Caste and the Democratic Imaginary: Notes from Bihar

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Bihar refuses to shake off its image of a caste-ridden society among both academic scholars and popular observers. This preoccupation with caste continues to inform scholarly analyses of voting behaviour of its adult populace. It equally informs the analyses of post-Independence trajectory of its politics in terms of shifting intra-party factional alliances and the fluctuating social bases of political coalitions. Although the politics of lower caste empowerment has had a late start in Bihar when compared to states in southern and western India, the explanatory pre-eminence of caste as a framework for understanding political phenomena remains firmly etched in contemporary political sociology. Interestingly, its being the nerve centre of extreme forms of agrarian radicalism has not been able to overshadow caste-centric discussions and formulations that so easily stick to anything and everything that relates to politics in Bihar. Caste appears to be such a natural and legitimate way to imagine and experience the state in its various avatars, that it obviates the need for any scholarly investigation. The ingrained currency of the politics of lower-caste empowerment and the attendant celebration of the efflorescence of popular sovereignty and social justice adds to the taken-for-granted analytical prowess of caste.

Caste has been hailed as a great facilitator of the twin processes of 'democratisation of politics' and 'consolidation of democracy' and its role in helping bridge the gap between India's social and political democracy has been underlined time and again (Jaffrelot 2003). An acknowledgement of democracy's triumphant march pushes conventional concerns of good governance, rule of law and development to the back seat: 'if increased political participation by historically marginalized groups is considered a measure of democratic legitimacy, however, then it is not necessarily the failings of democracy, but rather its increasing penetration that contributed to Bihar's poor governance and economic decline over the last decade and a half' (Witsoe 2006: 41). More often than not, the well-intentioned exaltation of the caste-based political empowerment ends up projecting caste as the only potent carrier

of an uninterrupted one-sided penetration of the democratic imaginary in the countryside. True, there is enough literature to suggest that in the process caste itself gets transformed and comes to acquire modern features much beyond its traditional purview of roles and functions (Kothari 1970a; Kothari 1970b).

Recent ethnographic studies of state in India too reveal the intimate linkages between experiences of the state and that of caste. They enjoin us to be sensitive to the thickening nexus between state institutions, democratic practices, politico-ideological discourses and informal cultural codes and the everyday social register that people employ in their interactions with the political (Fuller and Benei 2000). Following such a framework, I wish to particularise the democratic imaginary in the context of Bihar with a view to delineate its specific accretions. For this purpose, besides secondary literature, I draw upon fieldwork conducted in two phases (October-November 2007 and March-April 2010) in Sitamarhi, a district town in Bihar.[1]Can 'primordial' social categories like caste be invested with a self-propelling dynamics of its own, thus denying agency to countless men and women who engage in politics at the local level? One is aware that democratic politics have differential articulations in local contexts. One is equally aware that elements of social register too seep into democratic imaginary. After all, much of political sociology in contemporary times revolves around an understanding of the processes of 'politicisation of caste' and its modernist role vis-à-vis the increasing scope and reach of democracy in India.

Forward Castes and Backward Classes

[1]Sitamarhi lies on the western bank of the Lakhandai River in the fertile Middle Ganges Plain in northeastern India. It is a station on the East-Central Railways (earlier North Eastern Railway) and is connected by roads with the Nepal borders. It has been a commercial centre trading in rice, timber, oilseeds, and hides; it is part of the scared complex extending up to Janakpur in the Terai region of Nepal. Legend and religious beliefs portray it as the birth place of Sita (Ram's consort) and it forms part of the cultural region called Mithila which shares an affinal relation with the Ayodhya region on this count.Our selection of Sitamarhi is guided by factors other than the present researcher's preliminary exposure to the place. Sitamarhi has been the nerve-centre of Indian national movement and figures prominently in the context of Quit India movement of 1942 (see Yang 2000). Secondly, it is characterised by substantial presence of Muslims and has seen some of the worse communal rioting after Independence. The riots in the early 1990s have made Sitamarhi a part of the communally sensitive geographical locations in the country (see Varshney 2002). Moreover, it has been an active centre of socialist (backward classes) politics in the state.

