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Specifying citizenship: subaltern politics of rights and justice in contemporary India

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This article uses the lens of development discourse to shed light on subaltern politics of citizenship and rights claims in contemporary India. It argues that battles for development entitlements allow subaltern subjects to meaningfully inhabit and simultaneously alter the contours of legal citizenship, which they have been formally granted by the Indian constitution, but, in effect, denied. Subaltern claims on citizenship, articulated from a position of subordination and difference, not equality, and through specific idioms, contest and radically transform the generic and universal slot of personhood that liberalism provides – one that is rational, secular, sovereign and individualistic. Their citizenship claims draw upon multiple discourses, extending well beyond the law, mixing morality and materiality, ethics and politics, and traditional and bureaucratic languages of power, and thereby muddy the very distinctions on which modern citizenship rests. Subaltern struggles over development, thus, force us to reconsider hardened, normative ideas of legal citizenship and to widen the scope through which we look at and think about rights claims, justice, personhood and, indeed, the state in the neoliberal era.

Keywords: citizenship; development; India; rights; subaltern

Cet article s'appuie sur le discours sur le développement pour analyser les politiques subalternes sur la citoyenneté et de revendications de droits dans l'Inde contemporaine. Les luttes pour des droits au développement permettent aux sujets subalternes d'habiter de manière significative, et dans le même temps d'altérer les contours de la citoyenneté légale, qui leur a été attribué par la constitution indienne, mais leur est de fait déniée. Les revendications subalternes de citoyenneté, formulées à partir d'une position de subordination et de différence, et non d'égalité, et par des langages particuliers, remettent en cause et transforment radicalement la vision générique et universelle de la personne fournie par le libéralisme, une personne rationnelle, laïque, souveraine et individualiste. Leurs revendications de citoyenneté s'appuient sur une multiplicité de discours allant bien au-delà de la loi, et mêlant moralité et matérialité, éthique et politique, des langages de pouvoir tant traditionnels que bureaucratiques, rendant par là même floues les distinctions sur lesquelles repose la citoyenneté moderne. Les luttes subalternes sur le développement nous obligent donc à reconsidérer les idées normatives et figées quant à la citoyenneté légale, et à élargir notre vision et notre pensée sur les revendications de droits, la justice, la personne, et de fait, sur l'état à l'ère néolibérale.

Mots clés: citoyenneté; développement; droits; Inde; subalternes

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I

The administrative complex of the city of Begumpur is situated near its verdant military cantonment area. This cluster of relatively tall buildings stands in contrast to and apart from the low-lying sprawl of Begumpur, which is one of eastern Uttar Pradesh's older cities and religious centers.¹ As I rode a cycle-rickshaw on a late March morning in 1999, on my way to meet Vishnu Pandit, a government official, I marveled, yet again, at the palimpsest-like appearance of the City. Here different physical landscapes, eras and worldviews jostled and interpenetrated, exemplifying, in my opinion, the messiness of modernity.² My journey that morning began amidst a row of modern, boxy flats, bordering a university campus, where I was renting a room as a 'paying-guest'. It wound through densely populated areas with single-level homes called *havelis* that dated back at least a century, newer two- or three-storey homes, and famous mosques and temples that claimed medieval, if not ancient, origins and were absolutely central to the life of Begumpur's denizens. The *havelis* gave way to colonial-era military bungalows and barracks as we entered the cantonment. The narrow, winding lanes of the older part of the City broadened, as if straitjacketed into predictability. I could see my high-rise destination from afar. Upon reaching, I entered one of the buildings and took the stairs to Pandit's fourth-floor office.

Vishnu Pandit was the District Development Officer or DDO of Begumpur, a mid-level official in the local administration. A district in India is made up of several 'blocks', which, in turn, consist of approximately 100 villages each. A DDO works with Block Development Officers, or BDOs, below him and a Chief Development Officer above him to implement development programs. I had interviewed some of the men – there were only men – who occupied these key positions about their perspectives on development, gender issues, and the Mahila Samakhya program, a state-initiated rural women's empowerment project, on which I was conducting research.³ Vishnu Pandit was my last interviewee in Begumpur.

I was ushered into Pandit's office at the sound of a bell, and asked, by a male clerical assistant, to take a seat. The office space, like that of most government functionaries I had previously met, was 'standard': the room was dominated by a large desk and several audience chairs, one of which I occupied. The white walls were lined with grey metal cupboards with inventory markings that identified them as government property. Pandit, a graying, bespectacled man, was seated at his desk as he looked over some files. The desk seemed to engulf and overwhelm him; I assumed that Pandit was small-statured. After a short while, he looked up and acknowledged my presence. We had barely exchanged greetings when he rang a bell and asked his assistant, who appeared instantly, to bring tea for us. Pandit now settled into our meeting and offered me two thick reports bound in pink paper. These were the reports about development indicators and projects in Begumpur that I had requested when I had spoken with him over the phone the day before. As I flipped through these documents, Pandit described the development status of his area and the main poverty alleviation programs in operation. He told me that although Begumpur was slightly better off in terms of development indicators when compared with surrounding areas, anti-poverty development programs had generally failed in the district. He sounded bored and a bit frustrated, as though tired of repeating the same story over and over.

