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Hierarchy as a Democratic Value in India
An Informal Essay[1]

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What are India's democratic values? Metropolitan common sense tells us that democracy is an essentially egalitarian political form and that to be good democrats, people, wherever they are and whoever they may be, must espouse equality as a political value. In this essay I challenge this conviction by suggesting that hierarchy is a pivotal value in India's democratic life. Drawing on 15 years of ethnographic work conducted across northern India and touching on the history of democratic thinking in Europe, from Aristotle to Rousseau and Bernard Manin, the essay offers comparative reflections on the nature of "democratic values" in a bid for a more ethnographically grounded theory of democratic life.

In the 70-odd years since India's independence, much ink had been spilled over its democracy: its capacity to mobilize and failures to include; its plebeization and criminalization; its resilience, intensity, diversity, and size.[2] And yet no discussion, much less debate, has focused on India's democratic values—the ideas that motivate and orient its citizens' engagement in democratic life. Celebrations of India's democracy are often accompanied by comments on the spread of "democratic values" (e.g., Banerjee 2011; Béteille 1986:121–123; Joshi 1982), but the question of what exactly these values are remains largely unremarked.[3] It is as if we already know what they are, as if they require no further reflection. Central to this presumptive set of democratic values is equality, which analysts treat as democracy's very essence: what makes democracy what it is and sets it apart from other forms of politics.

But in the democratic politics I have observed across northern India, the idea of equality neither framed the value that people ascribed to democracy nor animated their involvement in it.[4] What oriented their democratic engagement instead was the value they attached to hierarchy, which centrally shaped their political and otherwise lives. This essay is a brief report on why my Indian interlocutors see value in hierarchy, what kind of value it is, and how it informs their democratic politics. It is also a prompt for broader comparative reflections on democratic values and on democracy as a political value, wherever we may find it in the world.

But first a note on why any attempt to understand how people act within and think about democracy, in India or anywhere else, demands from us that we pay special attention to values. Quite apart from the fact that we cannot make sense of politics without understanding the values that shape people's judgments, orient their decisions, and motivate their pursuits, the need to reflect on democratic values is particularly pressing because we think that we already know what these values are. If in discussions of other features of global political modernity—state, bureaucracy, nationhood—social scientists have had much to say about their ideological content: the values that Euro-American history has charged them with (e.g., Althusser 1970; Anderson 1983; Herzfeld 1992), how these values have changed over time (e.g., Ball, Farr, and Hanson 1989), and ways in which they have transformed in different cultures (e.g., Kapferer 1988; Sharma and Gupta 2009; Wright 2004), when it comes to democracy, it is as if we are dealing with something unchanging and absolute, a political order perceived universally through the same set of basic values.

1. This echoes the title of A. K. Ramanujan's (1989) well-known essay, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," as well as its genre and spirit. It is an essay, not a formal research article, meant as a playful but serious conversation starter, not a closing statement in a debate.

2. This essay was presented in King's College London, University of Pennsylvania, as well as Oxford and Columbia Universities, and I am grateful to their audiences and especially Allison Busch, Kanchan Chandra, John Dunn, Sudipta Kaviraj, Sheldon Pollock, and Jonathan Spencer. Conversations with Lisa Mitchell have long been a source of inspiration, and dialogues with John Dunn have made the writing process at once instructive, infuriating, and fun. It was the reviewers at the *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Social Analysis*, and *Current Anthropology* whose helpful comments convinced me of the urgent need to publish this piece.

3. Although see Banerjee (2018), Michelutti (2007), Piliavsky (2014*c*), Price (1989), and Price and Ruud (2012), who have been showing the importance of kingship and kinship in India's democratic imaginations.

4. This essay draws on ethnographic observations made in rural and urban Rajasthan, rural Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi since 2002 and more concertedly during a year of research on democratic cultures in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi in 2013. The argument is spelled out in ethnographic detail elsewhere (Piliavsky 2014*a*, 2015, 2019).

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It is not that the Euro-American concept of democracy has altogether escaped scrutiny.[5] While political theorists have been prizing the idea of democracy away from Euro-American ideals and institutions,[6] anthropologists have been documenting the different paths of democratization, varied attitudes to democracy and resistance to it, how democracy has changed and adapted to local political cultures, and the chaos that it has wreaked around the world.[7] And yet despite many challenges to Western democratic theory, its egalitarian value-core still remains intact. Even democracy's sharpest critics see it as a political order that is egalitarian by essence and origin: a government of political equals where every mentally and morally competent citizen gets an equal say in how their country is run.[8] Each has an equal right to vote and stand for political office, to speak, associate, and assemble for political purposes; each is politically equal not only to her fellow citizens but also to those she elects to rule in her stead and on her behalf. Our presidents and prime ministers are not our masters but fellow citizens, whom we entrust temporarily with executing our political will.

Or at least this is how it is meant to be. When we speak about democratic equality, most of us do not, of course, think that we are describing observable fact. Only the most ingenuous would insist that citizens of democratic states have an actually equal say in how their countries are run, that they have truly equal access to political office or to having their political views heard and acted upon in equal measure. What we mean instead is equality as a normative principle—a value—that makes democracy a political good and that is basic to a democrat's sense of legitimacy and justice, that moors his visions of how a political community, action, and responsibility ought properly to be organized.

Such naturalization of equality as the democratic value par excellence makes us blind to the variety of democratic relations across space and time, in different cultures, including Euro-America's own present and past, and the different values that guide their course. How and why equality has become enthroned as the infallible, all-purpose political good and the necessary condition of democracy is a task for historians.[9] Strip this history back, however, and what there is, is a much more minimal, normatively open-ended idea that can absorb whatever values shape a given society's sense of political community, authority, and responsibility. After all, the Greek word *demokratia* refers to nothing more than "a people's rule" or to political power being shared in one or another way by a people within a polity (Farrar 1989). The term *demos* describes nothing more than "a collective body" (Ober 2008:4)—any kind of collective body, not necessarily a society of equals. The idea is, simply, that if kingdoms and caliphates concentrate power in the hands of their rulers, democracies should distribute it among the ruled. In itself, this says nothing whatever about how this is to be achieved: through what moral, political, or relational principles, through what kinds of social, legal, or institutional means. It does not tell us who these people are or how they should be organized, or how they should relate to their rulers, or about the shape of their government (Dunn 2014, 2018). It tells us nothing whatever about equality of political participation or equality of political community, nothing about equal citizenship—only about the involvement of the governed in their governance.

The global success of democracy, its widespread (although by no means universal) appeal, rests precisely on this normative openness of the idea. For otherwise, how could democracy possibly migrate, settle, and naturalize so readily around the world, if to be good democrats—to believe in democracy as a political good and enact it in good faith—people would have to believe in equality as the supreme social and political good? For historically and ethnographically, egalitarianism is exceedingly rare, confined chiefly to small-scale societies of hunters and gatherers in places like Siberia, Papua New Guinea, or the Amazon (Cashdan 1980; Robbins 1994; Woodburn 1982). Were egalitarianism democracy's necessary condition, most of the world would have to undergo a major cultural revolution; it would need to embrace radically new ideas about what persons should be like and how relations between them should be organized—ideas that are foreign, and often repugnant, to many (Haynes and Hickel 2016). It is impossible to assess accurately the extent and velocity of cultural change, but we can be sure that nothing so seismic—no global conversion to egalitarianism—has occurred. This poses no problem, however, for social scientists, most of whom assume (if rarely discuss openly) that no cultural change is required to accommodate democracy. The idea is that once democracy arrives in a country, once elections are instituted and universal suffrage secured, its people, whoever they are, wherever they may be, and however they may imagine their collective lives, are bound to embrace equality as a social and political ideal—for scratch the cultural surface; throw off the yoke of oppressive, feudal regimes; or shed the fetters of "false consciousness" and you will find a species of born egalitarians covering the surface of the globe.[10]

Observers who take culture more seriously tend to be less sanguine about democracy's global prospects, for they think many cultures at base incompatible with it. Churchill was one of many who thought democracy a cultural misfit in India, a place too hierarchically minded to cope with the egalitarian demands of democratic life (Weigold 2010). Needless to say,

5. I mean the view entertained by Western political theorists, if not necessarily one held by Euro-American political actors themselves.

6. See, e.g., Bell (2009), Chatterjee and Katznelson (2012), Dunn (2014, 2018), Kaviraj (2011), Mounk (2018), and Pabst (2019).

7. See, e.g., Banerjee (2009), Hickel (2015), Michelutti (2007), Paley (2008), Ruud and Heierstad (2016), Sabloff (2016), Witsoe (2013), and Wouters and Tunyi (2018).

8. "Democracy," writes Sudipta Kaviraj (1998), "is based, even in its most limited, formal, political sense, on a principle of equality" (148). And Partha Chatterjee has described India's democratization as "a tidewave of equality," which carried the country "'towards equality' from an inegalitarian social order at independence" (Chatterjee and Katznelson 2012:16).

9. See, e.g., Bejan (2016), Hoekstra (2013), Steinhoff (2015), and Waldron (2002).

10. Perhaps the best-known statement to the effect is Fukuyama's (2006), a point also made by Kaviraj (2011:3).

he was less than prescient. And he was wrong on two counts. The first is self-evident—democracy spread like wildfire in India—and the second is less so. He was also wrong about hierarchy getting in democracy's way, for in India while hierarchy persists as a crucial social and political value, Indian citizens have proven themselves avid democrats. What I will suggest in this essay is that in India hierarchy has not only proven no obstacle to democratization but has in fact been its crucial vehicle.

