How a Subject Negates Servitude: A Peasant Dialectic about Mastery and Self-Rule from Late Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

*This essay focuses on a report from 1918, produced by the Kshatriya Samiti, the premier early-mid twentieth century organization of the Rajavamshis, a 'lower caste' peasant community of colonial northern Bengal, the princely state of Cooch Behar, and adjacent parts of Assam. The report describes a dialectical transition from an originary state of nature (*prakriti*) and animality (*jantupunja*), to the rule of the master (*prabhushasana*) or king (*rajar shasana*), and then to the rule of society (*samajashasana*), and subsequently to self-rule (*atmashasana*). In the process, the rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*), including the rule of the master, paradoxically becomes a slave/servant (of self-rule). The trajectory culminates in an anarchic negation of all rule. The essay analyses why this Rajavamshi discourse took the specific form of a dialectic, mediated through antagonisms, as well as the surpassing of these conflicts, as each stage sowed the seeds for its own negation. To do so, the essay relates the report to broader currents of Rajavamshi intellectual production, as well as to multiple South Asian and European discourses on political authority. Further, the essay locates this discourse in the landscape of British colonial programmes of gradually devolving political authority to Indians, as well as in the context of agrarian power structures which moulded Rajavamshi notions of labour, wealth, exploitation, and material self-reliance. Finally, the essay compares the Rajavamshi record to Hegel's celebrated Herr-Knecht dialectic. It argues about the world-historical significance of the Rajavamshi discourse in demonstrating the subaltern and extra-European roots of modern globalized dialectical thinking about material, political, and ethical autonomy. It is argued that this subaltern globality still carries a tremendous intellectual power, one which charges us to unbind the world from varying forms of servitude.*

Introduction

How does a subject negate servitude? Stated in this unornamented abstraction, shorn of specific referents – how anyone in any position of bondage, abjection, can become autonomous, negating the servitude to a master – to most intellec-

tual historians, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* would perhaps first come to mind, including the afterlives of his *Herr* and his *Knecht* in Marx and beyond. (This is not to deny that Hegel's dialectic has been historicized and particularized, from in relation to colonial slavery and the Haitian Revolution, to in relation to structures of landed lordship and serfdom in *ancien régime* Europe: see e.g. Buck-Morss 2009; Cole 2014). However, soon enough, the question arises as to whether this famed dialectic could have arisen only in Hegel, or whether it is possible to identify other originary points for similar movements (points which had no direct familiarity with Hegel's text). In this essay, I begin a preliminary response to this question by interrogating an (unfairly) obscure archive: a corpus comprising records of meeting proceedings and associated reports from the 1910s to the 1920s which – unlike other similar records which were burnt down during a massacre in 1971 in Rangpur (then in East Pakistan, now in Bangladesh) – survived thanks to the efforts of the educationist and researcher Dharma Narayan Bhakti Shastri. These records were ultimately transferred to the Rajavamshi intellectual, bureaucrat, and legislator Sukhvilas Barma (Barman 2017: ix–x).

The troubled life of this significant archive certainly serves as an index for the vulnerable lives of the (so-called 'lower caste') Rajavamshi peasants who produced them, and for the obscurity to which the intellectual production of subalternized actors is often deliberately reduced, in South Asia and elsewhere. Without minimizing in any sense the importance of Hegel and his successors, it is necessary to underline the comparable political prowess and conceptual ambition of subalternized peasant discourses in offering tools for unbinding servitude. To re-author world-history from its limits (Guha 2002) – or to put this more *à* la mode, to stress the globality of a certain dialectic, in terms of global intellectual history (Moyn & Sartori 2013) and beyond – is something this Rajavamshi archive may well train us to do. Since I had started working on this archive for my doctoral dissertation (2010–14, published as Banerjee 2018), in the supervision of Gita Dharampal-Frick, this essay also offers a libation to her, as she always enjoined me to focus on political thought in the vernacular.

The Rajavamshi Dialectic

Let us begin in 1918, with a record from the annual proceedings of the Kshatriya Samiti, the premier early-mid twentieth century association of the Rajavamshi community of sub-Himalayan northern Bengal, the princely state of Cooch Behar, and adjacent parts of Assam (on the history of the Samiti, see Basu 2003). The annual session of the Samiti that year was held in Dinajpur, a town in northern Bengal. The record began by describing an originary state of nature

(*prakriti*) to which the world (*jagat*) was subject. Nature was always active (*kriyashila*); in it all things (*vastu*) were mobile (*chanchala*). Of these things, living creatures (*jiva*) were particularly active, as well as characterized, due to their sensations (*anubhava*) and knowledge (*jnana*), by feelings of attraction (*akarshana*) and repulsion (*vikarshana*) towards known objects (*jnata vastu*). Of living creatures, human beings had particularly well-developed faculties of knowledge and sensation. Hence, whenever there was a gathering (*samagama*) of human beings, the unrestrained actions (*uddama kriya*) of each human being came into conflict (*virodha*) with similar uncontrolled actions of others. Such a gathering of human beings was therefore reduced into a state of mutually antagonistic (*paraspara virodhi*) and pain-inflicting (*paraspara yantranadayaka*) mass of animals (*jantupunja*) (Samiti 1918: 27–28).

