

Practices, Traditions and Material life of Musahar Community in Middle Gangetic Plain, UP and Bihar

The seminar-cum-cultural performance was organised by Deshkal Society on January 22 and 23, 2016 at Gaya, Bihar. It was organised with active support and cooperation from Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Several experts on Musahar culture, history, skills, practises and their contemporary status in Bihar participated in the seminar. Scholars, people with informed understandings, and members of the community took part, too.

It need be underscored that the seminar was an outcome of Deshkal's engagement with the world of Musahar community. Such engagement collates and draws on years of experience of working with them on issues of habitat, agricultural land, human rights, and social hierarchies amongst others. The seminar may not have been possible without active involvement of the Musahar community.

The thematic of the event was focused on the universe and cogent ambiance of Musahar community culture, practises, skills and belief systems; that its worldview and elucidating characteristics be ventilated and stationed in the modern world which has almost completely ignored and marginalised this vibrant community. No welfare, developmental or other schemes would be effective unless such factors are accounted for. Through this constructive affirmation the endeavor was for a corrective to the rather pejorative image the community has been given ---'stubbornly changeless', incapable of reinventing themselves, not taking initiative when faced with a crisis.

Musahar community are an ancient people. Not much was known of them till a few decades back; whatever was, was disparaging --such depreciatory understanding continues. Though a tribal community they were notified as Dalits in the 1960s. Lately, Bihar government has engineered a new social category, the Mahadalits. Musahar community are now included therein. Denying them a cultural and political identity of their own, the ruling elites of Bihar systematically divested the community of all its time-tested life skills. Neither the state government nor the people of Bihar could harness or benefit from such richness of this till recently vibrant community. Integrated by the settled agricultural society as low caste, their food gathering and hunting practices, domestication of pigs, their nomadic character, non-acquisitive nature, an egalitarian collective sense of past and identity are practices that carve out an intimate link with their tribal past. Ever since they descended to the settled society on the Indo Gangetic deltas, paddy cultivation has been at the centre of their life cycle that intimately corresponds to the cycle of nature. They refresh their lives when nature refreshes itself. It is interdependent and mutual. Such historical intimacy has given rise to tested and

tried diversity of cultural practices (art, ritual, music) that continuously revitalise human societies and life at large.

The Musahar community are classified as Scheduled Castes in Bihar. Their population is around 1.4 million, accounting for almost 2.5% of the total population of the state. Predominantly engaged as casual labour in agriculture and at the brick kilns, they are settled largely in the districts of Gaya, Nadwa, Munger, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Muzzafarpur, Darbhanga, Saran and Champaran. Apart from Bihar, they are also found in the neighbouring states of Jharkhand, U.P. and Bengal. From being a hunter in the jungles who wandered at will, to becoming un-free labour; from being a worshipper of nature to becoming an untouchable in the Hindu caste system, has been the Musahar community journey.

OBJECTIVES of the seminar-cum-cultural performance were identified in consultation with community leaders and experts on Musahar community. They were:

- Generate dialogue and awareness for dignified representation for rich cultural traditions- festivals and material life of Musahar communities.
- Disseminate rich cultural traditions- festivals and material life- of Musahar communities and contribute to safeguarding intangible heritage of local cultures
- To revitalize initiatives that seek to resist the above decline by reinforcing eroding Musahar cultural resources, skills, memory and the value placed in them.

In synergy with each other these carved out a space that present a holistic image of the world of Musahars, their worldview, their perspective on what constitutes ‘dignity’, ‘skills’, ‘education’ ‘home’ and indeed ‘development’.

It is an effort to create an active learning space for civil society at large. In particular students, scholars, and culture and development practitioners would benefit from this dissemination of experiences of marginal communities striving for dignified lives.

