

Musahars: The Mahadalits of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract:

In today's discourse, the 'Dalits' have become a strong phenomena in Indian subcontinent. Dalits are the ex-untouchables who were considered a caste/class below the four varnas of Hindu caste hierarchy. They were exterminated from the mainstream society as their presence was assumed polluting for the upper savarna people. Stigmatized as untouchables and living a life of grinding poverty, the Dalits of India are communities which live a life far below the level of human dignity. They are the socially marginalized, educationally deprived, physically exploited caste in our country. Caste Hindus have only used these left out communities by squeezing out the labour from them. Virtually, they have remained a slave caste in our country. After Independence, Government has extended innovative and effective measures towards the empowerment of these marginal communities. In spite of that this Mushahars remain in their usual retardation for centuries. Supporting agencies have researched that there are degrees and layers among the Dalits. There are few semi-nomadic tribes in India who are extreme examples of poverty and deprivation. These Dalits among the Dalits are categorized as the Mahadalits. The Musahars or the Mushahars are one of the lowest Mahadalit communities of India inhabiting largely Bihar and few parts of the middle and northern Uttar Pradesh. In this paper, by consulting few of the field based reports and data, I have tried to find out the narrow passage of the journey the Musahars have crusaded so far through their intrinsically hard working mental disposition backed up by the cooperating hands from the Government and other community development agencies.

Key Words:

Musahars, Dalits, Mahadalits, Myth, Saffronization of tribal legends, hegemony, Political participation, CSO (Civil Society Organization), MDVM (Maha Dalit Vikas Manch), BMVM (Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission) NGO, Resistance.

Introduction:

Myth and Misery:

From the Hill to the Plain

There were few castes among the Dalits of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who live under extreme poverty and social isolation. They are considered to be the poorest among the poor Dalits. Previously, Dalits were considered to be the yard stick for measuring the depth of poverty and deprivation of a community. Economic vulnerability, malnutrition, ill health, disease illiteracy, hard labour etc. are crowded in the dictionary of these people. So, the State Government of Bihar has formed the Mahadalit Commission to look after the actual fact of the matter. On the basis of the said Commission's reportage the following 23 castes/communities are defined as Mahadalits. These are the - Bantar, Bauri, Bhangi, Bhogta, Bhuiya, Chaupal, Dabgar, Dom/Dhangad, Ghasi, Halaka, Hari, Kanjar, Kurariar, Lalbegi, Mahtar, Musahar, Nat Pan, Sawasi, Rajwar, Turi, Dhobi, Pasi and the Chamar. In addition to it, after the recommendations made by the State Mahadalit Commission; Bihar, the Ravidas Community (previously a Scheduled Caste Community) has been included in the list of

Mahadalits. Under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the decision was taken at a state cabinet meeting. State Personnel and Administrative Reforms Department's Principal Secretary, Deepak Kumar said, "Ravidas community has been included in the list of Mahadalits on the basis of the third recommendation of the state Mahadalit Commission", (The Hindu). Mr. Kumar also reported that the government has also sought immediate report from the Commission on the status of Dusads community.

As goes the record, today, the Musahar are a scheduled caste community and mainly landless agricultural labourers. According to the 1981 Census of Government of India, their state-wise population are- in Bihar 13.91 lakhs, in Uttar Pradesh 1.26 lakhs. In Bihar, Musahars are scattered in several districts Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Hazaribagh, Santal Pargana, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnea and Gaya etc. In 1891, Sir Risley Herbert, a colonial official wrote,

"Musahars are an offshoot of the *Bhuiya* tribe of Chotanagpur." Musahars are also known as a 'pig rearer' community. Very few of them are cultivators or workers in industries and offices as temporary cleaner and sweepers. They have not been conferred tribal status and therefore are not entitled to earn a livelihood. Many of them are daily wage earners who live with such a precarious food security that they usually eat just one meal a day. Most of them work as bonded labour, as *Kamia*. They are extremely isolated, politically and socially and erstwhile have been labelled as a 'criminal tribe/community'¹. This makes them vulnerable targets for the police and forced them to stay within the safe guard of a forest. Consequently, they fear people in authority.