This was, indeed, a story I had heard before: that development-as-poverty alleviation had failed, and it could not but fail, was a sentiment shared by many government representatives I interviewed. One of Vishnu Pandit's underlings, Sukhdev Singh, the BDO of Nizabad block, for example, had told me a few months earlier that even though he had implemented two income-generating programs for poor women in his block, neither

succeeded. His office had provided women training in midwifery and pickling with the idea that these skills would lead to micro-enterprises or other forms of income generation. Both programs, however, did not have the desired outcomes because the women, in Singh's words, had not acted on the opportunity handed to them on a platter by the government. 'It is [the women's] responsibility to do the work and not the government's responsibility,' Singh complained. 'But they are not doing anything. That is the reason for failure.' Poor women, he argued, needed awareness raising so that 'they can move ahead on their own'; without state support, I presumed. Sukhdev Singh's colleague, Ram Kumar, the BDO of the neighboring Seelampur block, echoed this thinking, blaming the poor for their continued poverty despite good efforts on the part of the government. 'An ideal village is one that can make good use of the various development facilities provided for it,' he told me on one of the several occasions when we met. 'I buy vegetables and spices and bring them home to my wife. If I have a good housewife, she will make optimum use of these ingredients and prepare a delicious meal for me,' Kumar elaborated, using an obviously gendered analogy to explain the hierarchical positions and roles of masculinist government and feminized subaltern actors on the development stage. Poor, low-caste people, however, suggested Kumar, unlike good housewives, did not know how to make proper use of the unquestionably good programs provided for them. The problem, in his narrative, lay not with the nature of development ingredients or if and how they were made available and to whom; development failed because its responsibility fell into the wrong hands. 'No [development] happens now because of [the] reservation [policy],' Kumar openly declared. The reservation policy of the Indian government ensures a certain proportion of seats for women and lower-caste individuals in local legislative bodies.⁴ Kumar clearly implied that this quota system had resulted in the election of unprepared and incompetent people to positions of power, who did not have the skill to handle development and who, therefore, stymied progress.

These oft-repeated official stories about arrested development intrigued me. I prodded Vishnu Pandit to elaborate why development programs targeted at the poorest failed and what could be done to change that. He stated, matter-of-factly,

Village people should be taught about *duty*. Everyone thinks that the *sarkar* [government]⁵ will do things for them. This attitude ... has negative results. They forget that they are responsible for their own development – it is really about self development. For example, they produce five kids and then expect the government to take care of them. That is not right! You have produced them and you cannot leave it up to the government to bring them up. Giving free things to people is not good – it does not have positive results. We need to change this

II

The idea that poor people are responsible for their own misery and deprivation ignores structural inequalities and proffers that those who are poor lack the necessary skill, drive, and lift-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps attitude necessary for successful living in the contemporary world. Rather than work hard to take care of their own needs and cultivate appropriate awareness, this logic goes, the poor learn to become dependent on state charity. Indeed, welfare-oriented, anti-poverty development programs, that give 'handouts' to the poor, encourage free-ridership. This is precisely why welfare initiatives must be dismantled because it corrupts the mentality and morality of the poor, who believe that it is the state's duty to develop them rather than their duty to improve themselves. What the poor need are not handouts but moral lessons in fertility control, responsibility

and self-reliance; only then can they participate in, and benefit from, development as empowered and worthy rights-bearing citizens. This, in short, is the standard official story about development that I heard during my fieldwork in India.

The parallels between what I have outlined above and neoliberal dogma are obvious.⁶ It is not coincidental, for instance, that former US president Bill Clinton also described the 'end of welfare' as a shift from 'dependence to empowerment' (2006). Welfare programs are considered bad in the neoliberal imaginary for two main reasons: first, they distort free-market functioning and expand state expenditure and intervention, and second, they warp ideal sovereign individualism by making people reliant on the state rather than on themselves and the market. Neoliberalism, which builds on the liberal idea of freedom and alters economic, political, and social practices to preserve the only trinity of the free individual, free market, and free trade, defines ideal sovereign citizenship in terms of self-reliant and empowered entrepreneurialism enacted in the market arena (Harvey 2005).⁷

How do subalterns talk back to the official casting of their subjectivities as improper? How do they recast themselves as deserving citizens, putting forth notions of justice, belonging and rights that trespass and transform liberal boundaries? In this article I focus on these questions. The subalterns I write about are rural, landless, low-caste Dalit⁸ peasants, primarily women, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, with whom I interacted as part of my research project on the empowerment goals, workings and effects of the Mahila Samakhya program. The lens through which I access subaltern citizenship and rights claims is that of development. I do so because development is one of the key languages of modernity through which the discourses of citizenship, rights-as-entitlements and indeed 'the state' arrive at subaltern doorsteps; they are then confronted and redefined.⁹ I put official narratives about development, with which I began this article, in conversation with subaltern stories. Like their elite counterparts, the marginalized subjects I interacted with largely talked about development in terms of its lack and failure, but blamed moral corruption among the powerful, both state and nonstate actors, for it. A few also spoke about those rare occasions when they actually succeeded in obtaining development resources, highlighting all the obstacles that the powerful threw in their way and how they navigated these roadblocks. In either case, they positioned themselves as deserving and moral agents, not passive dependents, who were fighting the just fight against the powerful for their rights, not charity. Their stories about development voice a powerful critique of socioeconomic inequalities and domination and articulate an innovative politics of citizenship.

My argument, stated briefly, is that battles for development allow subaltern subjects to meaningfully inhabit and simultaneously alter the contours of legal citizenship, which they have been formally granted by the Indian constitution, but, in effect, denied. Subaltern claims on citizenship, articulated from a position of subordination and difference, not equality, and through specific idioms, contest and radically transform the generic and universal slot of personhood that liberalism provides – one that is rational, secular, sovereign and individualistic. Their citizenship claims draw upon multiple discourses, extending well beyond the law, mixing morality and materiality, ethics and politics, and traditional and bureaucratic languages of power, and thereby muddy the very distinctions on which modern citizenship rests. Subaltern struggles over development, thus, force us to reconsider hardened, normative ideas of legal citizenship and to widen the scope through which we look at and think about rights claims, justice, personhood and, indeed, the state in the neoliberal era.