The two day seminar was structured as given below:

Day One

1000 - 1100	Inaugural Session
	Inauguration of the Seminar
1100-1115	Tea
1115-1300	Presentation on the Making of Cultural Practices and Traditions of the Musahar Community
1300-1400	Lunch
1400-1600	Folk Culture, Myth and Collective Identity
1600-1615	Tea
1615-1730	Screening of Documentary titled, Aaropit Pehchan Ke Paar (Beyond

	Ascribed Identities with reference to culture, resistance and identity of the Musahar Community
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Day Two

1000-1030	<i>Tea</i>
1030-1230	Cultural Practices, Memory and Musahar Community
1230-1330	<i>Lunch</i>
1330-1530	State and Non-State Stakeholders Potential Initiatives of Revitalising Culture and Traditions of Musahar Community
1530-1600	<i>Tea</i>
1600-1730	Where do We Go From Here?
1900-2030	Traditional <i>Jhumar</i> Dance Performance

Of these the work-sessions were:

- Presentation on the Making of the Cultural Practises and Traditions of the Musahar Community
- Folk Culture, Myth and Collective Identity
- Cultural Practices, Memory and Musahar Community
- State and Non-State Stakeholders Potential Initiatives of Revitalising Culture and Traditions of Musahar Community
- Where do We Go from Here?
- Traditional *Jhumar* Dance Performance

Experts invited as key speakers for the sessions were *Rahul Ghai, Badri Narayan, Arvind Kumar Mishra, and Sanjay Kumar.*

In the FIRST SESSION, viz On the Making of the Cultural Practises and Traditions of the Musahar Community, *Rahul Ghai* observed in the post-World War II rhetoric of economic growth and reconstruction, culture was consigned to the backwaters. Since the 1950s economists shaped perspectives of development and modernization. The failure of dealing with culture in development in the last fifty years has to do with the failure to distinguish the constitutive, functional and instrumental aspects of cultural discourse. By itself, the development discourse has talked mainly in terms of economic growth and stability in exclusion of other vital aspects as memory and culture. They were relegated to the restricted meaning of literature, arts, artists and heritage.

In such background, development acquired a new meaning for Third World countries as they gained freedom from colonial rule. With underdevelopment as the foundation of India's tryst with destiny, development primarily meant rapid industrialization and high economic growth to avoid neo-colonial domination. The basis of development planning hinged on a consensus over a commodity centred approach, the chief aim of which was capital growth for rapid large scale industrialization. Keeping this as the main objective, the homogenising modern Indian state espoused a developmental ideology that aided self-definition of the post-colonial state as well as rule by consent in liberal democracy.

Communities were reified into administrative categories to facilitate rule, as subjects of development welfare and political manipulation. They were seldom seen as human beings with creative potential inherited orally through traditions that were generations old. Most of the development frameworks since then have rested on the assumption of a deficiency to be fulfilled in these 'deprived' communities. This 'deficiency model' has been the most dominant, an ideal type of development that seeks to explain the causes of underdevelopment of marginal communities. This model of development, dispensed by the experts, derives its legitimacy through reconstruction of underdeveloped regions and communities.

Independent India inherited this colonial representation that reified the Musahar community as the other, as rat-eaters condemned to the most menial agricultural labour and with no entitlements to land either for habitat or cultivation. They have been the single largest source of unskilled agricultural labour in the region ever since. Of late they have started migrating to Punjab during harvest season. A good number of them break stones in nearby quarries. Some work as daily wage labourers in neighbouring towns; a few in brick-kilns as far as Allahabad. They are largely concentrated in Gaya district where they constitute 17 per cent of the entire Scheduled Caste population. Literacy rate among them is 1.1 per cent. Socially considered 'untouchables', Musahar community entered the Hindu caste fold around 300 years ago. Even now the majority of Musahar community live in makeshift huts or one-room mud-houses on lands they do not own.