As this pain (*yantrana*) became intolerable, human beings sought escape from it. So they made attempts to tame/subdue (*damana*) or regulate (*niyaman*) their hitherto unregulated efforts. In the first effort (*prathama cheshta*), a single person (*ekjan*) or a group of people (*janasamuha*) was necessary (*avashyaka*), who would have the power (*kshamatashali*) to tame/subdue (*damana*) both the one who hurt (*ghati*; originally in Sanskrit, the term referred especially to a killer) and the one who counter-hurt (*pratighati*). By imposing rules (*vidhi*) or prohibitions (*nishedha*) backed by force (*balanusrita*), that person or group of persons was able to offer protection (*raksha*) to the antagonists as well as to everyone related (*samsargi sakalke*), and could thus deliver people from a state of pain into a state of greater happiness (*sukhatara avastha*) and joy (*sphurti*). This was the rule of the master (*prabhushasana*) (Samiti 1918: 28).

The master on top (*uparistha prabhu*) thus subdued the antagonisms (*ghata-pratighata*; literally, blows and counter-blows) of the person below (*adhahstha vyakti*) and brought about a more peaceful state. Antagonisms were increasingly replaced by feelings of union (*milanabhava*), amicable feelings towards each other (*paraspara anukula bhava*), and happiness (*ananda*). This generated respect (*shraddha*) towards the master. Hence the name of the master (*prabhu*) was king (*raja*). The master also felt affection (*sneha*) towards the people (*janasamuha*) – as if the people were the son (*putra*) of the master. Hence they were named *praja*. (Samiti 1918: 28). In fact, in colonial Bengal, the word *praja* ordinarily meant subject, in relation to the state, but was equally used to refer to tenants of the quasi-kingly *zamindar* landlords. But, as this Rajavamshi discourse underscores, the term has an original connotation of "offspring", since the Sanskrit root, *prajan*, implies "to be born or produced", "to bring forth, generate, bear, procreate" (Monier-Williams 1960: 658).

The report went on to describe that the king-subject-relation (*raja-praja-samvandha*) kept each in attraction to the other. The rule of the king (*rajar shasana*), by removing antagonisms, allowed the subjects (*prajavarga*) to come together and develop (*paraspara miliya unnati*). But the rule of the master was unable to achieve more than this. It was unable to regulate well the relations between subjects or to bring under control feelings like affection and love (*sneha-mamatadi bhava*). However, these feelings were innate to human beings, and held people together in relation. These relations (*samvandha*) could be seen as the root of society (*samaja-mula*), and the feelings of society (*samajabhavaguli*) could be called social feelings (*samajika bhava*). But, developing unrestrained, these social feelings came into antagonism with each other, resulting in pain. To escape this pain, people developed rules and prohibitions through which society (*samaja*) was regulated. These were social customs or rules (*samajika achara ba niyama*). The rule of society (*samajer shasana*) was directed against the individual who went against these social rules and who thus hindered the social happiness (*samajika sukha*) of another or the happiness of society. The rule of society (*samajashasana*) could thus prohibit or regulate some social feelings. But it was often incapable of purifying (*shuddhi*) these feelings. Given an opportunity, one tried to advance one's own aims and the harm of the other. Without self-rule (*atmashasana*) or self-control (*atmasamyama*), these feelings could never be purified (Samiti 1918: 28–29).

The report underlined that "to achieve self-control one needs to rule oneself" (*atmasamyama karite haile nije nijake shasana karite haibe*). The rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*) was unable to achieve influence here, so there was no alternative other than the rule which emerged from the self (*atma haite udbhuta shasana*). If one engaged in thinking with a calm mind, one heard a wonderful voice (*apurvavani*) which was magnified by its own grandeur (*nija mahimay mahimanvita*). The rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*) was like a mere slave/servant (*kimkara matra*) of this voice. This voice, shining in the virtuous mind, was right/good precept (*sanniti*) (Samiti 1918: 29).