If the political history of post-Independence Bihar were to be captured in two key words, they would definitely be Forward Castes and Backward Classes. One hardly comes across a work which does not draw upon this binary to make sense of much of politics in Bihar. As a rule, such studies would mention caste backgrounds of chief ministers, caste-wise distribution of ministerial berths, and the changing caste-composition of the members of legislative assembly.Thus, a decline in the percentage of upper castes in the cabinet would be interpreted as their declining political power. Likewise, an increase in the percentage of a given caste (say Yadavs) in the Legislative Assembly would be considered as symptomatic of the political ascendancy of that caste. And since no caste can decide on its own the political fortunes at the state level, the relative ascendancy/decline of a political formation would be explained in terms of various permutations and combinations of the major caste groups (Blair 1972; Chaudhary and Shrikant 2001).

Indeed, historical evidence suggests the viability of caste as a valuable political resource for modern politics in the state. Caste networks and associations were the channels through which political movements were launched and recast. The movement for the creation of a separate Bihar province in the colonial period is seen as the outcome of the organisational efforts of the Kayasthas. Like elsewhere, Bihar has had its fair share of caste associations and sabhas, the latter including for instance, *Bihar Kayastha Provincial Sabha*(1889), *Bhumihar Brahman Sabha*, *All India Kurmi Mahasabha* (1894), *Gopajatiya Sabha* (1909). Most of them were geared towards the organisation of cognate sub-castes and focused on a set of issues that combined the zeal for social reforms with efforts towards accessing public employment.

In large measure, the fortunes and raison d'être of these sabhas were linked to the actions of the colonial state. For instance, Herbert Risley's 1901 census was based on the idea of social precedence. The census-based classification of caste groups by rank gave rise to number of caste associations whose central agenda was to enhance their caste status by marshalling Sanskritic and ethnographic resources and petitioning the appropriate authorities. Bhumihars (Saraswati 1952) and Kayasthas (Carroll 1978) expended significant resources and energy in raising their respective caste statuses in subsequent enumerations, for they had been included in the Vaishya Varna in the 1901 census. Likewise, Kurmis put in great efforts to ensure that their caste is removed from the list of criminal castes. It is during the interactions between caste sabhas and the colonial state that a new notion of social justice started taking initial

shape: (a) the responsibility to ensure justice to numerous caste groups within its domain rests with the state, and (b) it means devising appropriate ways and means so that public offices reflect caste-based proportionate representation to approximate respective share of different caste groups in the population. In this sense, the idea of caste-based proportional representation flowed from the strategies of colonial governance and has been implicated in the control of key public institutions ever since. The subsequent discourse on reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as embodied in the Mandal Commission recommendations is an elaboration and amplification of the very same idea of social justice. In the particular case of Bihar, as Roy (1968: 563) observes, 'due to the absence of an infrastructure around which diverse interests can be organized, channelled and given autonomous roles, caste distinctions serve as a kind of comprehensive symbol for class and other criteria and are capable of becoming a politically potent force if reinforced by other factors such as a sense of political injustice'.

Moreover, the presence of caste sabhas predates the establishment of Bihar Provincial Congress Committee in 1908. In other words, the politicisation of caste in Bihar precedes the advent of nationalist politics and has not been solely dependent on the latter for its articulation. This leads Frankel (1989: 64) to argue that 'the fact that cognate castes and subcastes enlarged their identities through regional and provincial social organizations before the nationalist movement got underway, was an important factor in making this higher order of caste formation a potential unit of participation in politics'. It would not be too facile to argue that the nationalist political impulses reached the Bihar countryside through the preformed channels of a handful of caste groups. The caste character of Gandhi's comrades-in-arms in the famous Champaran Sayagraha bears testimony to this narrow social base of nationalism in the early twentieth century Bihar (Pouchepadass 1999). Much later, even the JP movement amounted to a [not reqd]little more than another manifestation of caste group rivalry, involving a temporary alliance between leading politicians of the Backward Classes and their rivals among Bhumihar, Rajput and Kayashtha groups feeling excluded from the then Brahmin-led coalition(Shah 1977; Thakur 2000, 2010).