The UNESCO report, *Our Creative Diversity* (1995) was a watershed. It gave culture an anthropological turn. The report persuasively argued that development is embedded in the deep structures of cultures. The immense diversity of human societies needed to be looked at on their *own terms* and not necessarily as approximations to any formulaic economic growth models prescribed by the West. Following this there has been an increasing recognition that culture, which is the 'soul of development', can no longer be ignored and needs to be explicitly incorporated in the understanding of human development and affairs. This calls for re-positioning economics and broadening the notion of development that has conventionally stood for uniformity based on Western values. This re-positioning sees hope for the future in acknowledging the constitutive power of culture of the marginalised in shaping the processes of development. In proclaiming this cultural dimension to development there is an effort to liberate culture from 'the primordial trap', a mystical haze, or a source of hegemonic power; and go beyond simplistic notions of culture as a hindrance to development.

In attempting to liberate culture from the economic growth syndrome, the emerging perspectives suggest positive strategies for integrating indigenous Cultural Knowledge as skills into the processes and programs of what is called 'development'. In proposing a vital link between development as wellbeing and culture as dignified worldviews at the fringes, these articulations point to the necessity of situating and engaging with the perspectives of the marginal communities in overcoming the reductive basis of development as simply growth.

In the SECOND SESSION, Folk Culture, Myth and Collective Identity *Badri Narayan* spoke from the perspective of myth, culture and democracy. He emphasised on the myths and ballads popular among the Musahar community. He brought forth the primordial myth of the Musahar community founding ancestor Deosi. This myth traces the origin of Musahar community to the Kol tribe of Cheru and is popular in their oral traditions in central and eastern U.P. The second myth is about the female ancestor Savitri, which exists as a sub-plot in the Ramayana epic. The third myth that Badri analyses is popular in north Bihar and relates to the two *Birs*, the warriors Dina and Badri, symbolically akin to Rama and Lakshmana of the Ramayana, who came to the world to protect the poor labourers from the exploitation of rich landlords. These heroes are idolized, temples and worship sites are constructed around them, they are publicly venerated during religious occasions and fairs and festivals commemorating them have proliferated in the community in recent times. These fairs are extremely popular, attracting large numbers to soulful performances of ballads about these heroes. Badri points out that these songs represent the collective psyche of all the Musahar community. It is now becoming increasingly evident that the processes of positive assertion of the past, which mostly involve reinterpreting Brahminical symbols and myths to subvert the dominance of the Great Tradition and upper castes, plays a critical role in the efforts of stigmatised groups to claim an alternative representation.

In the telling and retelling of these myths on various occasions lies the promise of emancipation, of attaining self-respect through symbolic assertion. Badri went on to delineate the twin processes that facilitate the active participation of Musahar community in parliamentary democracy. He pointed out that fairs and festivals organised by the community to celebrate the memory of their caste heroes have emerged as important focal points for political parties, who use these occasions as platforms for political mobilisations. At another level, that of the internal organisation of the Musahar community, these tales of dignity and lost affluence galvanise the community and motivate them to engage in development, upward mobility and acquire social confidence.

The argument about the positive impact of this recasting of the heroic ballads among the community is further strengthened by an important observation that these are popular among the youth of the community and are not merely the nostalgic yearnings of a glorious past limited to the elders. All this led Badri to conclude that the Musahar community is emerging as active participant in the democratic struggle through its own cultural resources. He sees in this an instance of how cultural capital is being transformed into political and developmental capital for community betterment.

The presentation Cultural Practices, Memory and Musahar Community by *Arvind Kumar Mishra*, on the second day and THIRD SESSION, excavated varied sets of voices from among the Musahar community that are in themselves contemporary discourses on emancipation. The rich analysis

made a case for knowledge as deliberate action to bring about change. *Arvind* makes the case that unless a different image of the community is understood and portrayed, it will not be possible to do any significant work for their emancipation.