Human life (*manavajivana*) or the life of human society (*manavasamaja-jivana*) moved through certain stages (*stara*) of expanding happiness. In the regulation of human behaviour, the application of exterior force bore the name of rule (*bahyashaktir prayoger nama shasana*), while the application of interior force bore the name of education (*abhyantarika shaktir prayoger nama shiksha*). In the course of human life or the life of human society, the influence of rule (*shasana*) was gradually reduced, while the influence of education (*shiksha*) grew. In the end, the operation of both rule and education came to an end. As a human being approached the ultimate goal (*charama lakshya*), both rule and

education ceased to be. Human behaviour became stainless (*nirmala*); the self (*atma*) found its own blossoming. The human being achieved fullness of desire (*purnakama*), fullness of happiness (*purnananda*), fullness of satisfaction (*purnatripti*). The human being achieved fullness (*purnatva*) (Samiti 1918: 29–30).

Produced in the remote interior of northern Bengal, the extraordinary sophistication of this discourse produced by peasant-origin activists compels our attention, in the way it imagines a periodized transition from heteronomy (*bahirer shasana*, the rule of the outside, comprising both *prabhushasana*, the rule of the master, and *samajashasana*, the rule of society) to autonomy (*atmashasana*, self-rule), and finally the extinction of all rule in the fullness of joy. There is a fascinating dialectic at work here, whereby the rule of the master becomes – through biting and unavoidable irony – a slave: a slave or servant (*kimkara*; indeed, nothing but a slave/servant, *kimkara matra*) of self-rule. In parallel, the subject (*praja*) – unambiguously described as the person who is at bottom (*adhahstha vyakti*) – comes out on top, indeed reaches the ultimate goal. If one wanted, one could compare this with Jean Hyppolite's famous description of Hegel's dialectic: "The dialectic of domination and servitude [...] consists essentially in showing that the truth of the master reveals that he is the slave of the slave, and that the slave is revealed to be the master of the master." (Hyppolite 2000: 172).

In the Rajavamshi discourse, being under is an abjection, but as it turns out, also a privilege, one which is denied to the master who is on top (*uparistha prabhu*) and who is phased out of the forward movement of the dialectic. Being the bottom becomes a preparatory discipline to achieve a certain – I would call it, revolutionary – agency: revolutionary because it ends up erasing governance. Thus the ultimate (literally, anarchic) withering away of government provides the most paradoxical conclusion to this trajectory which began with a seemingly iron-clad justification for government. The rest of this essay will be devoted to analysing some of the components and possible sources of this dialectic.

From Nature to the Birth of the State

Let us turn to its first movement. I use the word 'movement' consciously, drawing on terms like *chanchala* (mobile) and *kriyashila* (active) through which the Rajavamshi discourse conceptualizes the cosmos. The term dialectic is also appropriate, given the historical charge it has acquired by now of not only bearing the sense of dialogue, but also of opposition, confrontation, contradiction, and synthesis. Much of the Rajavamshi discourse is precisely about such encounters: attraction (*akarshana*) and repulsion (*vikarshana*), blow (*ghata*) and counter-blow (*pratighata*), conflict (*virodha*), and ways of resolving them. The

first reversal in this dialectic is from a state of nature (*prakriti*), which is also a state of apparent freedom, or at least of unrestrained action (*uddama kriya*), to a state of domination, of restraint, of loss of freedom to do whatever one wants.

The bestiality of the originary state of nature in the Rajavamshi discourse (the fear that human beings are reduced to a heap of beasts, *jantupunja*) reminds us strongly of Hobbes' famously negative description of the state of nature in *Leviathan*, as well as (in his *De Cive*) of the saying *homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf to man. In the Rajavamshi discourse, from this anomic condition, the state offers relief. This involves a process of taming and subduing, both these senses captured by the Sanskrit/Bengali word *damana*. The word and proximate terms have strong animal-related connotations, and are used in Sanskrit, for example, in relation to taming horses, bullocks, and so on (Monier-Williams 1960: 469). This process of taming and subduing is the birth of mastery. One could also narrate this as a process of domesticating bestial wildness. As an aside, one remembers that, in Latin, *domus*, household, whence domestication, is etymologically related to *dominus*, master, whence domination (de Vaan 2008: 177–78). In general terms, as James Scott has most recently reminded us, the domestication of human beings is intrinsically related to the birth of the early historical state (Scott 2017). The Rajavamshi discourse alludes to all these processes. In this discourse, the master (*prabhu*), which may be a single person or a group of people, brings about the taming, the eradication of the original wildness of nature, creating thereby the state. This is the birth of rule (*shasana*), or more specifically, of the rule of the master or of the king. The people will to escape endless antagonism and mutual infliction of pain. Through their desire and through their self-conscious first effort (*prathama cheshta*), the state is born.