But first, a few words on "hierarchy," on what I do and do not mean by the word. As a distinctive concept, an idea that reveals something about the world that others do not, "hierarchy" refers to differences of worth and power as a social good. Ideas about why these differences are valuable, what kind of good they may deliver, and how, vary from place to place. But the essential thing about hierarchy, anywhere, is that it is not a descriptive antonym of equality but a prescriptive counterpart to egalitarianism. It is a normative idea about social relations, not an order of social stratification, as Louis Dumont, the most important modern theorist of hierarchy, has taught (1980, 1981, 1986, 1994).

This idea, however, was lost on subsequent generations of South Asianists, who rejected Dumont's theory of hierarchy as an arrangement of castes and, with it, any attempt to understand hierarchy as a social principle.[11] This rejection was in step with the regional social sciences' turn away from the study of local categories, values, and ideas of personhood and relatedness to India's social and political problems (anticolonialism, development, democratization, social and political activism, poverty and social "uplift"). As social scientists embraced the vision of India's newfound modernity, older scholarship on endogenous social forms and norms fell into disrepute, with scholars rejecting the very idea that thinking seriously, let alone sympathetically, about hierarchy was fruitful or even ethically sound.

At fault were not only changing academic fashions but also Dumont's work itself. His turgid vision of caste hierarchy universalized Brahminical values, left little room for movement and change, and bore little resemblance to the polyphony, dynamism, and contentiousness of Indian life.[12] Dumont also conflated hierarchy with caste—relational principles with communal identity—creating lasting confusion in regional scholarship (on which more shortly). Perhaps most fatally, his theory of caste hierarchy as a stable social totality resembles visions of social life that are abroad in India much less than those that have long been around in Europe.[13] The idea of hierarchy as a pyramid of rank graded by degrees of proximity to a single paramount value and comprising a whole with a bottom and top has a long pedigree in Christian Europe. Coined in the sixth century by Pseudo-Dionysus to describe ranks of angels, the word "hierarchy" later referred to the ranks of priests and finally of the whole universe: to the Great Chain of Being or a cosmic totality in which everything, from mushrooms to angels, was arranged in a ladder of rank leading up to God (Huizinga 1955 [1919]; Lovejoy 1936; Verdier 2006). This conception of hierarchy as a ranked totality that has a bottom and a top, and that is depicted usually as a pyramid, has had a long career in Christian theology and the (post-Christian) social sciences (James 1984). This includes Dumont's writings on India, where the creator-God is replaced with the idea of ritual purity but the ranked whole oriented toward and organized through a single sovereign value remained intact.[14] This picture certainly has parallels in Brahminical theology, but it is at variance with most ethnographically documented visions of India's social life.

While Dumont has continued to inspire anthropologists working across the world,[15] Indianists have been decisively put off hierarchy. And so while hierarchy remains a patently crucial fact of Indian social life, no theoretical debate now surrounds it—only denunciation. Whenever scholars of India now mention "hierarchy," what they really mean is inequality: a social ill, an unjust and exploitative order that removes people's agency, power, and dignity. The confusion of hierarchy for inequality is such a staple of regional social science that the entry on "hierarchy" in a recent collection of *Keywords for Modern India* (Jeffrey and Harriss 2014) simply redirects readers to "inequality."

This is no minor muddle but a wholesale denial of hierarchical value. When we reduce hierarchy to "inequality," we reject a priori the very possibility of nonegalitarian, vertical, hierarchical normativity, turning a value into a vice: advocacy of oppression, collusion with the elites, or, in the words of one of this essay's peer reviewers, a "naturalization of domination." This confusion arises from the social scientists' own commitment to equality as an all-purpose good, a commitment that presents its own normative judgment as a self-evident fact and so addles any attempt to appreciate other normative sensibilities.[16] Pronouncements of "inequality," which, as Talcott Parsons remarked long ago (1970), are value judgments—there can be racial inequality only among people who place value in skin color or wealth inequality among people who value wealth—often appear in the writings of social scientists as statements of natural fact. The hegemony of this egalo-normative sensibility is precisely what Dumont pushed against. It is only unfortunate

11. For a summary of Dumont's critics, see Parry (1998).

12. While in his comparative work on hierarchy as a structure of value, Dumont was concerned with action and change (Duarte and Robbins 2017:660–672; Robbins and Siikala 2014), in his writings on India, this concern barely features. He was the first to note the major shift in the structure of caste, its "substantialization" (Dumont 1980:226), or the shift away from hierarchical complementarity, but he did not account for it theoretically (see Bairy 2010, chap. 1).

13. For a fuller treatment of what follows, see Piliavsky (2020, chap. 1).

14. Dumont's idea of hierarchy as an encompassment of opposites was an afterthought, which appeared in the afterword of the expanded 1980 edition and did not inform his substantive analysis of India (on this, see Graeber 1997; Macfarlane 1993).

15. See, e.g., Ansell (2014), Hickel (2015), Keeler (2017), Peacock (2015), Rio and Smedal (2009), and Robbins (2004).

16. I am summarizing a number of points already made by Dumont.

that in the study of India he scuppered this eye-opening project by painting an implausible picture of Indian social life.

But if we suspend the belief that equality must be the necessary condition for a just and dignified human life, for fair and responsive politics, it should be easy enough to see that differences of status, power, and wealth are not in themselves good or bad but can be both a good thing and a bad thing. Nobody, whether committed to the ideal of equality, thinks well of a situation where some have a great deal of money, power, and privilege that allows them to do whatever they please to those with less. Some people no doubt enjoy unbridled power, but nobody thinks well of exploitation in principle. But inequality need not be exploitative. It can also provide a structure of care and responsibility. Think, for instance, of the quintessentially hierarchical relationship in your own life: the parent-child relation. It is by definition unequal: socially, morally, legally, economically. But were you to describe it to someone who knew nothing of it as a relation of "inequality," you would fail to convey what it is really about: what it is like to be in it, the kinds of pressures and pleasures that parents and children experience, what they expect from each other and from themselves, and how they are judged and judge one another. Relations between parents and children can no doubt be abusive, conflictual, difficult, dissatisfied. Indeed, their intense intimacy makes them especially prone to trouble. But to understand these dissatisfactions, we need to understand what people are dissatisfied with, what kinds of expectations they feel have been broken. The core of parent-child relations in the experience of most of this essay's readers will be an assumption of responsibility based on essential inequality (moral, legal, financial), where the parents' superiority obliges them to greater and more intense forms of responsibility toward children. As anthropologists have repeatedly shown across cultures, what makes someone a parent is not shared genes but the assumption of responsibility for their children (see Strathern 2011). This is as widespread a cultural fact as a global legal reality.

What hierarchy is, in contradistinction to inequality—what indeed makes hierarchy the obverse of inequality—is a structure of responsibility. And this idea, I shall insist, is basic to hierarchical normativities, wherever we may find them. Hierarchical logic aligns responsibility with social standing and the capacity to act effectively in and on the world. People with greater wealth, status, and power are held more responsible than those with less. This idea was neatly summed up in the formula of the ancien régime—noblesse oblige—which is to say that privilege obligates. While Dumont paid little attention to responsibility in his work on India (the word appears but once in *Homo Hierarchicus*), the conception of hierarchy as a logic of responsibility is central to older anthropological literature, South Asianist and otherwise. It is at the heart of the Africanist literature on chieftaincy as a structure of social care (Feeley-Harnik 1985; Ferguson 2013), of the anthropology of leadership (Lewis 1974), and of comparative work on kingship as an order of responsible generosity (e.g., Geertz 1980; Graeber and Sahlins 2017; Tambiah 1977).

In South Asian studies the idea was first articulated by A. M. Hocart (1936, 1950) and further developed by ethnographers of village patronage, or *jajmāni* relations.[17] William Wiser (1936), who first analyzed *jajmāni* relations in a North Indian village, described caste hierarchy not as a ladder of purity and pollution but as a system of responsibility, where caste rank was established through mutually obligated ritual and economic exchange. Castes derived their worth not from ritual purity but from their economic and ritual relations to other castes. These ideas were further developed by Dumont's most effective critics, who rejected his model of purity and pollution in favor of a moral logic of obligation and exchange (Dirks 1987; Marriott 1959; Quigley 1993; Raheja 1988). Building on this work, I have argued elsewhere that what people value about hierarchy in rural North India is neither a social pyramid nor a social whole nor a ladder of rank but rather a relational logic of mutual expectation—with value located inside relations—structured by differences of rank and role (Piliavsky 2020).

As in the parent-child relation, the responsibility borne by superiors is greater not only in degree but also in kind. Just as parents are not responsible *to* their children—not merely accountable to them—but responsible *for* them, in a hierarchical logic superiors should be responsible for the well-being of their subordinates. These are ideal horizons, but their force in shaping how people judge, decide, and act is not diminished by the distance of their abstraction. This powerful model of responsibility is not confined to the so-called traditional, hierarchical societies but also informs the so-called modern, egalitarian ones. Think of the "family values" rooted in the hierarchies of generation and gender, which are central to American political rhetoric (Ginsburg 1989). Or think of the rage felt currently across Europe and the US at the legal difficulty of holding economic or political grandees—heads of banks, states, corporations—personally to account. Here, while states shed increasing loads of responsibility onto individual citizens (Shamir 2008), citizens imbue the powers above with intense personal responsibility and the lion's share of blame.

In India, despite changes to the "traditional" caste hierarchy, the country has not undergone an anti-Copernican cultural revolution, suddenly imagining their world as socially flat. Egalitarian ideas have no doubt made inroads (and they were there in premodern India too), but they have not done so to the extent that could account for the scale of India's democratic boom across differences of caste, class, income, cities and villages, and education. The logic of hierarchical responsibility has vanished neither from ambient social life nor from politics. Whether in households or temples or at political rallies, people expect their superiors to be responsible for them, to care for them, to be there for them in times of need. This idea is visible in the choreography of popular politics and local conceptions of corruption, audible in the language of political appeals, palpable in descriptions of and interactions with political leaders and their self-styling during campaigns. Let me explain.