I draw upon the work of scholars who, writing about modernity, democracy and justice-based politics, critically scrutinize the presumed universalism, individualism, and

equality of liberal citizenship (for example, Hall and Held 1990, Mouffe 1992). My primary theoretical building blocks in this article come from the Subaltern Studies collective, which opened up vital spaces for studying subaltern politics, consciousness and history making in India as a counter to elite nationalist historiography, and to question the universal categories and teleology of Western modernity and history (Guha 1983, Chakrabarty 2002, Chatterjee 2004).

Arguing that subaltern and elite domains of politics are relatively autonomous, Ranajit Guha initiated the task of undoing the erasure of Indian subalterns as subjects of history and insurgency during colonialism (1983). He firmly situated subaltern peasants as political actors, highlighting their subversive consciousness and practices in struggles against domination and for justice. Domination in colonial India, he suggested, was complex: the 'hitherto discrete powers of the landlord, the moneylender and the official came to form, under colonial rule, a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant' (1983, p. 8). This oppressive triad exerted power and enacted violence in ways that were simultaneously rational/colonial/statist and symbolic/feudalist/traditional (though not archaic). These muddled languages and forms of power, I argue, continue into the present, making challenges to them equally complex.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) extends Guha's arguments about the dualistic natures of both elite domination and subaltern rebellion under colonialism, which are at once secular (formal) and religious (symbolic), to challenge and 'provincialize' (2000) the universal narrative of European modernity and history. In India, Chakrabarty avers, 'colonial modernity created a domain of the political that was heteroglossic in its idioms and irreducibly plural in its structure' (2002, p. 13). Subaltern Indians today, who technically have democratic rights, continue to bring to this political realm 'their own ideas of well-being, justice, gods, spirits, religion, magic and so on' (2002, pp. xix–xx), which contest modern understandings of politics, law and citizenship. These generic languages of law and citizenship, Chakrabarty contends, are incapable of speaking to either the 'radical alterity of the other' (2002, p. 112) or her particular experience of oppression and injustice. Subaltern politics of justice thus implicitly requires them to narrativize their particularity and oppression and claim affective belonging in terms other than the law. I build on these insights to illustrate the irreducibly plural genealogies and particular nature of subaltern politics and citizenship claims that cannot be subsumed under modern liberal categories. However, I also show that the law and cultural 'narratives' of belonging and personhood are not as distinct as Chakrabarty seems to suggest;¹⁰ the law, after all, is itself a particular cultural narrative, albeit one that has been universalized. Rather than positioning subaltern articulations of citizenship as an alternative discourse, separate from the law, I argue that it calls upon, alters and exceeds legal notions. I highlight the mixed idioms, both statist and social, legal and moral, that subaltern women use to contest their subordination, to demand accountability and justice from the powerful, and to redefine and particularize legal conceptions of rights and citizenship.

Partha Chatterjee's (2004) notion of political society also extends Guha's idea of autonomous domains of elite and subaltern politics. Chatterjee uses the term political society to denote underprivileged groups who do not fit the small, elite domain of civil society citizens and are constituted as 'target populations' by governmental regimes. Whereas citizens work through formal state institutions and use the law to fight for their *rights*, political society denizens sit on the fence of legality (often crossing over into the illegal domain) and struggle for *entitlements* through mobilizing the very administrative categories that deny them the identity of rights-bearing citizen. Chatterjee's analysis of political society battles provides a powerful starting point for my work, as will be obvious,

although I widen his urban political society frame to include and understand rural peasants', primarily subaltern women's, struggles. Their politics is not illegal as much as 'extra-legal' in that it mixes both formal civic/legal discourses and religico-moral languages to express notions of legitimate (and deserving) belonging and justice. Indeed, justice and rights talk (Merry 2003) do not get much play in Chatterjee's thesis, given that he contrasts rights and entitlements, and sees the latter as the main basis of political society mobilizations. My work, however, shows that entitlements and rights are inseparably intertwined in the subaltern vision of justice.

The centerpiece of my analysis of subaltern political actions and imaginations is the story of Shyama, a middle-aged, landless Dalit widow from Seelampur district. I pull in other ethnographic vignettes as I proceed, to illustrate how marginalized actors use the lens of development to articulate a rights- and justice-based politics of citizenship that problematizes and opens up Enlightenment definitions of these categories. I highlight subaltern women's narratives and struggles, in particular, as a way of talking back to the manner in which they have been written out of the story of liberalizing India. This current narrative is no different from earlier versions of nationalist historiography of colonial India in that it focuses on the elite and middle classes, not the subaltern, as the leaders of the new 'powerhouse' nation and makers of history. The story of liberalizing India, however, is a tale of growing income and social gaps, and increasingly tenuous lives of the have-nots. The struggles for survival and justice of lower-caste landless peasants, the subaltern I write about, are, at once, more widespread and more invisibilized. If, as Chakrabarty rightly contends, 'the peasant is a figure of the past', in classic Marxist history (and not there alone), who 'must mutate ... in order to emerge, eventually, as citizen-subject of modern democracies' (2002, p. 11), the female peasant is doubly burdened and erased, as an actor, by the past and the present. She is seen as neither a subject of history, nor politics (Spivak 1988a, 1988b) but only as a passive and ignorable object, who has "needs" and "problems," but few if any "choices" or the freedom to act' (Mohanty 1991, p. 64). What kinds of citizen-subject spaces do Dalit female peasants create today, how do they inhabit and recode these spaces of struggle, and what kinds of political languages do they speak? This is my attempt to complicate the new round of elitist history making in India and keep subaltern women at the center of it.