What could be the possible sources for this quasi-Hobbesian narrative of a movement from an originary state of nature to the time of the state which offers protection (in the Rajavamshi discourse, *raksha*) from anomie? The Rajavamshi text itself, in its majestic referent-less abstraction, offers no obvious answer. But if we look at the Kshatriya Samiti archive in general, we perceive a transparent Sanskritic basis for many of the discourses. In part, this had to do with the training of the Rajavamshi leadership. For instance, Panchanan Barma, the main leader of the Rajavamshi movement in this period, acquired university degrees in Sanskrit and law in the 1890s, and practised as a lawyer in northern Bengal in the 1900s, before heading the Kshatriya Samiti (Barman 1980: 1–16; Barma 2017). Such training perhaps equipped the Rajavamshi leadership to interpret ancient Sanskrit texts about the origins of the state through modern-Western legal-political lenses. In fact, across the 1910s and early 1920s, in the

context of widespread discussions about devolution of governmental powers to Indians (leading up to, and going beyond, the Government of India Act of 1919) as well as rising waves of anti-colonial struggle (from older streams of militant Indian nationalism to newer waves of Gandhian nationalism, pan-Islamic Khilafat agitation, and peasant and working class insurgency), several Indian (including Bengali) historians began re-reading ancient Indian texts through the lens of social contract theory. They included prominent figures like Pramathanath Banerjea, K. P. Jayaswal, D. R. Bhandarkar, and U. N. Ghoshal (Banerjee 2018: 228–33).

To justify their aspirations for a liberal-constitutional state, and to critique British discourses about Oriental Despotism, these historians identified articulations of social contract theory in ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts like the *Mahabharata*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the *Manusmriti*, the *Digha Nikaya*, and the *Mahavastu*. The Indian scholars sought an indigenous lineage of constitutionalist thinking which embedded the state in the 'rational' desire of people to escape mutual destruction. They found elements of Hobbesian social contract theory in some of these two-millennia old texts, whereby the state was born through a kind of social contract made by people to remove a violent and antagonistic state of nature. Thereby these scholars, drawing on ancient Indian political thought, embedded the state in the contractual will of the people. They often argued that state power was justified only as long as the government actually brought about the welfare of the people (providing a subtle critique thereby of British colonial rule which, in the perceptions of many Indian nationalists, exploited the people, instead of offering genuine welfare and protection) (Banerjee 2018: 228–33).

I have not yet discovered any direct evidence that these works of historical scholarship were read by Rajavamshi politicians. However, we do have evidence from a 1911 Rajavamshi text, authored by Jagat Mohan Devsimha Barman, that one of the main narratives in which these elite-Indian historians of the 1910s located a social contract theory – the story of Prithu, the primordial 'good' king, in the *Mahabharata* – was also discussed in Rajavamshi circles in order to show that a ruler (*raja*) was so called because he pleased (*ranjan*) his subjects and pursued their well-being (Barman 1911: 34–36). It seems likely that ancient Indian textual descriptions of an originary state of nature and mutual antagonism, and the birth of the state/kingship in response to the contractarian desire of the people to get rid of this stage of violence and fear, influenced the Rajavamshi discourse of 1918. Both the general familiarity that many Indians had with these texts, especially the *Mahabharata* – but also, at least ones with some contact with Sanskrit, with the *Manusmriti* (the latter was however very

controversial in relation to debates about caste and gender) – as well as the specific traction of these texts in the 1910s would lend some plausibility to this hypothesis. Whether there was in addition any influence of the Bengali/Indian historical scholarship of the 1910s – scholarship which was acutely conscious of European social contract theories, including Hobbes – remains an open question.

In parallel, there may have been an indigenous Bengali strand of thinking – though that may also have reworked in part the Sanskritic tradition – influencing the Rajavamshi discourse. In the *Chandimangal* tradition of early modern Bengal – of which the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century version of Mukunda is the best known variant – there is a fascinating description of an originary forest (*vana*) of mutually antagonistic and destructive animals. The animals worshipped the goddess Chandi and petitioned her to remove their condition of incessant fear (*sashanka*), and to bestow on them lack of fear (*niratanka*). In response, the goddess created a state, whereby rules were made to reduce violence amongst the animals, indeed to institute some measure of non-conflict (*avirodha*). Further, every animal was given a particular office, beginning with kingship (the lion) on to other positions (Mukunda 2007: 105–106; Banerjee 2010; Banerjee 2016a; Banerjee 2016b). The *Chandimangal* tradition was widely known across Bengal from at least the sixteenth century; in the context of northern Bengal, the text was cited in the famous Cooch Behar political chronicle about the birth of kingship in the region, Radhakrishna Das's *Gosanimangal* (1823–24) (Das 1977, pp. 2–3). The Rajavamshi discourse of 1918 – about the transition from an animal-like state of nature to the epoch of the state – may have had some roots in this widespread vernacular popular tradition about the transformation of bestiality – a literal forest of animals killing each other – into the order of the state. Finally, given the Western education received by a small section of the Rajavamshi elite, some direct exposure to European social contract theory, especially its Hobbesian variant, is of course also possible.