17. For a recent overview, see Piliavsky (2014*a*:156–161).

Right across the country voters celebrate their political leaders as kings and gods, stage spectacles of coronation, and install their images in temples.[18] This is just as true of politics on the ideological "right" as it is on the "left": followers venerate Modi and Mayawati much as they venerate Sonia Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee. Nor is it exclusively "poor people's politics" (Chatterjee 2011); the rich, the educated, and the urbane worship politicians no less than do poor and illiterate villagers (Piliavsky 2015). Step into one of the thousands of *darbārs* (literally, "royal courts"), or daily meetings with constituents held by Indian politicians, and you will hear constituents address them as *mā-ī-bāp* (mother-and-father), *anndātā* (bread giver), *sarkār* (lord), *dādā* (grandfather, big brother), or simply "boss"—the superiors' terms of address and certainly not something you would hear in a British member of Parliament's constituent surgery (Piliavsky 2014*c*, 2020).

Political commentators demur at the worship of politicians as an archaic eccentricity of local political culture or deride it as a feudal survival.[19] They say that here politicians run constituencies like feudal fiefdoms, where resources and influence run down personal lines of command. Instead of legislating on behalf of their voters, Indian parliamentarians allocate the state's fiscal, legal, and administrative resources as personal favors in a top-down system where the drastically disempowered citizen is left to beg and appease those in power by means that sometimes take the form as grotesque as deification. You may well extoll India's electoral energy, critics say, but this is not democracy as democracy ought to be.[20] This is democracy gone topsy-turvy, with democratic power relations arranged back to front. Here politicians are not people's representatives but sovereigns of citizen-subjects.

But anyone who has watched Indian voters negotiate demands with their political representatives knows that the electorate here is anything but submissive. In personal interactions with politicians (Piliavsky 2015; Roy 2018), much as in publicly staged claims (e.g., Banerjee 2018; Subramanian 2009), Indian citizens are relentless in pressing demands on their representatives (Mitchell 2023). From the building of roads and schools to the funding of weddings and hospital treatments, Indian politicians are expected to take full responsibility for their constituents' well-being—indeed, for their lives. When people lament widespread "corruption," what they often mean is not the misuse of public office for private gain, not embezzlement or political favoritism, but the failure of politicians to protect and provide in good measure for "their people" (e.g., Price and Dusi 2014). A corrupt politician is not crooked but stingy; he betrays "his people," not political office.

Needless to say, in India as anywhere else, more often than not politicians fail to deliver, or to deliver anything like what people hope for, causing grave disappointment. The members of Parliament and members of the Legislative Assembly I spent a year researching in Rajasthan (2012–2013) complained bitterly that their constituents did not understand the limits of a politician's role, that they had "primitive thinking," no sense of how the modern state really works or of the limits on the powers of politicians, who are treated like omnipotent kings (Piliavsky 2015:23). And yet, despite these complaints, no career politician, no one who hopes to be reelected, can safely ignore their electors' demands. And so politicians press bureaucrats and policemen to do things for their constituents and dole vast sums of cash out of pocket to fund all kinds of public and private goods, from roads to weddings and communal taps. If British parliamentarians complain that they have been reduced to the role of social workers, to having to help their constituents (rightfully, the work of the state) instead of making laws, in India politicians speak proudly of being "social workers" who help "their people" (e.g., Berenschot 2010, 2011; Björkman 2015; Piliavsky and Sbriccoli 2016). Their promises of personal care and generosity are not grounded in claims to identity or any kind of equivalence but in a robustly vertical social imagination, often in the language of kingly largesse (Michelutti 2007; Piliavsky 2014*a*, 2015; Price 2014).

Political representation in India, you might concede, may well be structured hierarchically, through the lordly idiom (e.g., Burghart 1996; Piliavsky 2014*b*; Price 1989). But what of equality of political participation, as democracy's normative cornerstone? Does not every Indian citizen feel personally entitled to, dignified and empowered by, having a vote of her own? Is not the fact of India's hard-won universal suffrage, which gives each adult citizen a voice of their own, in itself cherished by Indian citizens? No doubt, some Indian citizens value precisely this sense of political equivalence (Banerjee 2011), but for most of those I have known, the vote meant chiefly something else. For them, it was first and foremost a connection to a leader, an expression of loyalty that tied them to other voters, not horizontally through shared political judgment, citizenship, or ideological commitment but vertically via ties to a leader. As an expression of abstract opinion or citizenly voice, for them, the vote had little meaning.

When in the 2014 general election the option to vote "none of the above" (NOTA) first appeared on ballots, it appealed or even made sense to few. My friends in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh could not understand *who* exactly was NOTA. When I explained to a middle-aged farmer from southern Rajasthan that NOTA was not in fact a person and to vote for NOTA was to vote for no one, he was dumbstruck: "Why should I spoil my vote?" he asked. "Why would I throw my vote away?" To him, the vote was not a statement of abstract political preference, a marker of political equality, the capacity to have one's say, an assertion of his rights, or an expression of

18. See Bate (2010), Copeman (2004), Michelutti (2007), Piliavsky (2014*b*), and Sen (2022).

19. While Indian journalists react to such practices with bemused condescension (Piliavsky 2014:1), most prominent academic analysts of Indian politics (such as Partha Chatterjee, Ram Guha; Sunil Khilnani, Sudipta Kaviraj, or Pratap Bhanu Mehta) give them no space on the pages of their books.

20. For a typical view, see https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/danger-of-deification/296875.

citizenship.[21] His vote was first and foremost a *relationship*. And as a symbol of political participation or an expression of abstract political views, it was "a waste." For him voting was not a matter of joining a community of political equals, nor was it an opinion tool, but it was a means of allying to a political leader. In other words, "political participation" was not a matter of joining a community of equal voters but rather an opportunity to form a hierarchical relation with a powerful figure, without whom political desires remained mere fantasy.

Hierarchy is certainly not the only show in town. No value excludes other values, none is comprehensive or evenly distributed in any society, none is immune to challenge and change. The egalitarian language of rights, citizenship, and brotherhood is part of many Indian citizens' political vocabularies, some new (e.g., Béteille 1986; Hansen 2001:72–73; Kohli 2001) and some quite old (Banerjee 2018; Rawat 2011). Democratic competition has given rise to new political collectivities—caste conglomerates and associations, political parties and ethnic secession movements, collectives of social and political activists—that reject any pecking order and assert their position as rivals for political and economic resources. In fact, it was Dumont (1980) himself who some time ago termed the shift from "traditional caste-hierarchy" to a collection of "impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another" "substantialization" (226). Since then, the process has been described at length by scholars, who have shown that caste as communal identity is perfectly separable from hierarchy as a principle of social relations.[22] This fact, however, oddly eludes current scholars of India, who, when they say "hierarchy," almost always mean "caste."[23] But caste is not hierarchy, and hierarchy is not caste. Hierarchical norms are not confined to relations between castes, as Dumont suggested. And while the "traditional" caste order has certainly been unsettled by forces of modernity,[24] foremost among them the "democratic revolution" (Kaviraj 2011, 2012), hierarchy patently flourishes in every corner of Indian life, from formal to familiar settings, from the village hearths to the New Delhi drawing rooms; in gestures, marriage arrangements, and political choice, hierarchy is the ordinary grammar of life.

And yet egalitarianism, too, has a place. Dalit and Naxalite movements, Hindu nationalist and communist organizations are organized, at least formally, through egalitarian principles: through ideals of one or another kind of equivalence, like caste or ethnic identity, a shared history of untouchability, of political or religious views. I say "formally" because such collectives are often hierarchically structured, recruited, and organized.[25] As Partha Chatterjee noted, the dynasty is India's core political form, in cahoots, not at odds with democracy:

> Rather curiously, democratic politics itself appears to have produced a new kind of aristocratic principle in the emergence of political dynasties. Thus, democratic organizations such as political parties often find their most secure points of identity and coherence in the family and the lineage of their leaders. More than ideological or organizational conformity, adherence to the party is most prominently displayed in the form of personal loyalty to the leader and his or her family. Successions to leadership in the party are, more often than not, decided by the dynastic principle. (Chatterjee and Katznelson 2012:4; also Chandra 2016)

Claims to popular sovereignty are frequently made through appeals to royal or divine ancestry or by association with kings, present or past (Banerjee 2018; Gell 1997; Michelutti 2007)—which is to say that in India democracy has not banished kingship, a hierarchical relation par excellence, but has transvalued and replicated it at an ever-growing pace.

In India claims to and contests over entitlements are frequently framed not in egalitarian terms but rather in hierarchical ones, through appeals to distinctiveness (to being most backward, downtrodden, poor, etc.), an idea enshrined in the schedules of the Indian constitution, as the grounds for special entitlements (positive discrimination), not equal rights. Claims to distinctiveness rather than equality have been as central to the recent Hijra (transgender) protests as they have been to Dalit (former Untouchable) assertions or recent Gujar-Meena agitations in Rajasthan. And many ethnic secessionist claims reach back to histories of kingly rule (Banerjee 2018). The fact has not been lost on India's egalitarian intellectuals, from Ambedkar to Pratap Bhanu Mehta, who have lamented that Indian masses, good though they are at staking claims, fail to do so through commitments to basic equality (e.g., Constituent Assembly of India 1989; Mehta 2011).