III

Shyama was working for the Mahila Samakhya program as a field-level functionary when we met. It was a Saturday in late September 1998 and the post-monsoon heat was oppressive. Shyama, a few other program staff members, and I had spent the entire morning sitting in a single-room, concrete office in the Seelampur area, discussing local development and gender issues. We were hot and hungry. After eating some fresh *rotis* [wheat bread] with sugar, everyone, except Shyama and I, departed. The two of us decided to sit in a nearby mango orchard and talked about her life and the Mahila Samakhya program.

Shyama, a dark, petite, middle-aged Dalit woman with a pock-marked face and a gentle disposition, was dressed in a red and white sari that day, draped in the 'modern' style that distinguished her from other village women in the area, and wore no *bindi*, the traditional Hindu marker of marriage. Her husband had passed away 18 years ago, soon after their twin boys were born. She intimately understood a widow's life of deprivation, vulnerability and 'unbelonging': she was forbidden from returning to her natal family and was considered too inauspicious to continue living in her in-laws' home. They turned her out for bringing death on to their only son and breadwinner. Shyama camped outside her

married home with her twins, but refused to leave. She worked on other people's farms, cut grass and sold it as cattle fodder and, at times, begged. She ignored the sneers of her community and the beatings of her mother-in-law, cooked in borrowed utensils, and survived. Her village chief or *pradhan*, an upper-caste Brahmin man she called 'Dubeyji', probably took pity on her and inducted her into a sewing program for women. This training required some literacy background, and since Shyama was the only literate woman in the Dalit hamlet of her village – she had completed fifth grade – she was chosen.

A few years later, in 1991, when Mahila Samakhya program personnel came to her village looking to initiate a women's collective and to recruit field-level staff members, Dubeyji recommended Shyama's name. 'Mahila Samakhya changed my whole life,' Shyama stated with pride. She used the very modest 'honorarium' she got for her program activities to pay off her in-laws' debts to upper-caste landlords, to marry off her sister-in-law, and to educate her sons and herself (she finished high school). She began working her way back into her marital home.

Through her work in Mahila Samakhya, Shyama learned about a state-subsidized housing scheme for poor, lower-caste rural people.¹¹ Under this program, eligible candidates receive funds from the government, in two cash installments, for labor and materials needed for building a *pucca* or brick house. Shyama needed her village headman's approval for accessing this scheme and Dubeyji agreed to help. But once the construction of her house began, he backtracked. 'He became jealous,' Shyama said to me. 'He wanted to keep some of the funds, intended for my house, for himself. So he only gave me half the materials – some very bad quality bricks and stones for the roof, [and] no beams. And later he had the construction stopped.' Dubeyji wanted Shyama to pay Rs. 1000 to him in addition to signing over her second housing installment check; otherwise, he warned, her house would remain incomplete.

Shyama spoke with her senior colleagues at Mahila Samakhya and together they confronted Dubeyji. To be yelled at publicly by a group of women incensed Dubeyji and he threatened to have Shyama killed. But instead of cowering, Shyama retorted, 'Panditji', referring to his Brahmin caste, 'dying at your hands will release me from this and future lives'. According to Hindu belief, being killed by a high-caste Brahmin frees a person from the cycles of rebirth. Shyama welcomed this release.

Despite the imminent threat of violence – Dubeyji was a powerful man, well connected with the political, economic, and state elite in the area – Shyama did not give up her quest for a *pucca* house. A brick house in rural India, as Guha (1983, p. 69) discusses, is an important status symbol, coveted by those in subordinate positions, who do not normally have access to such markers of authority. Shyama, moreover, needed a place to live and saw this *pucca* house, in addition to her prestigious job with Mahila Samakhya, as a means to stake further claim as a member of her husband's family and renegotiate family ties. She needed to complete this house, not only for its material benefit but also for its symbolic, social and kin implications.¹²

Shyama approached the chief of a neighboring village, an upper-caste (Thakur) man who was a friend of Dubeyji's, told him of her problem and asked for his advice. He commended her courage in challenging upper-caste authority: 'You are a very brave woman.' He also intervened on her behalf by reminding Dubeyji that it was election time and that if Shyama's house did not get built Dubeyji would lose all Dalit votes in the village; he needed those to maintain his position as headman. Sure enough, Shyama's house was completed soon after. As she explained,

The *pradhan* of my village wanted me to remain obligated and servile And I had dared to answer him back. But I felt that he had only given me my *haq* [right] [and] nothing from his own pocket. That [house] was my right. I had received the appropriate information from Mahila Samakhya and I had questioned [Dubeyji], which he did not like There is another government house in my village that never got completed. I spoke out [and] that is why things got done.

IV

Shyama's fight for a government-subsidized house was simultaneously economic, political and symbolic. She struggled at multiple fronts: against hardened kinship and gender ideologies that marginalize widows socially and economically; against entrenched caste and class domination that tries, often violently, to keep poor Dalits in their place; and against a corrupt political-economic system of development that made it almost impossible for the poor and disenfranchised to know about and access entitlements. Her story was emblematic of how multiple systems of domination, such as class, gender, and caste, mutually shape and reinforce each other to oppress subaltern women, and how these intersections, in turn, inform women's strategies of resistance.