His narrative interwove biographical sketches of prominent social reformers and activists among the community in recent times. Dasarath Manjhi, was one such leader in the community right from his days of razing the hillock near Gehlor way back in the 1960s, through the turbulent years of armed struggle of the mid-1970s and till the post-1990s when there was much hue and cry about liberalisation and globalisation at both state and national levels. Another biography of resistance is of Bhagawati Devi who has raised the issue of entitlement of Musahar community to homestead land. From the dusty village school to the campus of T.M. College to the district headquarters of Darbhanga district in Bihar, Asarfi Sada has trudged the difficult path of life in his pursuance of education. The arduous toils of Musahar community social activist Baleswar Prasad and his wife Jayanti Devi from Bapugram were also brought to the fore. Their effort over decades has transformed Bapugram from a wasteland into a beautiful flourishing village. Land had been levelled and forest cleared through sheer human labour. Most of the inhabitants were *kamias* who fled from their *maliks* when they received land under the auspices of the Bhoodan Movement. For *Arvind* there is an underlying common thread of dignity as a core ethic of Musahar community life that lies beneath these narratives. He further adds that the emerging multiple voices of the community provides enough suggestions that for them food and dignity are not separate issues. The inherent genius of Musahar community society is empathetic to the community's idea of change and expectations from the future that emerge from their everyday life experiences. Their voices of emancipation have organically developed through a dialogical process. Unlike the commonplace perception of the Musahar community as poor, silent, powerless and unthinking spectator, the narratives see the Musahar as able, worthy to lead a dignified life and contributing to the welfare of society and the nation at large. According to such real philosophies of life, 'change' or 'progress' should necessarily respect the ethos of the community and create enabling conditions where they have the freedom to choose for themselves. And in this choice for freedom lies a fundamental quest for self-esteem as a cardinal value of human existence.

In the concluding FOURTH SESSION, State and Non State Stakeholders Potential Initiatives of Revitalising Culture and Traditions of Musahar Community, *Sanjay Kumar* stressed on, and recommended, the need to represent the rich texture of lives and struggles of Musahar community as a premise for meaningful positive change, with development as a dialogue for well-being. The Musahar community is a story of their 'imagined' past and imaginative present. Constrained and imprisoned in the present socio-economic-cultural paradigm, they are about how they take recourse to creativity of the liberated soul to reconstruct a past that sets them free and unconstrained. They are mirror images of the present subjugation, humiliation and insults. Legends of the epical past are all prosperous, high, brave and the king that fights and takes revenge against insults. By identifying the valuable cultural assets of the community, he argued that cultural practices should be considered as assets rather than a hindrance to development. By substantiating this argument with analysis of the value of cultural practices among the Musahar community themselves, Sanjay's was a passionate plea for considering them as dignified human beings with the vision and capability to make a positive contribution to the original goals of development.

It has been Deshkal's conviction that production and representation of Musahar community --and other such alternative viewpoints of marginal communities-- are needed to advocate for an agenda of development as well-being; also to engage in affirmative action that seeks to represent the concerns of a marginal community that has been the victim of conventional development paradigms.

CULTURAL PRESENTATIONS

At the end of the two day seminar the community performed Jhumar dance as a form deeply embedded in --and derived from-- nature. A traditional folk dance, it was performed by women. Anchored in cycles of nature, it has a vast thematic weaving into its tapestry several occasions, events, epics and legends in Musahar community life in the community. Though there is no fixed season for it, it is performed more when spring descends on earth with its beauty, and spreads joy and happiness all around. Intimately linked to community life, Jhumar corresponds to the cycles of nature. People welcome it with song and dance. It is a major attraction in fairs and festivals the year round. Rows of colourfully attired women, arms entwined and flowers in their hair, swayed to-and-fro with delicate vigour and gay abandon. Men in feathered headgears and yellow-green scarves provided musical accompaniment with age old *Mandar*, *Dhol* and Windpipe. Children joined in now and then. Sitting or standing, the spectators swayed in unison. The performance was a living testimony to deep veneration of all, of nature to regenerate human societies and life at large.