It sounds plausible, though simplistic, that 'the search for an enduring support base leads the contending groups to exploit the existing social distinctions and unities, which in Bihar primarily means the caste system. Inasmuch as caste distinctions represent primordial loyalty with an autonomous existence serving as a kind of

comprehensive symbol for class and other criteria, it becomes easier for the politician to exploit such distinctions for building a support base'(Roy 1966: 710). Nonetheless, caste identities have their own historicity; they are not to be seen as simply given. Yet, caste identities lend themselves as the most obvious way of categorizing citizens. The continual uses of these identities impart substance to the existing or manufactured caste unities and distinctions and thus helps fortify, maintain and perpetuate caste differences among voters in otherwise similar socio-economic circumstances. It does not matter so far as political uses of caste are concerned if caste differences coincide/diverge with other kinds of differences. No wonder, the usual narrative of the caste-politics relationship in Bihar turns out to be an unending tale of factional fights among high caste groups in the predominant congress system. These alliances and counter-alliances among the competing castes necessitate co-optation of men from 'politically inarticulate castes to positions of second rank leaders (who in due course emerged as leaders in their own rights), brought more and more castes into the vortex of politics' (Roy 1968: 557).

Attempts at forging coalitional caste alliances and their successes and failures have been part of the same historical process. It is instructive to note that the first attempt to bring together Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri caste groups under the banner of the Triveni Sabha failed miserably. The same has been the fate of the Bihar State Backward Classes Federation that was founded in 1947 by freedom fighters belonging to the backward castes and communities. Frankel is right in asserting that 'the caste associations of Bihar were never able to co-ordinate their efforts on behalf of Shudras as a whole. Competition for higher relative rank made political collaboration difficult notwithstanding periodic attempts to forge caste alliances on behalf of the Backward Classes' (Frankel 1989: 65). To be sure, the larger unity of the Backward Classes tended to give way to the pressures of Sanskritisation that the individual low caste groups had to contend with given their relatively lower position in caste hierarchy. As against this, the high-caste groups were characterised by the relative cohesion and unity. Apart from factors such as high economic standing in terms of control of land, access to modern education, political awareness, the high caste groups were completely free from the burden of Sanskritisation, something that the low caste groups could ill-afford. As a consequence, their relative political trajectories differed in certain key respects in the first half of the last century. However, to the extent democratic politics had to act as the carrier of both social as well as political

aspirations, the broad identity forged on the social plane became available on the political plane: 'the political system in Bihar has to discharge not only strictly political functions but social functions as well, thus in effect becoming an extension of the social system where the battle of upward social mobility is carried on' (Roy 1968: 557).

Hierarchy Matters

Some of the observers of the Indian caste system have argued that the increasing scope and growing reach of the democratic imaginary have made the hierarchical holism of the system give way to a loose confederation of discreet caste groups in perpetual competition for secular and material interests (Gupta 2000, 2005; Tanabe 2007). 'Natural repulsion' and 'ritual distance' among caste groups have become almost insignificant. A close reading of Bihar politics does not lend itself to a corroboration of such a dismantling of the hierarchy. It is generally believed that the three upper castes (Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas) closed ranks in 1962 to support K. B. Sahay as the Chief Minister against Bir Chand Patel, a Kurmi leader supported by Maithil Brahmins led by Binodanand Jha. The fraternal wars between Bhumihars and Yadavs during the RJD rule (1990-2005) has had as much to do with secular interests as the former's indignation at the rise of the latter as the ruling group. Likewise, development outcomes have usually flown through patron-client relations based on caste alliances which presuppose vertical linkages. The long-prevalent Brahminical ideology had historically imparted the upper castes a sense of their rightful privilege to rule. The latter's enormous efforts to control democratic institutions can well be construed as surrogate to power and privilege that they have historically enjoyed in times of non-hegemonic Brahmanical ideology. Viewed thus, democratic politics becomes a mechanism for reproducing caste dominance and/or to challenge the existing dominance. Evidently, any understanding of dynamics and implications of democracy in Bihar has to engage with the ways in which electoral practices are embedded in local relations of dominance and subordination (Witsoe 2009).

In a similar vein, democracy is seen as offering historically unavailable opportunities to lower castes to seriously undermine the hierarchical framing of the caste system. It is the democratic imaginary which makes it possible for them to think