Their anxieties, however, may have been misaimed. For in Indian politics, it is the egalitarian collectivities—super castes

21. This was the case for the vast majority of Indian citizens in 2014. Anglophone, middle-class advocates of NOTA in Delhi were shocked and horrified when they learned that only 1.1% of the voters availed themselves of the choice (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/lok-sabha-elections-2014/news/Election-results-NOTA-garners-1-1-of-countrys-total-vote-share/articleshow/35222378.cms).

22. For a comprehensive overview of the literature on the "substantialization" (or ethnicization) of caste, see Manor (2010); for a critical assessment, see Bairy (2010).

23. For example, throughout Chatterjee and Katznelson's (2012) thought-provoking volume on democracy in India and the US, hierarchy invariably describes "traditional" caste hierarchy imagined as an order of "ascriptive stratification" or a "ranked ethnic system" (230). "Caste," writes Kaviraj in his contribution to the volume, "is an intrinsically hierarchic principle" (39); what the principle of political equality turned against was hierarchy as "the order of castes" (31).

24. If ever it was really settled in the first place.

25. Think of the god Krishna, the patron of the Yadav super caste (Michelutti 2007), or the Maratha king Shiva-ji as the patron of Hindu nationalists (Hansen 1996), whose gargantuan statue is currently being erected in Mumbai. On hierarchical organization and recruitment, see Ruud on Communists in Bengal (2003), Berenschot (2012) on Hindu nationalists in Gujarat, or Chandra and Kamra (2017) on Maoists in the northeast.

(like the Yadav) that vie for majoritarian rule, Naxalites who advocate equality as the premier political principle, Hindu nationalist organizations (like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS]) bound by a shared monoreligious ideology[26]—that have been wreaking some of the greatest political chaos and violence. There is also less visible egalitarian violence, an unseemly subject, which F. G. Bailey (1996) nonetheless once gave an account of. Prior to India's independence in 1947 and still in the early 1950s, when Bailey conducted his fieldwork in rural Orissa, one of the communities that lived in his research village were the Pannos, a low caste whom Brahmans thought too polluting to touch, eat, or share water with. The Pannos, nonetheless, had their own place in the village, quite literally: their own neighborhood, fields, temples, and wells and their own occupational and ritual role, which entitled them to work and social respect and gave them a sense of dignity. Even though they ranked low, they did not feel humiliated by their position. Then came the 1950s, when egalitarian ideas started to spread—more particularly, ideas about equality of temple entry, which still spark violent controversy today. If previously no Panno was interested in visiting Brahmans' temples, just as Brahmans were not interested in visiting the Pannos', the passing of the Temple Entry Bill in Orissa and the political rhetoric that surrounded it made Panno youths feel that it was their right to enter Brahmans' temples and that being debarred from them was an insult. They staged protests, clashes ensued, and people died. This marked the beginning of caste violence in the village. And it was just as Tocqueville (1835) warned: the leveling of social hierarchies is always fraught with the possibility of disaster—not just the tyranny of the majority but also, and more profoundly, the demise of a structure of responsibility, which spells totalitarianism, although, of course, he himself did not use the word (e.g., Dumont 1994).

There is nothing uniquely or perhaps even distinctly Indian about the preponderance of hierarchical value in India's democratic life. In the history of European democracies, from the ancient Greek to the modern American, democracy has only rarely been thought of as a specifically egalitarian political form. Quite often, in visions of democracy, whether in European antiquity or in modern Euro-America, equality was perceived as irrelevant, partially relevant, or indeed antithetical to democracy. In the fourth century BCE, in ancient Greece, which we look to as the cradle of democracy qua political equality, many ardent democrats did not believe that political power should be distributed equally among citizens of city-states. They thought that citizens had different worth (different wealth, birthright, and virtue) and were thus differentially capable of making political decisions. Hence Aristotle: "The will of those whose qualifications . . . are the greatest, should prevail" (bk. IV, pt. III). And so it was only right that if citizens were to possess different degrees of political power, there had to be a hierarchy of citizenship (Harvey 1965). Otherwise, *demokratia* was liable to collapse into *ochlokratia* (mob rule). The word *demokratia* was a general term used to describe both political systems with a hierarchical distribution of power and those with an egalitarian one, known by the more particular name of *isokratia* (rule of equals; Ober 2008).

When modern, representative governments were first founded in Europe and the United States, few associated democracy with equality. In the eighteenth century, political thinkers on either side of the Atlantic thought that the governed and their governors, whether elected, divinely ordained, or otherwise, could not possibly be one another's equals. The authors of the American Constitution were not egalitarians; they owned slaves and happily excluded women from franchise. For them, democracy differed from other forms of government not because it leveled differences among electors or between electors and the elect but because it allowed people to choose their superiors (Manin 1997, esp. chaps. 3, 4). The very men who wrote that "all men are created equal" and that this is a "self-evident truth" knew all too well that, should political power be, in fact, dispersed equally, the country would be vulnerable to the crude and the ignorant, and so they left the choice of America's president to the College of Electors, to the more competent and better informed—superior—citizens.

On the other side of the Atlantic, even during the French revolution, categorical egalitarianism was only the preserve of a violent outlier faction, the Conspiracy of the Equals (Buonarroti 1836 [1828]). And even Rousseau (1984 [1754]), the famed advocate of equality, imagined representative democracy as an "elective aristocracy." Later on, in the nineteenth century, Tocqueville (1896:127) wrote that the French peasants treated political representatives (including himself) not as their political equals but as grandees, whom they revered and on whom they relied. Over in Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, committed egalitarians, Quakers and Levellers, were always socially and politically marginal and had never exercised serious political influence for any stretch of time. In Britain, indeed, right until 1950, a system of plural voting entitled property owners and people affiliated with universities to multiple votes (Pulzer 2013:32). Cross the ocean and fast-forward to the US today, and if you think that Rust Belt and trailer park America voted for Donald Trump on the basis of any kind of egalitarian principle, through a sense of identity or equivalence with him, I will assure you that you are wrong. Many Americans (if not quite half) voted for a man drastically unlike themselves, someone who in their eyes stood high above, someone with terrific wealth, status, and power, which in their eyes enabled him to take much better care of their lives than they could ever have dreamed of doing themselves. Misguided though their hope may be, it was shaped by hierarchical, not egalitarian, thinking—by the idea of hierarchy as the framework of responsibility that I outlined.

The moral effort that we, progressive left-liberals, need to put into thinking our way into a nonegalitarian normative sense holds out rich intellectual rewards—if only because it pulls us away from what has become in recent decades the absolute,

26. Neither the internal organization of the RSS nor its vision of social life within the Hindu world is, of course, egalitarian. But the idea of a national community bound by equivalent Hindu-ness to the exclusion of others is strikingly antihierarchical.

infallible social, economic, and political value, something that all of us, whether on the political left or the right, whether Rawlsian advocates of equality of opportunity or Marxist believers in equality of outcome, have come to perceive as the foundation of social and political good. The alignment of democracy with equality has been particularly muddling for understanding ways in which people, the world over or right next door to us, think and act within their democratic lives. This egalo-normative stance generates not minor blind spots but a severe blindness to the world, for the nonegalitarian—hierarchical—sensibility is not a cultural quirk but the most widespread social normativity that is perhaps ill served by the deeply parochial, ecclesiastic word "hierarchy."[27] It is abundantly clear in the ethnographic archive that most people most everywhere live with the understanding that we are not one another's equals and that this inequality is not in itself an evil but something that can be put to good social use. It is egalitarianism—the idea that we must flatten inequalities to make life good—that is historically and ethnographically peculiar and is thus a very poor orienteer for reckoning with the world. What I hope to have done is not necessarily to convince you that I am right about the prevalence of hierarchic value in Indian democracy but to prompt you to suspend your egalitarian loyalties, if only briefly, and think with, not against, hierarchy—and thus together with much of the rest of the world.

Comments

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Anastasia Piliavsky asks us to reconsider the consensus conviction that equality is the "all-purpose political good and the necessary condition of democracy" and instead to "think with, not against, hierarchy." Her reflection on the oft-denied persistence of hierarchy among avidly democratic Indians contributes to an emerging anthropological literature that addresses the tensions between popular sovereignty and cosmopolitan liberalism in various cultures (e.g., Ferguson 2015; Hickel 2015; West 2005). To me, Piliavsky's call for us to open ourselves to the prospect of a synergy between hierarchy and democracy hinges on whether her distinction between hierarchy and inequality is veridical. I am convinced that her distinction is valid and that it helps us to imagine not only alternative forms of self-rule but also hierarchy's potential antagonism toward economic inequality. Here I will offer some conceptual suggestions aimed at bringing that part of Piliavsky's argument into sharper focus.

For Piliavsky, hierarchy is "not a descriptive antonym of equality but a prescriptive counterpart to egalitarianism," itself defined as the idea that "we must flatten inequalities to make a good life." Less clear to me is what she means by "egalo-normativity." Is this the preponderance of egalitarianism in a given setting? Is it the absolutist condemnation of all hierarchy? I come away from the essay with the urge to define it as the ideologically motivated refusal to see hierarchy where it lives. Thus, when Piliavsky insists that US citizens supported Donald Trump for president because they wanted a leader with "terrific wealth . . . and power . . . [who would] take much better care of their lives than they could," she is unmasking a desire that otherwise lives behind the curtain of Americans' dominant self-representation. Analogously, hierarchical normativity might look like the preindependence "Brahminical theology" that, according to Piliavsky, Louis Dumont mistook for a description of reality, that is, a caste system neatly organized into the structure of a "ranked totality" in which "the polyphony, dynamism, and contentiousness of Indian life" was similarly shoved behind the curtain. I suggest, then, that Piliavsky entertain a tripartite distinction among equality (a description of a flat distribution of value in the world), egalitarianism (a prescriptive call to flatten that distribution), and egalo-normativity (the ideologically driven denial of value's differential distribution). An analogous tripartite distinction could be made for hierarchy.