It needs underlining that the Rajavamshi report discussed above begins with the affirmation of the inevitability of the rule of the master/king. The discussion on the state of nature prepares the ground for this. This perspective differs from that of someone like Muhammad Ali, the celebrated anti-colonial Khilafat revolutionary, who, in the course of his trial in 1921 by the British, denounced the argument that the British had rescued Indians from a Hobbesian state of nature (Banerjee 2018: 359–60): an argument which purportedly justified colonial sovereignty as a neutral umpire between supposedly conflicting races, creeds, and castes. In contrast, the Rajavamshis affirmed loyalty both to the

British colonial state, and especially to King-Emperor George V – the *raja* who loomed most large in the Kshatriya Samiti's imagination in the 1910s – as well as to the ruler of the princely state of Cooch Behar. Like many similarly placed 'lower caste' movements in contemporaneous India, they saw the British as an ally who would give them employment (Rajavamshis joined the colonial army in large numbers during the First World War; many served in Mesopotamia, Egypt, France, and Belgium); access to higher education (hitherto often monopolized by high-caste elites); and above all, political representation. Rajavamshis had constituted a dominant social group in precolonial sub-Himalayan northern Bengal. But, in the colonial era, they had gradually lost control over land as well as political and administrative power in the face of immigrant Western-educated higher-caste (especially, Bengali) elites. Indeed, the very crystallization of 'high' and 'low' in the caste hierarchy, here as elsewhere in British India, was shaped in part by colonial interventions. The loss by Rajavamshis of social, economic, and political-administrative power was due to structural transformations wrought by colonialism: revenue maximization, demilitarization of martial-peasant groups, administrative modernization, growth of a strong and interventionist state, and the premium placed on Western education in the growing state apparatus. Nevertheless, the Kshatriya Samiti still saw the British as a possible ally who would rescue them from their current epoch of decline. By the 1930s, they were classified by the British as a Scheduled Caste, and they managed to wrest from the colonial state significant political representation at the provincial level, as well as some employment and educational benefits. They were also able to promote some pro-peasant measures through the colonial legislature. Moreover, the Rajavamshis ideologically positioned themselves as a kingly Kshatriya community with an aptitude for political authority. Indeed, the very name Rajavamshi means "of the royal lineage". This name is related to the role which various martial-peasant groups played in precolonial state formation in sub-Himalayan Bengal and western Assam, and especially in the birth (during the end-fifteenth/early-sixteenth century) and consolidation of the Koch kingdom (the ancestor of the Cooch Behar princely state and of various other ruling lineages across northern Bengal and Assam) (Banerjee 2018: 312–31). Given this overall context, it is understandable why the Rajavamshi discourse of 1918 would see the rule of the master or king as a structural necessity in the forward movement of history.

From the Rule of the Master to the Rule of Society

Yet, the Rajavamshi dialectic moves through a series of negations. The first negation – of unrestrained action (*uddama kriya*) – led to the rule of the mas-

ter, to the birth of restraint and domination. In the second negation of the dialectic, the rule of the master promoted feelings of union (*milanabhava*) among the people, which led the latter to gather together with the aim of bringing about progress (*paraspara miliya unnati*). But the rule of the master was unable to contain these feelings of sociability. Hence, gradually, the rule of society (*samajashasana*) came to acquire more importance than the rule of the master in the forward movement of humanity. The very success of the rule of the master sowed the seeds for its progressive negation. The rule of society offered the point of mediation between the rule of the master and self-rule. In historical terms, we can see this rule of society as a reference to precolonial-origin forms of community (*samaja*) organization which ensured some measure of group autonomy, as well as to the early twentieth century associational life of the Kshatriya Samiti itself. For example, one of the Samiti's main methods of consolidating the Rajavamshis was through the organization of *milana mahotsavas*, "great festivals of union" (Banerjee 2018: 328; on the discourse on *samaja* in colonial Bengal, see also Gupta 2009).

Further, the Rajavamshi discussion about *samaja* was a response to British devolution of powers to Indians. This is evident from a letter (preserved in both English and Bengali variants) that Panchanan Barma sent on behalf of the Samiti to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal in November 1917, seeking to meet the visiting Secretary of State for India Edwin Montagu. The British war-time promise, emblematized by Montagu's declaration of August 1917, to ensure "self-governing institutions" and "responsible government" in India (House of Commons 1918: 5) offered the immediate instigation for this. Expropriating the British concept of "self-governing institutions", and juxtaposing it with Rajavamshi concepts and practices of communitarian rule, Barma suggested that the "Kshatriya Community"/*kshatriyasamaja*, as a part of "Hindu Society"/*hindusamaja*, had traditionally been

> "internally governed by small Samajas or Societies each with its controlling head and a Panchayat or a council composed by the Pramanikas […]. These Samajas were in their respective spheres self-governing and representative, and worked by love […], blending the people as if in one body, making them respect the order and law […]. Their leaders as also the king himself were completely under the control of the law and order."