of acquiring power in a legitimate fashion. Though, this realisation of their numerical preponderance as crucial electoral resource is hardly confined to the political field alone. In a village, the political, ritual and social have always been fused. As Witsoe (2011: 78) writes, 'from the perspective of many lower caste villagers, the landlord historically has been in much closer proximity than state institutions but has also often enjoyed close relationships with state officials'. In other words, to control the state is to control the village and vice versa. In this reading, democracy gets imbued with an understanding of the larger relations of domination and subordination. Even when it remains a tool of political struggle its implications are almost always understood in caste terms. 'For many lower caste villagers, electoral politics is not just about control of the state, but more crucially about control of the village and everyday power relations' (*Ibid* 2006: 22). To the extent that caste constitutes the culture of exploitation at the village level, it is hardly surprising that democracy speaks the language that it speaks in Bihar (Chakravarti 2001). Logically then, 'democracy is about the ways in which gaining control of the state can level inequalities in the social field' (Witsoe 2011: 77-78). Indeed, that is where democracy's radical potentiality lies. This is what explains the centrality of the struggle for control of the state by competing caste alliances. The discourse of political empowerment thereby turns out to be a discourse on the possible alteration of caste hierarchy.

Arguably, 'struggles related to electoral practice can extend well within the boundaries of the official positions that are actually being fought over-a battle for a single parliamentary seat is translated into myriads of micro-struggles for village and regional dominance' (*Ibid*. 2009: 66). As a consequence, intense social antagonisms come to characterise political processes and events in Bihar. Much of violence gets generated in the process which transgresses the usual bounds of democratically acquiring authority and legitimacy. In fact, a transformation of relations of agrarian production is so crucially dependent on this politics of caste empowerment that terms like 'Dalit-Naxalite' has come to acquire a kind of naturalness. This hyphenated identity connotes historicity and commonality of experiences such as landlessness, untouchability, oppression and poverty (Kunnath 2006). Since caste had been the idiom through which these experiences have been refracted, it is this caste consciousness which informs grassroots political agency which is based on a fusion of political consciousness with caste identity.

Also, caste appears as the natural medium of interaction between civil society and political society *a la* Chatterjee (2008).The conceptions of democracy emerging from the political society are not mere distortions from the ideal. They are different and are differentially linked to the agency of political subjects who have been constituted differently. True, the prevailing democratic practices in the political society are far removed from the liberal notion of democracy whose ideal habitat happens to be the civil society. Yet, 'it is precisely the "illiberal" character of democratic practice that makes possible a radicalization of democracy' (Witsoe 2009: 69).

There is no denying that caste as an active and dynamic element in the cultural and political domain of the state has always been there notwithstanding changes in its forms and contents. As an identity marker it has intimately been interwoven with the unfolding of democratic imaginary over time. While there is palpable identification with the provincial/national leaders of their caste groups amongst local political workers, it would be premature to infer that the boundaries of the caste inevitably circumscribe their political universe. In any case, no particular caste group in a given parliamentary/assembly constituency can single-handedly decide the electoral outcome. The winning combination includes alliances between dominant castes and other caste groups. This translates at the local level in terms of socio-political camaraderie between local leaders representing different caste groups. Yet, these local equations among politically significant caste groups are never constant. The prevailing shifts in such equations reflect the overall political mood at the provincial level.

For example, during my field-work (October-November 2007), I closely observed the mobilisational strategies for elections to the graduate constituency (Tirhut) of the Bihar Legislative Council. The ruling party (JD-U) had fielded a candidate belonging to the Brahmin Caste while the opposition RJD was supporting the incumbent Congress candidate who came from a prominent family of Bhumihar politicians. To my surprise, I found Bhumihar and Brahmin leaders working in unison to facilitate the victory of the JD-U candidate. This act gives a peep into their political understanding. The local leaders were of the view that the present ruling combination is the best that forward castes could ever hope for and it was their bounden duty not to unsettle the political applecart by displaying individual caste loyalties. They talked of the new social alliance of the upper castes, Kurmis and the extremely backward

classes, and they appeared determined to keep the alliance going lest the competing alliance of Yadavs, Muslims and the upper backward classes wrest political power from them. Clearly, caste loyalties are not the sole variable when it comes to elections and electoral support. What is interesting though is the uninhibited (at times innocent) use of caste idiom by one and all to explain shifting political combinations even when one knows that members of a given caste are distributed across the political spectrum, and any leader worth his name commands following in caste groups other than his own. A leader is acknowledged as a leader precisely because s/he is able to elicit support from a wide array of social groups crossing both caste and religious divides. I was fed with numerous stories of the committed Rajput and Muslim supporters of the local political heavyweight – RaghunathJha (a Maithil Brahmin). These supporters would always support Jhaji irrespective of latter's switchover to the RJD. The leader's current political affiliation does not matter as long as these supporters identify with the persona of a given leader. The acute awareness of the limitations of caste politics, and the continuing employment of caste framework and idioms to make sense of political arithmetic, is one of the interesting puzzles crying out for interpretive understanding so far as caste-politics relation is concerned.