I am pushing for more definitional specificity because I find the concept of egalitarianism, as Piliavsky defines it, apt for pushing back on an intellectual tradition that worries only about capitalism's potential to co-opt cultural and linguistic hierarchies (see, inter alia, Bourdieu 1991 on "linguistic capital"). Cannot egalitarianism offer just as much aid and comfort to capitalist inequality as hierarchy? At least this is so in cases where egalitarianism refers to an ethic of undifferentiated obligation—or nonobligation—between the rich and the poor. Does not the right-wing attack on progressive taxation in the US rest on the claim that good, autonomous individuals owe nothing to one another? And here I will quibble with Piliavsky's reading of Trump's popularity, not to refute her point about hidden hierarchy but to add that Trump also tapped into the antielitist egalitarianism of the white working class. His every breath is an assault on distinctions of education and cosmopolitanism. Trump may be rich, but he talks like white working-class people, lauds his friends who do not know how to read, and generally rejects any signs of refinement associated with "limousine liberals." Even Trump's white supremacy is couched in egalitarian terms, as an end to the special privilege of minorities. The point is that thinking with hierarchy—at least as Piliavsky defines it—does not lock us to an affirmation of inequality, and affirming egalitarianism per se does not make us progressive.

Finally, on a somewhat unrelated note, I want to suggest one wrinkle to Piliavsky's framing of hierarchy and egalitarianism as "counterparts." Insofar as egalitarianism is a value, it seems to be caught in a paradox: like any value, egalitarianism enables rank differentiation, that is, a hierarchy of more or less egalitarian traditions, movements, leaders, and so on. Piliavsky demonstrates

27. Which is, nonetheless, the only term in common English use that retains residues of value ascribed to nonegalitarian social forms and which has anchored most theoretical work on non- or antiegalitarianism. And so I stick with it.

as much in her discussion of India's egalitarian social movements, which are "often hierarchically structured, recruited, and organized" and which tend to elevate those who most embody the principle of equality (the "most backward, downtrodden, poor, etc.") above others. She accounts for that contradictory tendency in terms of the coexistence of hierarchical and egalitarian values in contemporary Indian politics. Fair enough. But could this tendency also express the hierarchical telos of egalitarianism's existence qua value?

None of this amounts to an attack on egalitarianism as an important element of an emancipatory politics, whether defined as democratic self-rule or the reversal of monstrous inequality. The question is what kind of egalitarianism should mark the horizon of such a politics. And the same is true for hierarchy. We need to stop asking how to stamp out all hierarchy and start asking which values should serve as the bases for differentiating people unified by a desire for justice and what obligations (asymmetrical and symmetrical alike) would bind them together in a more just world. Eve Kittay (2011) and other disability studies scholars arguably got here first through their affirmation of interpersonal dependency contra the liberal fetishism of autonomy. But the ethnographic record is perhaps the richest resource that we have for rethinking these questions. Piliavsky's conceptual intervention, along with her critical reapproach to the Dumontian scholarship of India, shows us how we can make good on anthropology's promised contribution to global challenges of democracy.

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Piliavsky insists that equality as a normative value does not "account for" India's democratic boom, while hierarchy as a social value does. She places so high a bar on egalitarianism that no social value anywhere would hope to clear.

Her central thesis (there is not a *necessary* relationship between democracy as a formal political form and equality as the ascendant/dominant value) is easily acceded. Consequently, her charge that extant scholarship stubbornly refuses to see this noncorrelation is intriguing. Two instances must suffice to prove the contrary. One, the two scholars that Piliavsky cites for being remiss. Partha Chatterjee (e.g., 2020, 2004) has repeatedly demonstrated the futility of modular thinking in analyses of political cultures. Sudipta Kaviraj, too, does anything but affirm this equation. Kaviraj's (1998) essay that Piliavsky cites argues that political equality does/did not automatically ensure social and economic equality, even if it remains/remained an incendiary invitation. Two, the lesser-known but important work on hero-turned-politician phenomenon in south India. This scholarship (see, e.g., Pandian 1992; Prasad 2014; Srinivas 2018) is founded on an impatience with the early theorizing on democracy and astutely demonstrates the unfolding of democracy and democratization in the south Indian context that thrives on clientalism, hierarchy, and magic. Thus, when Piliavsky ventures bland and sweeping statements such as "political commentators demur at the worship of politicians as an archaic eccentricity" and goes on to paint scholars of such diverse persuasions as Chatterjee, Ramachandra Guha, Sunil Khilnani, and Pratap Mehta with the same brush, I worry. Of course, there are prominent voices within the academia who took such commonsensical positions, but the excitement in this field in recent decades has come from elsewhere. Even as equality as a procedural or normative imagination may not be present in the myriad transactions of democracy, they may wittingly and otherwise adumbrate/further egalitarian demands. But the opposite could take place too. Both these scholarships variously account for paternalistic, hierarchical relationships that mark practices of Indian democracy. Accordingly, I find her statement "were egalitarianism democracy's necessary condition, most of the world would have to undergo a major cultural revolution" a false problem. Not many scholars today, I would imagine, continue to hold in any seriousness such modernization tropes or would posit that "no cultural change is required to accommodate democracy."

I am not sure that she demonstrates the other claim that hierarchy is a (dominant) democratic value in India. The issue is twofold: (i) Piliavsky rather quickly travels from the insight gained from her ethnography to a wholesale characterization of all of India and (ii) at a conceptual level, she reverts to the much-maligned Louis Dumont and makes an important plea that hierarchy as a social value must not be confused with inequality and that our own commitments to the idea of equality must not get in the way of gauging the function hierarchy performs. Yet I find that while she repeatedly asserts that hierarchy functions as a democratic value, she does not illustrate it. Moreover, she even shifts the goalposts in the course of the essay (cf. "What I will suggest . . . is that hierarchy has not only proven no obstacle to democratization but has . . . been its crucial vehicle" and "What I hope to have done is not convince you that I am right about the prevalence of hierarchic value in Indian democracy").

It appears as if hierarchy necessarily entails the responsibility, care, and well-being of all and equality necessarily begets violence and individualized behavior. Why must that be so? Further, it appears as if any self-representation of Indians through hierarchical modalities is somehow more authentic and real than through assertion of equality, which is insistently undervalued as mere "form" (some sort of a show) hiding the authentic, real organization of sociation in terms of hierarchy. The other mode she deploys to explain enunciations of equality is via a form of Dumontian naturalism—that somehow it is egalitarianism that is historical while hierarchy is given to human nature and hence always more real, more primary. Accordingly, she appears to mourn whenever Indians make a case for equality, either as a normative principle or as a measure of social life. (See her description of F. G. Bailey's work.) Moreover, Piliavsky appears to collapse two distinct registers. It is a truism, perhaps in all

societies, that equality is dearly held but rarely realized. But that does not take away its astoundingly transformative role either or both as a hegemonizing strategy and/or as a normative ideal. Often, Piliavsky asks humans, their associations, and their institutions to satisfy her that they are *really* egalitarian, and when they expectedly do not match up to her exacting standards, she dismisses them, making it impossible thereby to study either the legitimating role or the practice-directing normative role that such claims necessarily have.

Over the past century or more (variously, across caste India), the marginalized and humiliated castes have articulated insistently the normative ideal of equality. Their demand that we adopt this ethic is made precisely in decrying the model of hierarchy to care/responsibility as entailing humiliation and legitimation (e.g., Guru 2011). While B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) is the most incandescent enunciator of this, he was forwarding a legacy of almost half a century that centralized the principle of equality as structuring a language, sensibility, and comportment against the deeply unequalizing caste system. This articulation is recognized today as the most significant mobilization toward a just society in India. Even as this project, mostly committed to democratic negotiations, invests great energy and hope in the formal democratic processes and institutions, there is no a priori commitment to peace and care. If the demand to be treated as equals invites violence from the privileged castes, that is the cost to pay (and discriminated castes pay that price every day in India), but the project of equality is fiercely nonnegotiable. Care, benevolence, patronage might ensure that you do not get killed, but such a life is not worthy of living. Yet in the schema that Piliavsky assembles, this mobilization is rendered (i) as somehow less genuine and thus less worthy of our attention and solidarity or (ii) as a mere "form" while it is really reiterating the homo hierarchicus. In doing this she also equates the Hindu right, the Maoist/communist, and the Dalit mobilizations. She gravely mistakes reservations as yet another form of seeking "special entitlements" based on "claims to distinctiveness" rather than as an articulation of and demand for equality. While the history of reservations is complex, it is unwise to discount the deeply transformative radical vision of equality enunciated by individuals like Iyothee Thass, Ayyankali, the Phules, and Ambedkar. I find the rendering of this mobilization into insignificance (in order to assert that Indian democracy is, in some measurable form, more engineered by hierarchy than by egalitarianism) both politically disturbing and intellectually indefensible. Indian democracy is being mobilized for diverse, and often competing, visions and imaginaries and practices that could at once be hierarchical and egalitarian, each inextricably enmeshed with the other. It is not as if one cannot see similarities between, say, the Hindu right and the marginalized castes. I believe that it is the very success of democratization—and not its failure—that could indeed be contributing to more iniquitous and even genocidal projects currently in the making in India. But such an acknowledgment has to also confront the contradictory emancipatory, dignity-according impulses that these processes engineer.