Shyama, as a landless Dalit woman living under the poverty line, was at the bottom of the local social hierarchy and was expected to unquestioningly accept her lowly status and remain servile. In the dominant statist narrative, she was neither a subject, nor agent, nor citizen. And yet, Shyama defied this normative representation of who she was, recoding rights and citizenship in the process. Officials, like Vishnu Pandit and Sukhdev Singh, introduced earlier, essentially saw subaltern women as passive, ignorant, non-agents who hamper development. At times, the Mahila Samakhya program also represented poor, rural women in such stereotypical ways (Sharma 2008). A program document put out by the Government of India, for instance, states that: '[Women] are socially and physically oppressed. They do not have access to information beyond their immediate present [T]hey relate to Government's schemes and programmes as passive recipients. They do not have any information about their rights' (1988, p. 2). Did Shyama fit this image?

She readily admitted that before she began working with Mahila Samakhya, she had been ignorant about the government housing program she later accessed. Her ignorance, as I will illustrate below, is not passive unawareness but one that is actively cultivated by the powerful: the supposed beneficiaries of government entitlement programs are willfully *kept* ignorant by venal state officials and locally powerful people who divert resources meant for the poor toward themselves. Thus, there was a history to why Shyama did not know about the housing program. Furthermore, she did not see her lack of information as a mark of her passivity; indeed, what she emphasized in her story was her agency in surviving against all odds. Shyama took credit for strategically using information she was given and successfully negotiating with authoritative figures to demand her *haq*, her right, to development resources. Here was an enactment of the kind of empowered citizenship, combining knowledge, practical cunning (Scott 1998) or ingenuity and a defiant attitude, that Mahila Samakhya strives to instigate and spread among subaltern women.

Shyama's timing was perfect – that local elections were around the corner probably worked in her favor. But in Shyama's retelling, timing was only incidental. There was, after all, another government house in her village which remained incomplete despite elections. Shyama was the agent in her story. She not only took credit for her success, but also refused to see the house as an act of charity on the part of the village chief or the state. Rather, the house was an entitlement, which Shyama *rightfully* demanded as a cast-out, yet deserving citizen. Shyama's story can be read as an affirmation of Mahila Samakhya's

empowerment efforts, but it can also be read as a challenge to the anti-welfarist logic that the program sometimes seems to endorse (Sharma 2008). Unlike welfare programs that are meant to distribute material benefits to those who qualify, Mahila Samakhya is not 'involved in the delivery of services and resources' (Government of India 1997, p. 9). And yet Shyama did not view these resources as handouts, equating them, instead, with empowerment. In so doing, she talked back to neoliberal ideologies that colored the narratives of state officials like Pandit, Singh, and Kumar. Neoliberalism counterposes welfare entitlements and empowerment. The standard official narrative, with which I began this article, avers that welfare entitlements are inherently disempowering and dependency causing, and that the goal of programs targeted at the (undeserving) poor should be self-reliance, self-development, and moral uplift. In contrast, Shyama conjoined entitlements and empowerment, demonstrating that for those who subsist and struggle on the edges of society the latter is meaningless without the former. Moreover, for marginalized subjects, like Shyama, material entitlements and rights are indistinguishable. Therefore, political society struggles for development and basic needs (Chatterjee 2004), while different from the modalities and goals of civil society politics, *are* rights-based battles, where development serves as an important ground on which rights talk (Merry 2003) and citizenship identities and claims are elaborated by the underprivileged.¹³

What does Shyama's story tell us about subaltern *forms* and *means* of struggle against domination? Or, to use James Scott's (1985) words, what weapons do the weak use against oppression and how? Accessing state-provided development resources as entitlements-cum-rights and empowering herself, for Shyama, meant overcoming various obstacles and outwitting local power networks. These networks, overdetermined by caste, class and gender, include state and nonstate actors, and use both legal and traditional means of exerting authority. By traditional, I do not mean archaic or unchanging, but modern instantiations of practices of domination that predate colonialism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), elaborating on the work of Ranajit Guha, contends, the political sphere for subaltern peasants, under colonialism, was shaped by two forms of power: the first was rational, legal domination that lay at the heart of the modern state, and the second was feudal forms of authority and violence enacted both physically and symbolically, and often justified by *dharma* or religion (pp. 10–12). Subaltern actors continue to face an interwoven power politics today, where legal-rational authority is often impossible to separate from the traditional-religious kind; and the people embodying and enacting these forms of domination are often indistinguishable. Consider the Hindi word *sarkar*, for instance. This word is used by subaltern actors to refer to the state or government, but also to powerful people, more generally, who may or may not be part of the formal state apparatus. If, in the subaltern imaginary, authority does not flow from the state alone, and *sarkar* is a nexus of power that transcends formal state structures and dominates in both rational and other social ways, then this nexus cannot be challenged by legal and bureaucratic means alone.

Shyama's daring defiance of authority, in order to access her rights, depended upon her intimate knowledge of local power networks, electoral politics, caste ideologies, bureaucratic practices, and other social means of opposition. She used multiple languages with which to confront, appeal and subvert. Her insurgent practices (Guha 1983) were at once informed by the law, religion, politics, and kinship. She deployed the legal language of rights – the house was unequivocally her *haq* and not an act of charity on the part of either the state or her village headman – and she used technical bureaucratic procedures, such as applications, to access this entitlement. Her right, the house, transcended its legal significance though, and served as a symbolic means for negotiating subordinate status and

kinship relations. In addition to the idiom of rights, Shyama also deployed shaming as a key social and moral technique of protest. She iterated Dubeyji's superior status, referring to him by his honorific caste title, 'Panditji', only to defy his orders and to call attention to his unethical practices. Shyama asked other figures of authority (from the Mahila Samakhya program and the neighboring village) to intervene on her behalf, thereby openly humiliating Dubeyji; he clearly saw it as shaming, given the fact that he threatened to kill her for making his transgressions public and daring to upend caste and gender hierarchies. She exhorted Dubeyji to come through on his threat and release her from rebirth and oppression in future lives, poignantly and ironically using Hindu beliefs to put an end to his immoral domination and access her government-ensured right.