Bihar	Population
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W.Champran	75964
E.Champran	53175
Shaohar	7152
Sitamarhi	42279
Madhubani	106534
Supaul	76655
Araria	157694
Kishanganj	17455
Purnia	171609
Katihar	64698
Madhepura	132043
Saharsa	112846
Darbhanga	95909
Muzaffarpur	59953
Gopalganj	17013
Siwan	6026
Saran	9323
Vaishali	31264
Samastipur	64732
Begusarai	43005
Khagari	73276
Bhagalpur	25817
Banka	18763
Munger	35060
Lakhisarai	43634
Shaeikhpura	28876
Nalanda	70639
Patna	93062
Bhojpur	41877
Buxar	7204
Kaimur	15510
Rohtas	11959
Jehanabad	46452
Aurangabad	401
Nawada	119465
Gaya	49672
Jamui	85140
Total	2112136

Districts of	Mushahar
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Bihar is now the abode of 1.3 crore Scheduled Caste population according to the 2001 census. According to the 2001 Census, the total population of the Musahars in Bihar grew to 21,12,136 the second highest Mahadalit concentration in Bihar after the Chamar caste which had the highest population of 40,9,0070. Among the 21,12,136 Mushahars, 2,052,971 remained in the rural patches of the state where as 59,165 migrated to urban areas to try their fortune.

“Bihar, economically, educationally and socially one of the most backward states of India, is also politically one of the most important.” (Edited by Ghanshyam Shah; 2008, p-315). Its peculiarity includes that most of the agricultural land till now, “remained monopolized by the three upper castes- the Rajputs, the Bhumihars, and the Bhahmins. For some exceptions, the upper layer of the backward castes, namely, the Yadavs, the Kurmis and the Koeris do have

little land. But the other lower castes (such as Musahars) were largely landless.”(ibid.p-315-16)

In older days, in villages (5 in U.P. and 1 in Bihar) only 25% of people from 2 villages have land and average land holding is not more than 1 to 2 *bigha* (a unit used for measuring land in India). They got these lands when the Land Ceiling Act was implemented. But in 75% of cases they do not have control over land as original landholders had managed to get stay orders from the court. In addition to that, their land are not irrigated, they are stony and far away from their habitat and near the risky forest.

There are few many popular myths behind the origin of the Mushahar or Musahar. They were traditionally rat catchers, and there is still uncertainty in the research area as to their exact origin. One myth recalls that once, *Parmeshwar*¹ (the Hindu god of creation) created man and gave him a horse to ride. The first Musahar decided to dig holes in the belly of the horse to fix his feet as he rode. This offended

Parmeshwar, who punished them by making them rat catchers. They are found in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and north Madhya Pradesh. The Musahars speak a variation of the Bhojpuri dialect of Hindi. In this write up, though, I have concentrated mainly on the gruesome situation of Musahar community in Bihar and the adjoining border areas of Uttarpradesh.

In Bihar, the word Musahar is said to be derived from *moos*, a local Bhojpuri word for a rat, on account of their traditional occupation as rat catchers. Musahar literally means 'rat-taker' or 'rat-eater' (from 'musa' which means rat and 'hera' means 'seeker') or even 'flesh-seeker' or 'hunter' (as '*masu*' means flesh). Sometimes they are called as *Banmanus*. As is said that, these native people live in forest and far from the main stream society, their abode become a part of their identity. In most of the myths associated with them, the Musahars are either shown as great soil digger or as good cow grazer. Few of the Musahars believe that they are the descendants of the legendary Savari (usually a wife of a Savar, a hunter), who offered the half-eaten berries to the Lord Rama and Lakshmana. In spite of belonging to a lower caste, Rama ate those eaten berries because those berries

were tested by Savari in order to sacrifice the best fruit to her *Avatar*. In few other areas the *Shiva Purana* Myth is popular, where Lord Shiva concealed his identity to the meditating Arjun, the 3rd Pandavas, in the guise of a Savar and Parvati, his wife in the guise of a Savari. Lord Shiva had in hand a *gahdala* (a weapon, the Musahar use for hunting) and Parvati had a basket in her heap. In the cottage of a hermit where Arjun got the revelation of Shiva and Parvati, a low caste maiden cooked for the hermit. Musahars believed to be the heirs of that devotee maiden.

All of the Myths and legends lend this marginal people a sort of confidence even in living in the lowest echelon of society. It is through their myths and primitive cultural resources, these *bhumiputras* (sons of the soils; rustics) try to subvert the Brahmanic hegemony. In their collective consciousness, Musahars do believe that they were also the part of the great Ramayan and Puranas and they are the worthy descendants of the brave Dina Bhadri brothers who fought against the feudal lords like Dhamiya Kanksingh and Kangaliya Dusadh to restore peace over the disorder of inequality, bondage labour and slavery.

As is stated by Badri Narayan in his politically insightful book *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (2009) that “the myths are being retold for creating a social discourse of empowerment, for acquiring social equality and for the development of their community. However, with the growing competition for votes in the electoral arena, these myths and symbols are being increasingly used by political parties to woo the Musahars under their fold, and thus the dividing line between culture and politics is slowly becoming blurred. (2009.P-139).