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When Everyone Is God and King: A Non-Eurocentric Genealogy of India's Democratic Values

Anastasia Piliavsky suggests that "no discussion, much less debate, has focused on India's democratic values." Indeed, recent historical scholarship overwhelmingly emphasizes the Western roots of Indian democracy, agreeing that India became democratic as a result of the Western liberal ideals espoused by Indian statesmen and embodied in the Constitution, in Westminster parliamentarianism, and in electoral bureaucracy (De 2018; Khosla 2020; Shani 2018). My comment resists reducing India's democracy to a gift of the West and foregrounds the longue durée and popular foundations of India's democratic values to a discussion on which Piliavsky invites. I argue that we need to deprovincialize studies of democracy by giving serious attention to non-Western genealogies and vocabularies of democracy.

Piliavsky identifies "hierarchy," which she describes as "a structure of responsibility" connecting social unequals, as a central democratic value in India. Indeed, I would add that since the late first millennium BCE/early first millennium CE, texts like the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Manu's *Manavadharmashastra*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, and the Buddhist *Digha Nikaya* and *Mahavastu* placed normative checks on the power of rulers. Describing the transition from a kind of state of nature to royal government, they offered versions of social contract theory, outlined the limits and responsibilities of royal power, and offered justification for rebellion and tyrannicide. In British India, Indian nationalists read these texts in dialogue with European ones to demand responsible and democratic government (Banerjee 2018:228–233). Today, Indians continue to draw on both indigenous and Western traditions when they expect their leaders to act responsibly.

Piliavsky also mentions classical Greek discussions of *demokratia*, or "people's rule." I shall underline that the Greek scholar Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE) described most Indian cities as dissolving kingly hegemony and democratizing their governance (δημοκρατηθῆναιτὰςπόλεις; πλείστας τῶνπόλεωνδημοκρατηθῆναι; Siculus 1888–1890:2.38.6, 2.39.4). The Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus (1893; first century CE) spoke of an Indian people (*gens*) who were ruled by the command of the people and not of kings (*quae populi, non regum imperio regebatur*; 9.8.4). The Greek scholar-administrator Arrian (1949; second century CE) described Indian cities that were self-legislating (κατὰ τὰς πόλιας ὅσαι αὐτόνομοι), not ruled by kings (12.5–12.6). Ancient Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali texts extensively discuss nonmonarchic *gana* (popular) polities, which survived into the first millennium CE (Jayaswal 1924; Sharma 1968).

Nearer our time, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Maratha and Sikh agrarian revolutions condemned

tyranny and precipitated the downfall of the Mughal Empire. The Sikhs in eighteenth-century Punjab evolved a nonmonarchic political system (Deshpande 2007; Dhavan 2011; Fenech 2013; Laine 2003). In precolonial Tripura, "the people" (*loka*, *jana*, *sarvaloka*, *sabe*) were canonized as political agents who deposed tyrants and selected new rulers; these traditions, evolved by highlander shifting cultivators, enabled the birth of socialist politics in twentieth-century Tripura (Banerjee 2021). Among the Jat peasantry of northern India and among indigenous communities in Nagaland and Assam, modern democratic politics has drawn on precolonial forms of collective organization, assembly, and deliberation (Datta 1999; Dowdy 2021; Wouters 2015, 2018).

These ancient traditions of customary democracy are familiar to agrarian communities and specialist scholars but are largely ignored by social scientists, media commentators, and India's Anglophone urban elites. The latter have grown deeply alienated from the wellsprings of subaltern democracy so fatally weakening the Indian mainstream left. To strengthen Indian democracy to battle against newly ascendant Hindu nationalism and against older class, caste, and gender inequalities, it is imperative to dialogue with entrenched subaltern institutions and grammars of popular sovereignty.

Piliavsky underplays the extent to which subaltern actors not only deploy divine and kingly hierarchies to achieve political justice and responsibility but also frequently challenge top-down rule, dialectically laboring through hierarchy to achieve a measure of equality. But Vedic-Upanishadic texts (first millennium BCE) already expropriated idioms of kingship to enable nonkingly men to claim autonomy (Proferes 2007); the "interiorisation of kingship expressed a new sense of individual autonomy" (Seaford 2020:139–140). Across the past two millennia, Indian peasant-pastoral communities have asserted collective divinity and kingliness—presenting themselves as Kshatriya, Rajput, Rajavamshi, and (for Muslims) *maliks* (lords) in Adam's mold—to practice collective sovereignty (Banerjee 2018; Kolff 1990; Michelutti 2008; Pinch 1996; Thorp 1978).

In early twentieth-century Bengal, Rajavamshi peasants thus argued that "the rule of master/king" (*prabhushasan, rajar shasan*) had to be sublated and overcome to achieve "self-rule" (*atmashasan*), as peasants recognized the royalty and divinity immanent within themselves rather than in an exterior master-sovereign. All rule was ultimately to be negated in the fullness of freedom. Peasant mutual aid and collective decision-making formed the material infrastructure for this anarchist dialectic. Figures like Sarojini Naidu and Begum Rokeya identified divinity or queenliness in common women while bolstering feminist self-organization. The modern Indian word for "autonomy" or "self-rule," *svaraj/swaraj*, democratized the ancient terminology of kingship (Banerjee 2018:190, 204–207, 318–330, 366–367). These perspectives helped to decolonize and democratize South Asia.

Popular religious traditions across India have moreover regularly asserted the identity of the individual soul with the divine to critique social inequality. These traditions, transmitted orally as well as through writing, constitute a vast archive of subaltern intellectual history. A song attributed to Kabir, the fifteenth-century weaver-saint of Varanasi, thus celebrates *samata* and asks people to abandon "caste pride" (*jati abhiman*; Sen 1910, vol. 1:51). Another song emphasizes *samata* between men and women (Sen 1910, vol. 4:52). *Sama* and "same" are cognates; *samata* and *samya* are used to translate "equality" in many Indian languages today. In the Kabir tradition, *samata* implies visualizing the same divinity in everyone while challenging status inequality. Such subaltern political theologies nourish lower-caste/Dalit political organization in contemporary India (Rawat 2015; Tiwari 2011).

In the era of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, Indian intellectual history provokes us to rethink the inequality of the nonhuman. Tripura's precolonial political chronicle *Rajmala* enjoins "not harming beings" (*prani ahimsan*; Sen 2003:15); the Kabir tradition emphasizes divine presence in all life and condemns animal slaughter (Sen 1910); Gandhian philosophy underlines "nonviolence" (*ahimsa*). The Dongria Kondh people of Odisha recently fought off a transnational corporate giant that sought to transform their divine hill range Niyamgiri into a bauxite extraction zone. These political ontologies inspire us to evolve a general cosmopolitics (Blaser 2013; Latour 2004) where the divinity of the nonhuman commands political and legal recognition. This recognition can circumscribe the capitalist logic that relentlessly subjugates, commodifies, and degrades human and other-than-human beings. The ancient realization that divinity presences equally in all beings awaits fulfilment in revolutionary politics today.

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Piliavsky's recent writings, including this one, aim to rehabilitate the values of patronage and hierarchy as key values to democracy's widespread acceptance in India. Her argument in brief is that democracy conceptually does not entail equality and hierarchy might in fact be good for it. Hierarchy, the author argues, is the "obverse of inequality" and instead contains a "structure of responsibility." It thereby needs to be delinked from its association with the study of caste as proposed by Dumont and considered a value in itself, without association with inequality. This article proposes hierarchy as a productive way to understand the success of democracy, because nonegalitarian arrangements are more widespread than the elusive ideal of equality in societies

everywhere, so she argues that "we, progressive left-liberals" (whomever this label may include) need to suspend our "egalitarian loyalties."

In this brief comment I wish to make four points. First, it seems strange to discuss democratic values in 2020 without alluding to the crisis of democracy in each setting the author mentions: the UK, the US, and India. It has been argued that one reason for the crisis in democracies globally is precisely widening social inequality and a growing disconnect between cosmopolitan elites and others. It would help if Piliavsky could clarify whether the world needs more hierarchy to address this crisis.

Second, I think it is important, while writing about democracy in India, to pay attention to a critical and less theorized aspect of India's democratic experiment: that democratic institutions such as elections were intended to establish the vertical relationship between ruler and ruled but were also accompanied by an adoption of the values of republicanism to define the horizontal relationship between citizens to create a democratic culture. In 1950, India was constituted simultaneously both as a democracy and as a republic. The word "republic" did not simply indicate its antimonarchical stand but a commitment to the radical value of fraternity, the quality of "associated life," as John Dewey put it, as an ambition to transform a society where "hierarchy [was] the normative idea of social relations." Ambedkar (chair of the Drafting Committee) had attended lectures by Dewey at Columbia University, where he did his PhD, and he drew on social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, who argued for a revival of republican values, to insist on the use of both the words "democracy" and "republic" to define independent India. The concept of *virtù* in republicanism draws attention to the agentive capacity of citizens to be vigilant, without which citizens would simply defer their popular sovereignty to their representatives with the introduction of representative government, leading to the "oxymoronic concept of representative democracy" (Skinner 2010:260). So the legal and moral framework of the Indian constitution was designed not simply to install democratic institutions such as elections but to generate a wider democratic culture, for it was believed that democracy without republican values, or elections without widening participation, or elected leaders without the solidary sense of "we, the people," would be a failure of India's democratic experiment. Ambedkar's hope was that providing each citizen with one vote through universal franchise was but the first step in recognizing that everyone also had the same value and that the experience of voting as a sovereign citizen would periodically reiterate that equal value.

Third, India's democratic success, which Piliavsky says "spread like wildfire," needs to be weighed against this constitutional ambition. The awareness of popular sovereignty through the periodic experience of voting has been realized to some extent across contemporary India, as voters valued the egalitarian spirit of the polling station and each experience of voting reinforced their identity as dignified citizens who "gave" politicians their power, leading to high voter turnouts (Banerjee 2014; Gilmartin 2015).