This allowed the Kshatriyas to be "loving confederates with all other similar Samajas as also the rest of mankind." The letter advocated that the British revitalize this heritage of local governance, of which elements still existed, by fostering "self-governing and self-improving (in Bengali, *atmashasani o atmotkarshi*) Institutions", and rendering "village Communities and Panchayats"

as "the basis of popular representation." Barma underscored that in government councils, "the representation must be thorough and every community high or low, and every interest", especially "of the small communities or interests", should be given due regard. Otherwise, there would only be "a rule of one part of the people over the other" (Samiti 1918: 50–55). The Kshatriya Samiti's objective, like that of many other 'lower caste' and minority community organizations of late colonial India, was to aim for a devolution of powers which would be truly representative, and not be merely monopolized by high-caste Hindu elites.

Lineages of Self-Government

The reference to *atmashasana* in this 1917 letter, which has come down to us as part of the same annual proceedings as the 1918 report we had been discussing so far, reveals the seeds of the third negation. This is the graduated negation of all exterior rule (*bahirer shasana*) – both *prabhushasana* and *samajashasana* – by *atmashasana*, self-rule. This self-rule had an ethical component, beautifully presented in the 1918 report as *sanniti* (*sat+niti*). *Sat* refers to "being, existing, [...] being present" (Monier-Williams 1960: 1134): in other words, to 'what is'. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak observes, *sat* thus implies "the True, the Good, the Right" (Chakravorty Spivak 1999: 302–303). Spivak draws on an older philosophical analysis by Martin Heidegger of the Indo-European etymologies of 'being' – which, apart from the Sanskrit variants, include Latin *esse/est*, English 'is', and German *sein* (Heidegger 2000: 74–76). *Sanniti* is thus not merely right/good precept (as I had translated it earlier, in a preliminary fashion). Rather, it is the precept/conduct (*niti*) which truly is, which is in conformity with Being itself. It allows our being, our self (*atman*), to manifest itself in its full presence. This government is *atmashasana*, the epiphanic thunderclap described as *apurvavani*, the wonderful (literally, unprecedented) voice. This is the rule which came out of one's inner being (*atma haite udbhuta shasana*). The rule of the outside prepared the ground for this. *Atmashasana* was prefigured – as the very use of the word for both institutionalized local self-governance as well as for a more abstract ethical-political mode of self-control (*atmasamyama*) shows – in the institutions, demands, and plans for representative governance. The moment of this prefiguration was the necessary mediation whereby the rule of the outside, and especially of the master, gradually became a slave/servant of self-rule. Representative governance cleared the ground for a deeper autonomy of the self.

As visible from the Samiti's emphasis on non-majoritarian political representation – especially of subaltern and minority communities, the "low" and

the "small" of the 1917 letter – *atmashasana* sketched a "democracy to come". (I borrow this phrase with its messianic connotations from Jacques Derrida: see Derrida 1994.) Simultaneously, the discourse on *atmashasana* also had a material, especially agrarian, grounding, which is obscured by the abstract elegance of the 1918 report. In various interwar Rajavamshi discourses, we find a strong emphasis on being *atmanirbhara* (self-reliant). The discourse on *atmashasana* cannot be completely understood without this other materially-grounded perspective. Rajavamshi activists saw themselves as the true generators of wealth (*dhana*) in society. Drawing on precolonial South Asian traditions, they presented the act of ploughing the soil as a sacred act, which rendered peasants similar to gods and kings. Rajavamshis claimed that their agricultural activities supported society, and yet the elites did not give them due recognition. They resented the way in which they were being displaced from ownership and control of land, while their labour (*shrama*) was being robbed (*apaharana*) by the elites, such as by big companies and moneylenders. Immigrant elites were cast as "foreign" (*bhinna deshiyera*) colonizers who sought to reduce peasants into an animal-like state (*pashur nyaya*, *pashubhava*). Rajavamshis criticized the modes of production and exchange through which raw materials and semi-finished products were extracted from them by merchants and industrialists from afar, while finished commodities were sold back to them at high prices. A new discourse on exploitation (*nishpeshana*) developed in reaction to these processes. A novel class consciousness emerged as well, pitting the rich (*dhani loka*) against the poor (*garib*, *nirdhana*): Rajavamshis identified themselves as part of the latter category. Simultaneously, sections of peasant elites sought to form their own companies, cooperatives, banks, and so on, whereby they could empower themselves economically against high-caste immigrant elites (Banerjee 2018: 322–324, 328–329). I have not yet detected any overt references to Marxism in these discourses. However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 generated enormous excitement in India, including in Bengal, in the interwar years; the Communist Party of India was founded in 1920. There is a high probability that the Rajavamshi discourse about exploitation of the poor drew on Marxist – or at least, broadly, socialist – debates. Even if the Rajavamshis had never directly read Hegel (as is likely the case), there could have been an indirect left-Hegelian imprint, via Marxism, on their dialectic.