Patronage to Brokerage

There is a general consensus among the observers of grassroots politics that the political empowerment through socialist politics of the post-independence era has changed the social character of political leadership in Bihar as elsewhere. With the burden of Sanskritisation being a thing of the past, caste identities of the middle rungs of the earlier caste hierarchy have come on their own, and the electoral politics has further reinforced this tendency. As Hauser (1997: 49) notes, 'the transition from the late 19th and early 20th century politics of culture, in fact began with the Council and Assembly elections of the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless it is true that the political and social alliances which were to emerge full-blown in an environment of universal adult suffrage after 1947 were already apparent in the cultural and colonial electoral experience of the 1920s and 1930s'. Even otherwise, the image of a democratically elected state based on the promises of nation- building, development, and rule of law had few takers in the political society. The state was experienced through networks of patronage that reinforced upper caste dominance effectively undermining the

promises of a casteless society. By contrast, the politics of caste empowerment has brought into being alternate networks of lower-caste politicians and political brokers to rein in the upper caste dominance (Gupta 1997).

Not surprisingly, political brokerage has come to be a new dispenser of social prestige. If a local leader can command compliance from the lower level state functionaries, his reputation would go up in local esteem. What is worth noticing is the smooth manner in which sources of social esteem have shifted to the modern democratic state. It appears that there is no questioning of the legitimacy of the modern democratic state; that is seen as *fait accompli*. One gets tempted to corroborate Micheluti's (2008) celebration of the indigenization of democracy based on her ethnographic evidence from neighbouring Uttar Pradesh where yadavs tend to see themselves as a natural caste of politicians and Lord Krishna is held to be the originator of democracy. Most of the contestations are either to capture the levers of state power or work their way through them for purposes of individual and sectional gains.

This also appears to have reworked the bases of social stratification in the local society. For long, government jobs have been replacing caste and land as sources of social esteem and prestige. In the course of the Indian National Movement, and in the euphoria that surrounded Indian Independence, 'freedom fighters' came to be accorded extraordinary prestige irrespective of their caste origins and economic status. One's participation in a movement, the sacrifices that one had made, and the ideals one had followed, enhanced the person's reputation. Such persons would be the chief guests at school functions, Independence and Republic Day celebrations, or any such associational activity that periodically sprung up in small towns like Sitamarhi. With the fading of the Indian National Movement from the public memory on account of temporal distance, and the natural disappearance of the freedom fighters, the new sources of prestige and privileges emanate from one's perceived mastery and control over the state apparatus at whatever level. The centrality of the state power is so ingrained that much of the struggles around it acquire the aura of a Dharma-Yudha. Some of the local activists would get beaten up; would die while making crude bombs during election time; would get into endless litigation and persistent family feuds because of their apparent political proclivities. However, I have not come across any sense of remorse or repentance on the part of those who had to suffer. It is their politics albeit understood in terms of caste morality, loyalty to their caste leaders, or

the leader of the right type of alliance that propelled their political passion. Also, I could not see the pervasive sense of looking at politics as a dirty game that Ruud (2004) describes in his ethnography of West Bengal. In Bihar, politics is more of an adventure and less of an enterprise (Thakur 2009).

Yet, it is impossible to make sense of this adventure without any reference to caste. Caste has had its own ways of creeping into the political system and public institutions. If a particular caste is seen as politically emergent and dominant, that has immediate impact on the local level political brokers. During the RJD rule in Bihar, most of the political middlemen at the block level would be either from the Yadav caste or from the caste groups seen to be part of the broader social coalition represented by the RJD. The change of government in Patna has palpable effect in the caste character of men with 'towel over their armpit'. This trickle-down effect has afflicted the class-based political parties as well. For example, Yadavs have never been supporters of the Communist Party in Sitamarhi district. However, the perceived political ascendancy of the Yadavs in the early 1990s ensured that a Yadav is made the district secretary of the CPI. This reveals another aspect of caste dynamics at the local level – once a particular caste becomes politically dominant, most other political parties start projecting the leaders of the same caste among their ranks. And, this process did not even leave the Communist Party unaffected. Bihar offers a curious case where during the 15-year long rule of the RJD, many communist leaders defected to the caste-based parties. Reportedly, some of the local leaders of the communist parties tacitly worked for the RJD during elections even when the state leadership did not have form a political alliance with the latter. Thus, years of ideological indoctrination in class politics got wiped off at the altar of caste arithmetic.