There has also been a widening of social caste and class base among voters, and parties representing lower castes have won elections, but this has not necessarily led to greater democratization in terms of widening participation in politics. Instead, members of socially disadvantaged groups have been mobilized to vote for increasingly authoritarian leaders drawn from their castes/groups, but with little prospect for them to aspire to political office themselves.

Finally, few observers of India would deny the role of hierarchy in India's political and social life, as it indeed exists in a variety of ways. But Piliavsky's argument that hierarchy is democracy's "crucial vehicle" in India is illustrated with the example of the term *ma-i-bap* ("mother and father"), used by constituents to address their political representatives as patrons whose largesse they depend on. She thus urges us to think of hierarchy as the relationship that exists between parent and child, which, while unequal, "need not be exploitative" and can instead constitute a "relational logic of mutual expectation" with greater "responsibility borne by superiors." While this infantilization of those with less wealth and status and the concomitant humiliation of those from lower castes and classes may be part of the idiom, an ethnographer attuned to the nuances of the political vernacular in India would also hear other terms spoken by Indians that assert alternative understandings of their relationship to political representatives, in which they assert their own rights and understanding of public goods. Thus, people may say *yeh unka baap ka maal hai kyai*? ("not his private property") or use words such as *haq* or *adhikar* ("right") to indicate their due. It is these alternative, coexistent definitions of citizenship that are derived from the constitution that was a "textbook as much as it was a rulebook" to create a democratic culture in which people are constituted as sovereign citizens of a republic (in contrast to infantilized adults) that lead to a widely documented national culture of claim-making, including the state of Rajasthan, where Piliavsky conducted her research (Khosla 2020). But these alternate and coexistent imaginaries find no place in her analysis.

The intellectual challenge today is, if anything, to explain how India's democracy has collapsed so easily as it has, and some of the answers may lie in exploring the tension between hierarchies in which adults are infantilized and mobilized for votes versus a constitutional imagination in which they are sovereign, active citizens.

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Democratic Values and the Perils of Naturalization

In her article, Anastasia Piliavsky makes a critical intervention in the study of democracy. Piliavsky argues that despite

the fact that the most prominent theories of hierarchy have come out of India, there is now almost no ethnographic attention to how hierarchy as a value shapes social life in India. By value Piliavsky means a normative commitment, one that not only describes the state of the world but also prescribes how people should act toward others. Scholars of India, Piliavsky argues, have failed to account for this pervasive social phenomenon because their own normative commitments to egalitarianism prevent them from recognizing hierarchy as a value. This has left us unable to understand how democracy in India works.

Piliavsky's argument challenges dominant currents of critical theory that, on the one hand, are analytic projects that examine how unequal power relations structure social life and, on the other, function as critiques of social inequality. Saba Mahmood (2005) noted that feminism's prescriptive project of liberating women from relations of subordination has hampered the analytic project of understanding forms of women's agency that do not abide by the terms of liberalism. Piliavsky's argument, similarly, is that normative egalitarianism prevents the analyst from understanding how hierarchy can be a value in social life (Hickel and Haynes 2018). I am in broad agreement with this approach, but I think denaturalizing egalitarianism also runs the risk of naturalizing hierarchy, a peril that must be avoided if we are to understand the political struggles around democracy throughout the world (see Graeber 2018).

Louis Dumont's (1980) classic *Homo Hierarchicus* is a key touchstone for anthropological understandings of hierarchy. Dumont argues that the "paramount value" of Indian society is purity, and this sets the terms for the ranking of people and things, creating a hierarchical and holistic world that is in marked contrast to the egalitarian individualism of the West. Piliavsky argues that Dumont's conflation of caste with hierarchy has led scholars of India to disregard hierarchy, which is a much broader value in Indian social life. Unlike Dumont, who assumes that each society is characterized by a singular "paramount value," Piliavsky argues there are many competing values that structure social life in India. Yet Piliavsky nevertheless argues that hierarchy in some form permeates Indian social life and thus Indian democracy.

I leave it to scholars of India to determine the extent to which this empirical claim is true, but it raises a theoretical question: what exactly is the basis for the pervasive normative commitment to hierarchy in India's democracy? Having dispensed with Dumont's holism, Piliavsky must come up with an alternative explanation. Piliavsky finds an answer in the very definition of hierarchy. Hierarchy, she argues, can be differentiated from inequality by a "structure of responsibility." The relations between Indian voters and politicians are characterized by reciprocal exchange. But why is a relation of hierarchical reciprocity and responsibility rather than one based on equality desirable in the first place, and what precisely counts as reciprocity and responsibility? Piliavsky's (2019) ethnographic work addresses these questions, but scaling up from a particular ethnographic example to the vast social and institutional expanse of Indian democracy requires showing how hierarchical norms are constituted and naturalized. Otherwise, we are left with the Dumontian position that hierarchy is simply an indelible feature of Indian tradition or, worse, a naturally given aspect of social life.

If the normative commitment to egalitarianism (and individualism) treats all forms of hierarchy as exploitation and domination, making it impossible to conceive of hierarchy as a value, naturalizing hierarchy simply inverts this problem. We become trapped in a tautology; whenever we find hierarchy, we assume a structure of reciprocity and responsibility, and whenever we find structures of reciprocity and responsibility, we assume that they must imply hierarchal value. This makes it difficult to see any relation of inequality as a form of exploitation and domination and makes it impossible to entertain the possibility that people in unequal relationships may actually prefer to be in egalitarian ones.

Hierarchy and egalitarianism exist as values in all social contexts. The analytic task is to show how one or the other becomes the encompassing value. The egalitarian values of citizenship rights embodied in India's constitution carry the promise of equality. But equality between fellow citizens is predicated on a hierarchical attachment to the state as sovereign and as an embodiment of the will of the people that stands above society. These "egalitarian" sensibilities of citizenship rights depend on the sovereign providing the basis for material and moral well-being. When Piliavsky's interlocutor scoffs at the suggestion of voting "NOTA" (none of the above) as throwing away his vote, he is saying there is no abstract sovereign state that will provide anything independent of hierarchical patronage. Indeed, why commit to egalitarian values of citizenship rights when they offer only brute inequality?

As neoliberalism has decimated the ability of the state to provide social welfare, egalitarian values embodied in citizenship rights have come to appear empty of moral substance, while hierarchy has become full of promise and possibility. Thus, hierarchy as democratic value proliferates throughout the world. Hierarchies are culturally particular logics of reciprocity and responsibility, but the extension of this logic to politicians as "sovereigns of citizen-subjects" is happening throughout the world. This tells us that democracy does not just incorporate preexisting hierarchical norms. Rather, the normative commitment to hierarchical patronage with politicians is also created in the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

While egalitarianism and hierarchy both exist as possibilities within democracy, scholars working on the basis of "egalonormative" commitments have tended to equate democracy with egalitarianism and representation, while treating hierarchy, dependence, and patronage as a failure of the democratic ethic. In a world increasingly permeated by a desire for hierarchical patronage, Piliavsky's insistence that we attend to hierarchy as a democratic value is an important analytic and political corrective. The critical task now is to examine how the competing values of egalitarianism and hierarchy are constituted at the nexus of democracy and capitalism throughout the world.

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Democracy in India has strong patrimonial elements, as Anastasia Piliavsky illustrates in her essay. I suggest, though, that the language of honor and respect (including self-respect) more suitably captures people's democratic engagement than the language of hierarchy versus equality. As I explored patrimonial values in India's democracy, I found honor and respect associated with fluid conceptions of status, giving scope for endeavor. Democratic values could be multilayered and often contradictory, encompassing wide variations of human longing and experience. While a major element was the respect that the responsibly generous person customarily received from others, gratitude and dependence that clients felt did not necessarily exclude desires for personal and political independence.

The history of political culture in India since independence shows that the desire for respect from others—and the desire to show respect—has indeed oriented democratic engagement and centrally shaped political and other lives. Respect and a common associate, honor, were not necessarily acquired through caste identification but were earned, were competed for, and could easily be lost, giving a dynamism to sociopolitical standing in Indian society, which is commonly overlooked. I argue this based on my research in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, examining local and state concepts of status and political languages (Price 2013:143–289).

In 1997–1998 in Karnataka, politicians I interviewed told of the powerful desire among them for *stannamana*, the respect and recognition that accrued from holding office (Price 2013:210–259). Not receiving the respect that one felt one had earned in service to the party was a common source of grievance. As the ruling Janata Dal Party experienced powerful intraparty conflicts, politicians attempted to explain their decisions to leave the party in a political language that could resonate with ordinary voters. An emphasis was placed on humiliation resulting from disrespectful treatment, while attention was also given to the desire to escape oppressive political relationships, alleged authoritarianism in party leadership.

With the introduction of universal suffrage after independence, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana there emerged an expansion of possibilities and definitions connected with respect behavior and status. There was increased emphasis on self-respect, connoting personal and political independence. The Tamil movement of Dravidian politics that produced the DMK party and the end of Congress Party state rule in 1967 placed great value on *tan manam* ("self-respect"; Price 1996). This conception focused on moral principles and on resisting subordination. A person of self-respect showed respect to another person not because of higher caste status but because of the other's moral qualities. Members of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s resented the cultural and political domination of Hindi-speaking North India and enacted their *tan manam* by demanding respect for the Tamil language, envisioned as the goddess Mother Tamil. As became clearer after the DMK came to power, men of *tan manam* could not conceive of a society in which personal and political honor and respect were not salient at the same time as they felt liberated from various forms of subordination.

In prepartition Andhra Pradesh, a regional political party emerged in the early 1980s, Telugu Desam, whose leaders commonly spoke of "*jaati gouravam* (honour of the Telugu race) [and] *atma gouravam* (self-respect)" (Naidu 1984:132). Not unexpectedly, then, in 2003–2004 in a village in today's Telangana state, I found that showing respect and receiving respect were preoccupations in personal as well as political life (Price 2006).