Admittedly, the Kshatriya Samiti's interventions were marked by inequality: the concerns of peasant elites were often prioritized over those of lower class peasants, including sharecroppers and landless labourers (Basu 2003). Nevertheless, in a very fundamental sense, a new discourse on self-rule was generated which derived its material charge from the claim that Rajavamshi

peasants ploughed the land, generated the true wealth of society, gave support (*avalambana*) and shelter (*ashraya*) to the whole of society, and therefore deserved economic empowerment, political representation, and social recognition. From the Rajavamshi perspective, the rich and the powerful too thus depended (*bharsa*) on the peasants. It was their labour (*shrama*), their work (*kaj*) – whether as peasants or as soldiers – which rendered Rajavamshis into divine and kingly beings, into those capable of *atmashasana*. The demand for political representation was rooted, in part, in the claim of labour. This is starkly visible, for example, in the Rajavamshi activist Upendranath Barman's poem 'Langaler Dabi' (The Claim of the Plough): a manifesto for the 1937 legislative elections which marked the coming of age of 'lower caste' peasant politics in Bengal (Banerjee 2018: 316–330, 410). Re-reading the 1918 report through this long-term lens, we clearly see how the movement of the dialectic from heteronomy to autonomy was necessarily mediated through labour. Peasants' labour gave substance to their claim for political autonomy. Through their agrarian and military labour, as well as through their political and conceptual work in self-organization, they achieved *atmashasana*. Labour, which was initially a marker of their servitude, their low status, which allowed elites to denigrate them, turned through the dialectic into the marker of self-reliance and freedom. (For a striking example of this inversion, see Nabinchandra Barma's arguments in a 1919 meeting: Banerjee 2018: 322–323). We cannot but be reminded of Hegel's celebrated lines from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807):

> *"The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman. […] But just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so, too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence"* (Hegel 1910: 184).

Emancipation, Self, and the Negation of Rule

In the final stage of the Rajavamshi dialectic, all rule, even self-rule, is negated. Like every other previous phase of rule, self-rule (*atmashasana*) sowed the seeds for its own negation. The self became so stainless (*nirmala*) as it approached the ultimate goal (*charama lakshya*) that both exterior rule and interior rule withered away. All government simply ceased to be, like so many shackles that disintegrated to dust. What was this ultimate goal? The 1918 report speaks in seemingly individuated terms. The self realises its fullness, it reaches plenitude of desire, of satisfaction, of joy. But Panchanan Barma's 1917 letter to the Government of Bengal gives another elaboration more engaged

with alterity. It noted that, for the Samiti, "final emancipation of the souls (*jivatmar vimukti-sadhan*) by the finding of the great soul in all we see (*drishyaman jagat madhye paramatmar darshan*), is the goal (*charama uddeshya*)" (Samiti 1918: 51, 54). Ostensibly, this is pure metaphysical language, rooted in precolonial Indian, especially Vedantic, worldviews. Scholars have studied in granular detail the rise of Vedantic thinking in early modern and colonial India, and related this trajectory to ideological imperatives of elite Indian actors (e.g. Sartori 2008; Nicholson 2010). But there is still significant research vacuum regarding the traction of Vedanta-inflected conceptual vocabularies in non-elite political thought. One could here mention the interwar Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, who related Vedantic and Islamic structures of thought in order to formulate a non-sectarian grammar of anti-colonial democratic revolution, geared especially towards the empowerment of peasants and other labouring classes as well as women (Banerjee 2018: 239–240, 363–368, 371, 384). The Rajavamshi actors I have analysed embody another strand of this Vedanta-inflected popular politics. Their vision of non-majoritarian subalternized democratization was grounded in a metaphysics of seeing the divine in all, and of thus achieving emancipation (*vimukti*).