Undoubtedly, caste continues to influence social and political experience of the large number of citizenry in Bihar. It does not matter if the leadership roles are in the hands of LalooYadav or Nitish Kumar. As long as caste offers the kernel for the formation of a political subjectivity and the associated democratic imaginary, the unending debate over the relative merits of identity politics and good governance is not going to be of much help to understand the direction of political change. Likewise, the much talked about contradictions within the OBCs and/or the OBCs and Dalits are not going to make a dent in the caste-based democratic imaginary. The announcement of 20 per cent reservations for the EBCs (Annexure I castes) in Panchayat elections by the JD (U)-BJP government, and the entire official discourse around 'Mahadalits', are

the logical moments in the caste-based understanding of the democratic citizenship. Commenting on the Provincial Council elections of late 1926 and the Legislative Assembly elections of early 1937 in Bihar, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati writes, 'there is very little difference between nationalism and casteism, and it is a difference which disappears at a certain stage.... The only real difference is that caste covers a relatively smaller field whereas nationalism functions in a wider arena' (cited in Hauser 1997: 49). And, this historical process has continued with effects which could not have been foreseen earlier. Political empowerment of the OBCs in Bihar is part of the same process. Though, it would be premature to write an obituary to the hierarchical social structure of caste based on an exaggerated reading of the salutary effects of the second democratic upsurge of the low caste groups. Even now the land ownership patterns display old patterns of dominance as it is mostly upper caste landowners who lease out land to mostly lower caste marginal and small cultivators (World Bank 2006). This is not to make light of the fact that other socio-cultural co-ordinates of the caste-based exploitative relations have definitely been eroded thanks to the extensive politicization of caste.

Conclusion

What E P Thompson wrote about the process of working class formation in the nineteenth century England rings true for contemporary Bihar. To him, class was an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. It was his emphasis on its historicity that made him see class neither as a "structure", nor even as a "category". Class was something which in fact happens and can be shown to have happened in human relationships. One has to just replace class with caste to gain the understanding that caste (despite Louis Dumont) has never been a static ahistorical structure. Instead, it is best seen as a dynamic, whereby caste is always in a process of becoming, based not just on being (what one is) but on consciousness (what one perceives oneself as being). And this consciousness is always guided by politics and leads to the shaping and reshaping of political subjectivity in concrete historical settings.

In Bihar, the continual caste-based mobilisations have contributed to this shaping of modern political subjectivity in unanticipated ways. Democratic co-

ordinates of modern politics are as legitimate to the erstwhile beneficiaries of the hegemonic Brahmanical ideology as they are to its erstwhile victims. Modern state power is sought as much by those whose privileges could not be supported by the caste ideology of the yore as by those who wish to create a new ideological hegemony around the twin ideas of political representation and social justice. The makers of the caste-based culture of exploitation as well as the challengers to such iniquitous relations of dominance and sub-ordination have equally taken to the virtues of democratic politics in an unparalleled fashion. It is this immense faith in the emancipatory potential of democracy which makes it possible for a poor low-caste villager to cast his vote in Sitamarhi to see his leader acquiring power in Patna. And, his is not merely a primordial act of caste loyalty for he has come to see the unforeseen connections between the workings of power and dominance in his village, (his block and his district) and the social character of ministers and MLAs and MPs and bureaucrats who decide on issues of larger importance in the capital. This demystification of the everyday workings of power would not have been possible without the expansive reach of the democratic imaginary through whatever route it has taken.

Such an understanding privileges the way modern democracy is experienced substantively in its myriad manifestations by groups constituted differently than many standard assumptions about liberal notions of democracy would have us believe. Without discounting democracy's normative content, this paper underlines the need to document its varied cultural histories not only to critique and problematise its universal pretensions but also to entertain the possibility of democracies. All said and done, democracy does need the support of the exegetical prowess of its bright and ingenious theorists; it needs the services of ethnographers no less. It would be foolhardy to dispense with the meticulous ethnographic interrogation of democracy's actual practices. And, to that extent, we can celebrate the increasing critical anthropological engagements with democracy.

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