I witnessed these mixed languages and techniques of subaltern fights for entitlements and rights on several occasions. For instance, a group of landless Dalit women in the village of Nimani in Seelampur district, who were participating in the Mahila Samakhya program, subversively used a World Bank-led visit to demand development resources from government officials.¹⁴ A World Bank visit to a village in India is a rare, but significant occasion, in that it offers villagers a chance to meet and sometimes confront state representatives and to do so in front of powerful international development actors. Nimani was a village which most local development functionaries, including the BDO, Ram Kumar (whom I introduced earlier in the article), had not visited; until the World Bank decided to come, that is. Ram Kumar showed up early on the day of the planned visit and instructed his staff on how to clean and prepare the village for display. In addition, he ordered the female residents of Nimani who, as participants of Mahila Samakhya, were the stars of the show, to not bring up any failed development projects in front of the visitors. These women had been agitating for development facilities for a while, but their efforts had run aground as a result of lack of support or active resistance from the BDO's office. Now Ram Kumar wanted them to hide his ineptitude and callousness. Nimani women, however, overrode his orders and embarrassed him publicly by directly demanding development resources from his boss, the Chief Development Officer (CDO), who was present in their midst for the World Bank visit. Using the foreign visitors as witnesses, they submitted to the CDO two copies of a formal written application for basic needs such as housing, water, and a road, for which they had been struggling in vain. They asked him to write 'received' and sign one copy of the application, which they kept for their records. Interestingly, the women addressed the CDO as *mai-baap* or mother-father, distinguishing him from the uncaring BDO, Ram Kumar, and requested that he ensure their basic needs. They positioned themselves as knowledgeable and deserving citizens, who had been short-changed by what they perceived as a corrupt local administration and who deserved government resources as their right; this was a direct challenge to official caricatures of their identities as unaware, irresponsible, and immoral. Furthermore, on the one hand they used standard bureaucratic mechanisms, such as applications, to petition for rights. On the other hand, however, they used the older idiom of *mai-baap* and the parental duty it invoked, to hold officials accountable. *Mai-baap* referenced a different time and moral economy where just rulers, like good parents, were ethically bound to care for their wards.

These subaltern women's positioning of the state as a caretaker and direct provider of material benefits as rights for the disenfranchised was in direct contrast to how some officials, such as Vivek Rai in New Delhi, saw the state. Castigating the '*mai-baap* syndrome' and 'dole system' that the populist welfare state had fostered, Rai argued that the ideal role of the state was as 'a catalyst, a facilitator' of development and not provider; development, he argued, was the duty of civil society and communities. Nimani's female residents contested such neoliberal renditions of normative state and citizen identities and

roles by positioning themselves as informed *yet* victimized citizens-cum-wards of an ideal parental and caring moral state. Nimani's women, like Shyama, spoke a particular language of justice and belonging, as subjects who had been wronged in specific ways and whose oppression could not be addressed in statist legal terms alone. Law, as Chakrabarty suggests, 'can never address the victim . . . in her own language' (2002, p. 111); it has to be informed by different cultural narratives. In addition to formal, bureaucratic languages, the women in Nimani had to call upon other idioms, including kinship and moral duty, to claim personhood, rights, justice and citizenship *as* marginalized others. It is these radically particular (Chakrabarty 2002) moral articulations that I elaborate on in the next section, before concluding this article.

V

Shyama succeeded in getting her house, but Nimani women were unable to obtain the resources they had fought for. Both these stories brought up the issue of corruption, which was a constant lament among the have-nots. Whereas officials blamed the poor for their lack of development, subaltern actors reversed this narrative and alleged that development did not happen or was nearly impossible to access because of what they considered as widespread corruption among local administrators *and* powerful people in their own villages; corruption, then, was not limited to the state but was a larger social phenomenon of growing immorality. Corruption talk implicitly functioned as rights talk and citizenship talk in that it indexed the wrongs done to the disenfranchised and why they needed to be set right.¹⁵ These wrongs, moreover, were not simply 'legal' but overdetermined by various histories, hierarchies, moral worldviews and practices. Justice required more than formal legal intervention.

One common criticism about corruption that I heard from many Dalit women and men in the region was that state functionaries did not give them information about programs meant for them because they wanted to appropriate and misuse the program funds for personal ends; and if the subaltern found out about these programs from other sources, as Shyama did, from Mahila Samakhya, local administrators and powerful people got in the way and did not let them access benefits. For instance, Ajay, a male Dalit resident of the village of Gamiya in Seelampur district, who worked as a tailor and was also an elected member of the local Block Development Committee, told me that: 'Village development is the responsibility of the BDO, the block chief . . . [and] also the village chief. [But they] are all corrupt and eat up development funds . . . Take housing, for example. Houses are supposed to be constructed for [Dalits], but we only receive a portion of the total outlay,' he stated, confirming Shyama's experience. He rattled off the names of a whole host of development programs meant for Dalits and those who lived below the poverty line, clarifying that none of these programs were actually operational in his area. Dishonest local officials and other big-wigs, who were, according to Ajay, 'all in it together', actively denied poor people access to information that would allow them to obtain benefits. As Shanti, another resident of Seelampur district, remarked: 'State functionaries do not inform people about the [eligibility] rules of the various programs . . . [They] . . . keep the most crucial pieces of information to themselves. [They] do not implement programs from the point of view of the people; they implement programs for themselves.' Ajay's and Shanti's narratives were iconic of subaltern stories about selfish and immoral officials, who, in cahoots with local elites, misappropriated development funds and warmed their pockets by withholding information from the intended beneficiaries. Development failed and the poor remained poor because the powerful were corrupt and controlled information.¹⁶

When Ajay named a whole bunch of entitlement programs that existed on paper, but not on the ground, I asked him how he obtained information about these programs. 'I have contacts with top officials,' he replied. These linkages allowed him to skirt the corrupt local power nexus and directly approach higher-ups, in the state capital, to gather information and access development resources, like the water pump outside his house. 'I fought with the government for my rights and the government gave us the water pump ... I know only one thing. Nobody gives "power" to anybody. We have to demand and forcibly get our rights.'