Conclusion

Where does one place the Rajavamshi dialectic of 1918 within global intellectual history? In terms of studying "sites of citation" (Manjapra 2014: 288, citing Ricci 2011), the inexorable abstraction of the dialectic gives us little scope for absolute certitude. Influences of Sanskritic as well as Bengali traditions about the transition from an originary state of anarchy to the epoch of the state; indirect influence of Hobbes; British promises of self-government; some amount of (perhaps in part, Soviet-origin) Marxist, or at least broadly socialist, understanding about labour, wealth, and exploitation; Vedantic metaphysics: all these may have converged in the Rajavamshi dialectic, though we cannot pinpoint the exact sources. We may, without too much error, conceive of the Rajavamshi discourse as the product of transcontinental exchanges of ideas. However, in my opinion, what makes the Rajavamshi report of 1918 'global' in a very fundamental mode is its format of relentless generalization. The way in which it conceptualized the dialectical transition from heteronomy to autonomy could speak to anyone, anywhere in the world, and lose none of its traction. By divesting itself of specific communitarian or national referents, this dialectic made itself potentially useful to any subaltern. (This does not hold true for many other parts of the Kshatriya Samiti's archive, which often also remained bounded within communitarian horizons.) When read with other interwar

Rajavamshi discussions, we realise that, at certain moments, the Rajavamshi archive could generate a 'global' way of thinking because this archive grounded itself in categories – the world (*jagat*), nature (*prakriti*), the rule of the outside (*bahirer shasana*), self-rule/autonomy (*atmashasana*), end of rule, labour/work (*shrama/kaj*), exploitation (*nishpeshana*), the human being (*manusha*), the animal (*jantu*, *pashu*), the self (*atma*), emancipation (*vimukti*) – which could, in principle, appeal to anyone in the world in a condition of heteronomy, and even to anyone outside the colonial universe of commercialized agriculture which the Rajavamshis inhabited.[1] I suggest that the Rajavamshi archive achieved its abstraction and globality – above and beyond any question of South Asian, European, and Soviet intellectual 'influence' – because it emerged out of the actual experiences of degradation (loss of land, proletarianization, caste humiliation, and so on), the life-worlds of agrarian and military labour, as well as the conditions of collective social and political organization, of a peasant community in revolt. Even if there were variegated 'external' influences on Rajavamshi concept-production, the more significant question – as to why these sources at all gained traction within, and were transfiguratively re-authored by, Rajavamshi thought – can only be answered through a deeper probing of Rajavamshi political ethics itself, and not through a mere study of pathways of intellectual pollination.

This grand tendency towards subaltern-oriented abstraction and generalization does not imply that the Rajavamshi peasant community did not bear its own internal hierarchies, especially along lines of class and gender. In interwar Rajavamshi politics, peasant elites were generally prioritized over small peasants, sharecroppers, and landless labourers; men had much greater political and intellectual agency than women. Further, Rajavamshi politics, in affirming loyalty to the British colonial state, limited the possibilities of its revolutionary transgressiveness. Apart from having obvious practical consequences, the socio-political limitations of Rajavamshi thought also had deep conceptual implications. Thus, unlike Muhammad Ali (see above), the Rajavamshis accepted the inevitability of a Hobbesian transition from anarchy to state as well as, concretely, loyalty to the British sovereign. In imagining themselves to be a kingly Kshatriya community, they continued to offer some (circumscribed) validation for caste hierarchies. In terms of modes of labour and production, the act of

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[1] See, however, Sartori (2014) for a discussion on the relation between colonial agrarian commercialization and Bengali Muslim peasant thinking about autonomy. Sartori identifies in these Muslim discourses ways of thinking about the constitutive nexus between labour and property, comparable to certain Lockean and Marxian strands: he pins responsibility for this parallelism on the global dynamic of the capitalist mode of production.

ploughing (associated with men) received far more reverence and dignity than the act of sowing seeds (where women also participated). We could multiply instances of such limits of Rajavamshi political thought.

Nevertheless, we should be wary of dismissing the Rajavamshi breakthrough. That Rajavamshis could conceptualize a world where every epoch of rule sowed the seeds of its own destruction, until finally all government and exploitation would cease in anarchist joy; that it could hold out the promise of an era when everyone would be materially and spiritually free, and realise their social and ethical connection with each other: this embodies a majestic intellectual achievement. Such grand thinking remains outside the limits of most political discourses regnant today. Here, the progressive stages of negation of negation ultimately led to a plenitude (*purnatva*) of being. The revolutionary potency of this dialectic has scarcely diminished with time. For intellectual historians interested in tracking the multi-sited provenance of modern globally-oriented thinking, this peasant dialectic, produced from a remote corner of agrarian Bengal, should have at least as much value as the contributions of Hegel and other canonical thinkers. Here we find a fascinating register of subaltern globality. In impelling us to relentlessly negate every condition of servitude – whether imposed by the state or by the community and society, or even by the fetters we impose on our own selves – this dialectic of 1918 still carries a tremendous power to unbind the world.

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