The Musahars work as agricultural labourers for land holding castes and mainly do weeding and harvesting work. Even few years ago, they earn Rs. 40/ (men) and Rs. 25/ (women) for harvesting and Rs. 25/ (men) and Rs. 15/ (women) for the weeding work. These wages are far below the minimum wages of Uttar Pradesh where the payment is around Rs. 100/-. Most pathetically; all these jobs are seasonal and give them employment for not more than 3 to 6 months in a year.

Present Scenario:

Before the availability of the modern day NGO run survey methods, there were two types of records available to us about this Musahar. One is (Post-Independence) Indian Government-survey or a project, the other is the Missionary report organized/sponsored by the then British Government. Accordingly, all the villages have school near the community. But most of the time it remains close and that is almost 20 days in a month. The teachers come from other villages, all of them belong to higher castes either Brahmins or from OBC. The food is cooked on the days whenever school is opened. Though a board is painted in all the schools describing the menu and food chart dal-chawal or khichdi is the major food cooked most of the time. Roti-vegetable and Khir is served occasionally. 95% children belong to Musahar community but none of the school had cook from Musahar community. All the cooks were either from OBC community or were Thakur (a surname used by one type of caste Brahmin who took up job in worshiping and culinary activities on others' demand). Though there is no open discrimination against the children as most

of them anyway belong to Musahar community, children complained that food is not enough and they are shouted as if they ask for second helping. Then, the Musahars are entangled within the two ancient shackles of poverty and untouchability. Similar cases of extreme marginalization and multiple deprivations are an all pervasive bitter reality for all of the Mahadalits inhabiting in India. The Yanadee or Yanadi community of Andhra Pradesh is a similar case where the tribe strives hard to eke out a meager livelihood.

Under the project “Inclusive Development of Musahar Community” (implemented in Maharajganj and Kushinagar districts of Uttar Pradesh), Manab Seva Sansthan, “SEVA”, an Uttarpradesh based NGO completed a project for “Livelihood Promotion of Marginalized Groups and Labour Migrants in South Asia”. It was a three year long AWO/BMZ funded initiative that was implemented by regional NGO partners in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. In their pilot stage; they covered almost 22 villages of Nichloul Block of Maharajganj and later 33 villages of the same Block in the year 2012-2013. In the Kushinagar district they sampled 22 villages. In their exchange of

solutions for the betterment of this socially, geographically and politically isolated community, they expressed worriedly that:-

However, in the context of the project location the scenario is very pathetic. Studies and reports of district Kushinagar show that:

- Kushinagar has reported the most deaths of Musahars due to poverty and hunger.
- 80% of children (0-5 yrs) are malnourished and only negligible numbers of children are immunized against infectious diseases.
- Very high IMR and MMR among Musahar community compared to district level indicators
- Maternal malnutrition is very high resulting in low birth weight
- 50% of Musahar children in the project area have never been to school
- Majority of those children who go school dropout well before given the acute

poverty and demand to work with their parents

- 70% of the community have no access to health services, quacks and the Sokha Ojha (Saints) are the main health service providers

Moreover, the IMR accounting for Musahars in Kushinagar being as high as 83/1000 births and the institutional deliveries as low as 15% are alarming indicators. (AWO Baseline Survey Report of Maharajganj & Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.8-9). The survey exclaimed in sorrow that,

“The status of Musahars is so pitiable that they do not even own the land on which they have built their kachha houses (temporary huts). They stay on the common lands of gram panchayat⁴ on the outskirts of the main village even far off from other SC houses. Devoid of electricity, proper roads, water and sanitation Musahars hamlets look like outcasts and castaway.” (AWO Baseline Survey Report of

Maharajganj & Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.07.)

The outcome is a solidarity movement for the Musahar empowerment. The Musahar Vikas Manch (under Maha Dalit Vikas Manch) handed over a letter addressed to the candidates, and a charter of demands. With this event, the Musahar Manch clearly expressed its intention of participating in, and influencing, the governance process and negotiating with political forces. Moreover, it sent out the message that human development issues like food and hunger, livelihood, illiteracy, disease, public health and human security must figure prominently in the agenda of any political party. Their latest resistive stance is expressed in the solidarity they have found in their community.

Key demands of the Musahar community include:

1. Grant of scheduled tribe status to them.
2. Inclusion of Maharajganj district in the NREGA as also all poverty-stricken districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh.
3. Grant of gram sabha land to landless Musahars and possession to those given entitlements.
4. Antyodaya ration cards for all Musahar households.
5. Indira Awas Yojana to cover all Musahar households.
6. Residential schools up to Class 12 and the setting up of ashram-type schools in Musahar-dominated areas.
7. Filling up 2,000 vacancies for primary school teachers in Maharajganj.
8. Access to a functional anganwadi, primary school and fair price shop in all Musahar hamlets.
9. Special package for flood-affected areas, and all-round development of Sohgifarwa.
10. Social security for every Musahar household.
11. Increase in the minimum wage in Uttar Pradesh.
12. Equal wages for men and women.