Ajay saw himself as an empowered subject, who had successfully obtained government development benefits because of his efforts, ingenuity, and contacts with senior government functionaries. In so doing, he effectively positioned himself as part of the local power elite, a point that was not lost on his neighbors, who accused him of being as corrupt as the officials with whom he was connected. They highlighted the fact that the only water pump in the hamlet was installed right in front of his house and complained that his family regarded the communal resource as personal property. Dalit residents of other villages in the area told me similar tales of either upper-caste men or dominant people within their own caste communities who kept development at bay by usurping resources meant for the poor. Instead of using these resources for the benefit of the entire village and/or caste community, these morally corrupt, self-interested 'big' people, or *mai-baap*, used development for personal gain.

Thus, fruit-tree saplings meant for Dalit residents of Nimani village, I was told, were distributed to upper-caste Thakurs. The village headman, who belonged to the Dalit caste, commented that 'people who are able, strong, and economically secure – upper-caste Thakurs – create obstacles ... Rich people don't want the entire village to develop and they have political backing.' Ganga, a female Dalit resident of Nimani, agreed with her headman's description but went a step further. She pointed to the government-subsidized *pucca* house of the headman and identified him as part of the very power elite he castigated. He only looked out for himself and paid no attention to the development needs and rights of other members of his caste community.

Development talk thus functioned as a key axis around which moral personhood, rights, citizenship, and, indeed, communal belonging were defined. Those who were powerful and had links with the state, obtained development; subordinate and disenfranchised Dalits, with no connections, guile, or power, were excluded from development and kept in their marginal place. The latter, however, truly deserved development entitlements-as-rights, precisely because they were morally upstanding. Socioeconomic status and dominance thus correlated negatively with moral rectitude and the degree of deservedness of entitlements and care. Those denied development and forced to remain poor positioned themselves as the most righteous and worthy; these were the virtues of the weak (Scott 1985) that allowed them to stake a moral claim, based in inequality, on the powerful as ideal 'good' citizens. The poor and disempowered conceptualized their personhood and communal belonging in contrast to those who were self-serving and devious enough to move ahead, on their own, and in contrast to official images of their flawed and unruly (immoral) subjectivity.

VI

Subaltern narratives about failed development, exploitation, and moral corruption among the powerful serve as means by which the oppressed in postcolonial India mirror their rights and identities as upstanding citizens who deserve justice (see Gupta 1995). Yet, as

should be evident by now, the image of ideal belonging or citizenship they construct is not that of the generically equal, abstract, autonomous individual idealized by Enlightenment thinking and the liberal legal tradition.¹⁷ Rather, subaltern actors use their unequal status to enunciate and substantiate specific forms of culturally coded, historically inflected, relationally formed moral personhood and belonging overdetermined by multiple discourses.

Liberalism, as Chantal Mouffe contends, 'has contributed to the formulation of the notion of universal citizenship, based on the assertion that all individuals are born free and equal, but it has also reduced citizenship to a merely legal status' (1992, p. 377). In this discourse, purportedly equal rights are applicable to 'individuals as isolated atoms, acting in their own interests, maximised through exchanges in the marketplace' (Hall and Held 1990, p. 178). Neoliberalism emphasizes these liberal understandings of individual sovereignty and plays up market-based, entrepreneurial aspects of empowered legal personhood.

Subaltern struggles for citizenship in India expose the lie of universality and equality that forms the bedrock of liberal citizenship; they speak from a place of difference and inequality. Their ethical ideas of personhood, grounded in the *relational* and intersubjective experience of subordination and exclusion, directly challenge autonomous, self-interested individuality as the basis for rightful citizenship. In mobilizing ethical discourses to talk about unequal and corrupt developments, they imbue 'mere' legal equality and abstract rights with meaning, history, and morality and thus radically transform them. The discourse of the disenfranchised is one that 'emphasizes the value of a common good, prior to and independent of individual desires and interests' (Mouffe 1992, p. 377); furthermore, that common good must stem from and center the survival of the most downtrodden and undo their exploitation. This is a discourse of justice that challenges market-based self-reliance as a solution to socioeconomic inequality, and calls on the powerful, both official and non-official, to cultivate proper morality and fulfill their caretaking and redistributive obligations.

Subaltern struggles vigorously contest official and neoliberal scripts of development, the minimal (postwelfare) state, and competitive consumer/entrepreneur citizen-selves. Where neoliberalism detaches 'citizenship from its modern roots in institutional reform, in the welfare state and community struggles' (Hall and Held 1990, p. 174), Indian subalterns rebundle these themes. They provide a compelling example of neoliberalism's troubled travels, illustrating that it does not easily displace existing histories and ethico-political worldviews but intermeshes with them, producing unanticipated political consequences (see also Ong 2006).