However, here, as elsewhere in South India, electoral politics had contributed to low-caste challenges to entrenched higher-caste authorities. Villagers reported that as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, there had been just a few *pedda manushulu* ("big people") in the village, but some stated that now every family had a *pedda manishi* (the "head of the family"). Informants stressed that now people wanted to make their own decisions and they did not want to be told what to do by somebody outside their family. There seemed a celebration of independence (*swatantram*) in our interviews. Circumstances had brought much village land on the market, leading to widespread land acquisition by low-caste and Dalit (ex-Untouchable) families, and I heard repeatedly the expressions "having one's own land and work" and "eating one's own food." An illiterate Dalit farmer owning 10 acres told me, "Buying one's own land and doing one's own work gives respect" (Price 2006:308).

While having superior resources in itself gave respect, still, showing generosity toward others, protecting others, was of great value in the village. Both gave power and were requirements for election to all offices, from village president to the state legislative assembly. A leader who did not respond positively to requests for assistance was not a *manchi manishi* (a "good person") and lost votes in the next election. There was a tension between respect for goodness and for money, as respondents talked. A low-caste tailor remarked, "You can not get *padhavi* [elected position in the village] with money, you may have to use some money, but your self-*viluva* [worth/respect] has to be there. Money does play a role. *Manchitanam* [goodness] is more important. Money is only a tool to be used" (Price 2006:313–314).

In the constitution of patrimonial structures are fluid statuses, based on moral and amoral criteria. South Indian political languages conceive of these statuses in a rich lexicon of terms that translate variously as "respect," "honor," "dignity," "courtesy," "importance," "worth," and "status." Dismissing these constellations of values as "feudal" and ignoring them is to lose sight of what is, for a large part of the population, a moral fundament of political action, one that also supports strivings for independence. Occasionally, this fundament finds expression in such public demonstrations as the provision of thrones, the setting up of giant cut-out figures, the presentation of swords and turbans, the prostrating at the feet of a leader, or the dedicating of a shrine to a departed leader. As Piliavsky notes, such forms of

honoring belie the dynamism and energy of Indian democratic society and polity.

Reply

I am delighted at the range of responses that my essay provoked and grateful to my interlocutors for stepping up to this essay's challenge—and for not mincing their words. In the spirit of a candid debate, nor shall I mince mine. I should also like to apologize in advance for focusing on one of the responses. While respondents raise many important questions and help to advance and nuance my argument (thank you, Ansell, Khan, and Milinda Banerjee!), Mukulika Banerjee's response typifies the position I challenge and helps to sharpen my argument.

But I will first address the leitmotif that runs through several responses: the disquiet at my claim that hierarchy is a widespread value in India's democratic politics. This claim should hardly strike anyone as provocative or even original. After all, India is one of the world's most elaborately hierarchical societies. Why should its politics be exempt? And yet the idea disconcerts scholars sufficiently to blind them to large swathes of my text. They write that I present hierarchical value as "somehow more authentic and real" than egalitarian, as "given to human nature and hence always more real, more primary," that I do not acknowledge Indian egalitarianism (Bhairy), and that I run "the risk of naturalizing hierarchy" as "simply an indelible feature of Indian tradition, or worse, a naturally given aspect of social life" (Khan). Worse still, I "rather quickly travel from the insight gained from [my] ethnography to a wholesale characterization of all of India" (Bhairy). In fact, I write:

> Hierarchy is certainly not the only show in town. No value excludes other values, none is comprehensive or evenly distributed in any society, none is immune to challenge and change. The egalitarian language of rights, citizenship, and brotherhood is part of many Indian citizens' political vocabularies, some new . . . and some quite old.

Neither do I suggest that hierarchical value is all there is nor that it is more authentically Indian or natural. A value is unnatural by definition. Nor do I argue that egalitarian value is even an import to India. And, of course, not only do I cite plenty of ethnography, but mine is an ethnographic argument—a product of intensive, protracted fieldwork rather than of academic politics—and as such in itself a rejection of any kind of naturalism.

Now, imagine if I wrote an essay about equality as Indian democracy's defining value. Would anyone object? Would I be charged with generalizing, naturalizing, or being unethnographic (an anthropologist's cardinal sin)? Social analysts argue or (normally) simply assume this in hundreds of books, talks, and articles to nothing but approving nods. So why should my essay have stirred such unease?

Bhairy offers an answer: because it is "politically disturbing and intellectually indefensible"—neatly making my point about the egalo-normative stance. Egalo-normativity (which Ansell asked me to clarify) is not the striving for equality or the preponderance of egalitarian values but the belief in equality as the universally natural, infallible value that must be the absolute precondition of every social and political good—justice and dignity, agency and responsibility, fairness and solidarity. From this position, hierarchical norms appear disturbing and indefensible, morally (which is what Bhairy means by "politically") repugnant, and thus intellectually wrong.

Mukulika Banerjee's comments vividly illustrate the intellectual effects of this egalo-normative stance. She cites the citizens' "agentive capacity . . . to be vigilant," the value they place on "associated life," their capacity to "assert their own rights and understanding of public goods," and the "culture of claim-making" as *evidence* of their egalitarianism. It is as if only egalitarians have the capacity to exercise political will, form political solidarities, comprehend and assert political rights, hold politicians to account, make demands, and press claims on the powers above. Were that the case, what could we possibly make of dynasticism and appeals to royalty and divinity, which bolster claims to popular sovereignty and the rise of Dalits to political prominence (see also Banerjee 2018; Gell 1997; Michelutti 2007; Sen and Nielsen 2022)? What could we make of claims to distinctiveness, not equality—to being special, not like everyone else—framing demands for political entitlements and recognition, whether by *hijras*, Adivasis, Dalits, or Yadavs? What could we make of the pivotal role of patronal ties to electoral participation for people who see votes as parts of political relationships, not symbols of citizen status? What of the rhetoric of humility—the self-deprecating gestures and words meant to elevate politicians to a position of responsibility—being deployed across India to make demands on political leaders (Mitchell 2023)?

So what are the sources of Banerjee's egalo-normative conviction? She cites Dewey and Skinner, Machiavelli's *virtú*, the idea of "republicanism," and the constitution, to be treated as a "textbook as much as . . . a rulebook." Meanwhile, the ethnographically derived hierarchical term *mā-ī-bāp*, a term in wide common use across northern India, is derided as "infantilizing" and "humiliating." This is odd since Banerjee herself invokes *baap ka maal*, literally "daddy's goods," which she oddly glosses as "private property" but which invokes the same hierarchical idiom. It is doubly odd because Banerjee is an accomplished ethnographer. But the power of egalo-normativity is such that it makes even the best of ethnographers place more trust in Euro-American political theory than in ethnographic facts.

As a result, exchanges with the egalo-normative guard are not really intellectual dialogues that advance understanding but rather political debates that reassert established positions. In this spirit, Banerjee asks questions meant to elicit my own political stance: Why do I ignore India's "crisis of democracy"? Do I think that the world needs more hierarchy? India is certainly going through changes that both Banerjee and I find alarming, but this does not necessarily mean that its democracy is in crisis. What is in crisis is India's left-liberal Nehruvian political order. But our personal commitments are neither interesting nor

appropriate subjects for an intellectual debate. As for India's democracy—or the involvement of the governed in their governance—it is more alive than ever. Voter turnouts keep going up, from 58.19% in 2009 to 66.4% in 2014 to 67.11% in 2019 (https://pib.gov.in/), and ethnographers detect no slackening of democratic engagement.

It is not at all clear whether democracies in the US, where voter turnouts are "soaring" (according to the Pew Research Center), or in the UK, where voter turnouts went up by nearly 10% in the past 20 years, are in crisis. (The political left is no doubt in crisis, which its adherents often mourn as a "democratic crisis.") What *is* sharply felt by voters either side of the North Atlantic is a crisis of political responsibility. Many feel that they have no idea how to assign responsibility for the financial meltdown of 2008 or the displacement of millions across the Middle East, Africa, the Mediterranean, and now Eastern Europe. They do not know whom to hold responsible, on what terms and how, for the noxious air that fills their cities, the pollution of landscapes, oceans, and water supplies. Nor do they know how to make oligarchs, bankers, CEOs, and political leaders effectively accountable. Those responsible simply resign from office. Impersonal and increasingly automated regulative processes (bureaucracy, statistics, auditing, software, and other robots) only deepen confusion by eliminating human subjects as carriers of responsibility—a problem that egalitarian theories of political good, grounded in a logic of impersonal distribution rather than social relations, prove very poorly equipped to deal with.

So do we need more hierarchy, as Banerjee asks? A growing number of people across the world certainly think so, as the rise of strongman politicians across Europe and the US, for instance, suggests (Hickel and Khan 2018). And if, as I argue, hierarchical norms are one powerful way to ascribe responsibility, then little wonder they do. In the eyes of a growing multitude across the world, the egalitarian ideal that abstracts people from social positions, making everyone equally entitled and equally responsible—or not—is failing. And so more and more are seeking a better life inside differences of role, wealth, status, and power, inside the inexorable reality of social life. They want not to level these differences but to domesticate them, as it were, to put them to good use. That is to say, they are seeking a better life inside hierarchy. This search is just as evident in the Occupy Movement (on the political left) and its insistence on placing greater responsibility on the rich as it is in the growing popularity of big-man leaders (on the right). Theirs is not a search for greater inequality or injustice but a pursuit of another solution for the ills of an unequal world. Suspending our egalo-normative judgment, if only for a brief heuristic moment, will give us a shot at making some sense of this pursuit.

—Anastasia Piliavsky

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