Traditionally they had been voting for the landed class (who were their masters in life) represented by Congress party. But with the Jayprakash Narayan led anti-Congress movement in the 1970s they have found their true representatives in the legislative assemble and supported largely for the Ambedkarite BSP but in the last state election they shifted their allegiance to Bahujan Samaj Party. Scheduled Caste Community development did not remain a utopian thought when Jitan Ram Manjhi became the Chief Minister of the State.

More hopeful thing to mention is that, since 2001, 'Culture, Development and Identity: The Musahars of the Middle-Gangetic Plains' under the Dalit Resource Centre, Deshkal Society² (Gaya, Bihar) is

enthusiastic and consistent in circulating programme on documentation and research on the Musahars. The latest trend of the Musahar in joining the Military and Para-Military Services.

Thus, Musahars too had their say. Genu Musahar said that the Musahar Manch must analyze the assurances given by politicians and that the Musahars must remain united for the larger fight. Fulesari Devi and Kaushilya from Sohgarwa cynically remarked: “Politicians are coming to our doors because of elections and the fact that we are not united; they will disappear after the election.”

Conclusion: The Future

In this small endeavour, as I find it to be, I have tried to accumulate a miniscule which could stand both for the revelation of the actual condition of all the Dalits and Mahadalits of India and abroad and then it might call for the expectant measures on behalf of the Governments (central and State), NGOs, CSOs and Activists by

assuming more subtle and detail responsibilities. In modern times, the concepts of development and developmental strategies have undergone significant changes. Both formal and non-formal agencies go hand in hand in order to extend and meet the demand of an all round development of a society *viz-a-viz* the nation. The poverty stricken marginal communities and their vulnerability have been the legacy of Indian Democracy from time immemorial. Governments, politicians, activists, NGOs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), various Planning Commissions, Laws and Foreign Researchers cum Contributors, all of the above bodies have come to the bitter truth that even after nearly 70 years of independence, India still remains in the mythological state of limbo. Behind the *façade* of India gone global, the back log of the millions of poor faces still far from the basic amenities of life. A secured shelter, functional education, nutrient food, pure water, clean sanitation, electricity and congenial work ambience – are the very requisitions of the hour for the underprivileged, even if we shamefully bypass the serious issues like human values, human resources and the Commandments,

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Though, in *The Life of Musahars in North Bihar* J John & Mukul Sharma say, “Nothing much has changed in the employment pattern of migrant workers from Bihar over a period of hundred years”, the most important information the State Personnel and Administrative Reforms Department’s Principal Secretary, Deepak Kumar shared with the reporter is that another progressive measure the cabinet of Bihar allowed is an amendment to the Bihar Right to Information Act (amendment) rules 2009 to make it more effective and prevent its misuse. Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission under SC/ST Welfare Department of the Govt. of Bihar has published its ‘invitation for Expression for Interest for setting up Community Radio Station among Mahadalit Community for advancement of their educational, developmental, social and cultural needs.’(Times of India and

<http://mahadalitmission.org>. 17.06.2015).

This proves that the project of community development is in action not only in words but also in ink and blue.

End Notes:

1. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 identified Bauriahs, Sanorias, Harbwahs and Maghiya Doms as criminals. In Western India the Bhils, Kolis, Kanjars and Minas were increasingly regarded as criminal. Other communities(Musahar) were similarly classified in Nagpur and Oudh, Bihar and Bengal, Hyderabad and the Madras Presidency.(*Against History, Against State : Counter Perspectives from the Margins* by Shail Mayaram.2006)
2. Deshkal Society was founded by educationists, journalists, young researchers and social activists in 1995. It initially aimed at publishing a Hindi magazine with an objective to help formation of a liberal and thinking society, which constantly makes use of the tools of information, thoughts and logics. Presently, Deshkal Society is involved in understanding, documenting and disseminating the fundamental problems of economic and cultural levels. Deshkal also tries to enhance the capacity of a community by ensuring their partnership in the knowledge-based activism. Further, this society gives

special emphasis on building a network of NGOs, local groups and institutions for the betterment of the backward class of society.

3. A Planning Commission of India funded recent (2004) domestic survey on Scheduled Communities (mainly on Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal) under "A Social Development Profile of SC/STs", New Delhi: Government of India, revealed that out of 392 Scheduled Caste households only 18.4 per cent own arable (cultivable) land only and 11.2 per cent possess assets. The study found that among the lowest marginal communities the Musahars and the Chaupals have neither land nor agricultural assets.

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