The points of reference of subaltern women's understandings of justice, rights and citizenship are multiple, quite like the forms of oppression they suffer. If domination in India today is a complex mixture of the legal-rational and the socio-religious (Guha 1983, Chakrabarty 2002), then the injustices suffered by the subordinate cannot be articulated or restituted through law alone. The law, as Chakrabarty contends, works 'by abstracting and synthesizing identities' (2002, p. 112), which erases the radical particularity of oppressive contexts and violence done to specific people by specific people. He further states that: 'For there to be an effective history of citizenship, the gesture of facing the particular . . . must supplement the fixed and universal gaze of the law' (2002, p. 105); subaltern women's politics in India today achieves this and does more. I have highlighted the mixed idioms of subaltern protest in this article, which reference formal legal categories even as they alter and exceed them. Subaltern political society struggles, in that sense, do not put forth 'pure' and indigenous meanings of justice and citizenship that are completely distinct from and at odds with the law. Rather they offer us examples of an entangled

politics where legal and non-legal narratives of rights and citizenship become impossible to pry apart and are mutually transformed through particular struggles in particular times and places.

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Notes

1. Uttar Pradesh is a state in northern India. The names of all other places and of all people have been altered in this article, following standard anthropological practice.
2. Both Timothy Mitchell (2000) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) provide excellent analyses of the complexities of colonial modernity and question the givenness and presumptions of normative modernity.
3. Mahila Samakhya was initiated by the Indian government in partnership with women's groups and with Dutch government funds in 1989. It was the first national-level development program that had women's empowerment as its explicit goal. For a detailed analysis of the structure, workings and paradoxical effects of this part-state, part-non-governmental project targeted at poor, rural women belonging to Dalit and other lower castes, see Sharma (2008).
4. The 72nd and 73rd constitutional amendments, passed in 1992, for example, reserve 33% of seats in local governmental bodies, like *Panchayats*, for women.
5. The Hindi word 'sarkar' can mean either government or state. It is also used by the subaltern to refer to powerful individuals, such as upper caste people or landlords who might not be part of the formal state apparatus, but who are nonetheless connected, as far as the marginalized are concerned, to local structures of authority and oppression, and thus indistinguishable from the formal state. This fusing of the powerful in subaltern imaginaries has an older, colonial history, as Ranajit Guha (1983) has shown. It continues to be relevant today and is indexed by subalterns when they use the term 'sarkar'.
6. One does not have to endorse the global universality of neoliberalism in order to observe these similarities. I have previously argued, following Aihwa Ong (2006), that one needs to pay careful attention to how neoliberal logics sit with other histories and moral worldviews in various locations and what results these sometimes easy and sometimes uncomfortable layerings produce (Sharma 2006, 2008). It is only through such observations that one can see similarities and differences in how neoliberal processes work out in different places.
7. For a classic statement on the market-based logic of neoliberal freedom, see Friedman (1982). For poststructuralist critiques of neoliberal projects and freedom, see Barry *et al.* (1996), Rose (1999), and Hindess (2004).
8. *Dalit*, which literally translates as broken or crushed, is a commonly used term referring to oppressed or downtrodden people at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Until the rise of a self-conscious Dalit movement a few decades ago, this group was variously identified: *outcastes* which is a mistaken term because, although not belonging to the four main Hindu caste divisions [*varnas*], Dalits are very much a part of the caste system; *untouchables*, because they largely engaged in occupations deemed 'polluting', such as leatherwork and scavenging; *Harijan* or children of God, a term coined by Gandhi; and *Scheduled Castes*, a term invented by the British colonial state in 1935 and commonly used in postcolonial government documents. In contrast to the above labels, Dalit is a political and activist term of resistance, chosen by the people so identified, which aims to mark injustice and struggle and does not have the patronizing connotation that Harijan carries. Dalits in India today continue to suffer serious violence, social discrimination, economic marginalization and de facto disenfranchisement despite laws that abolish untouchability and protect against discrimination in public spaces and despite the state's reservation policies that institute quotas for Dalits in educational institutions, political bodies, and government jobs (see Human Rights Watch 1999).
9. In seeing development as a teeming site for subaltern politics, I argue against those critics of development discourse who see it only as a means of control and violence (Sachs 1992,

Escobar 1995). Instead, following Cooper and Packard (1997), I highlight development's heteroglossic nature, arguing that it more than a disciplinary regime imposed on passive subalterns. It is a productive and shifting discourse, shaped from above and below, that forms and informs citizen-subjects (see Sharma 2008). Subaltern politics is as much about redefining development as about accessing entitlements through using governmental categories and means.

10. Ajantha Subramanian (2009) also argues against such a separation in her ethnography of the rights politics of the Mukkuvar fisher community in Southern India. She argues for a processual understanding of rights: one that is not given *a priori* but is shaped in and through struggle.
11. This program is called '*Indira Avas Yojna*' after Indira Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister of India.
12. Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a similar point when discussing narratives of widows in colonial India. He argues that they invoked material property not for its own sake but as a means to negotiate affection and protection from their kin (2002, pp. 107–108).
13. Sally Merry discusses the use of rights talk by the US battered women's movement and argues that the ability to see oneself as a rights-bearing individual is facilitated by encounters with the legal system (2003, p. 344). My argument is that in postcolonial contexts, like India, development serves as a critical site for the formation and articulation of a rights consciousness among subaltern subjects who may have little contact with the formal juridical apparatus.
14. I discuss this 'development drama' in detail in my book (Sharma 2008).
15. Also see Gupta (1995).
16. Recognizing the importance of information to their survival, a group of peasants and rural workers in the western Indian state of Rajasthan, organized as the grassroots movement *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*, led the fight for a right to information and transparent and accountable governance. Their nearly fifteen-year struggle resulted in the passage of Indian Right to Information Act in 2005. My new project is an ethnography of the workings of this law.
17. Coutin (2003) argues that state discourses define citizenship in a generic manner, as a public identity that is shared by individuals who are seen as legally identical and equal units.

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