities was their ability to upend and replace residual culture, based on expectations of continued exploitation and performative hierarchy, with an emergent one. I claim, drawing on the theorization of humiliation, that the mechanics of counter-hegemony in Yavatmal included a struggle for vernacular equality to eliminate caste-based practices of humiliation, including labour exploitation. The emotions of self-confidence and pride shaped the emergent culture, while the emotions of humiliation and shame accompanied the residual culture. Second, I demonstrated the unwitting embroilment of the Indian state in the cultural change that has only facilitated and emboldened the emergent culture. Lastly, I showed that the attempts by the returnees to reconstitute social relations in their home communities were undercut by the limits of cultural politics, in its inability to usher in material changes that entail the redistribution of resources and substantive political power.

Cultures are hierarchically ranked in relations of dominance and subordination along a 'cultural power' scale. Subordinate cultures sometimes appropriate material resources from a domain and symbolically alter them to another (Clarke et al., 1976). An area of debate in cultural theory continues to be about the tensions between elite and popular culture and the scope for active resistance in the process of consumption. A theoretically reconstituted cultural geography's central task is tracing the material circumstances that enable such transformations (Jackson, 1989). In this article, I have explained contestations around honour/humiliation and striving for relative equality as the grounds for social and cultural transformation in caste-based relations.

Caste-based mobilization in the Indian society from the 1980s has grown as a 'silent revolution' (Jaffrelot, 2003). Growing politicization of the "backwards" and increased *Dalit* assertion has transformed the grammar of Indian socio-political life (Pai, 2002). Yet, caste inequalities have persisted and, in some cases, sharpened. Caste matters even beyond the village and its ritual life and agrarian economy. Migrants who work in urban businesses also remain tied to their caste. Members of the upper castes leverage their status in the cities and find community among fellow caste members. They often practice endogamy and form caste-homogeneous associations and business cartels (Iyer et al., 2013). The salience of caste makes it essential to understand how in regional contexts such as in Yavatmal, the institution has been stretched, questioned, and has been in the process of transformation by the historically marginalized. Note that the achievement of vernacular equality means that caste was no longer a doxa and was being increasingly viewed as an imposed and not taken-for-granted orthodoxy.

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