

Research, Documentation and Promotion of the Culture, Language and History of the Musahar Community in Bihar

The Perspective

The Indian state, with its languages of modernity and historicism, has constructed the Musahar community as backward, passive, incapable of entrepreneurship, achievement, and goal-oriented behaviour. Attempts to ameliorate their condition by the state and by development agencies, who too subscribe to this dominant image of victimhood, have not only failed miserably but also further reinforced this construction. If one assesses the Musahars' condition in terms of the conventional parameters of economic growth, consumption level, education, industrial employment and so on, there would be no doubt that the Musahars occupy a marginalized and subaltern status in the state of Bihar and its adjoining areas in Uttar Pradesh.

Yet if one admits other indicators into the picture, the Musahars do appear to be immensely capable and competent agents – for instance, in terms of political participation, communitarian functioning, ecological conservation and resistance to onslaughts on their dignity and nurtured values.

Recently, scholars have reconstituted the notion of marginality. From being merely an indicator of powerlessness, marginality today is acknowledged also as a critical positioning of the marginalized people, perhaps somewhat outside the system, which produces other forms of empowerment and criticality amongst them. Marginality enables a community to demystify and unpack the mainstream, expose its constitutive violence, and above all, interrogate the dominant history of 'progress'. In other words, marginality is also an alternative vision. A study of Musahar narratives of the past shows us precisely this. The various cultural and performative forms popular amongst the Musahars indicate that for the marginalized, remembering the past is not merely a simple recollection of 'objective facts', ie formalized history as we know it. Remembering the past is a critique of and a struggle against the present.



Background of the Community

Between the fertile stretch of the Ganga and the southern highland of Chotanagpur plateau, the Musahars are spread over middle Ganga plains. Although criss-crossed by numerous streams and rivers, this region is characterized by high agricultural seasonality as the water retaining capacity of the soil here is low, there being a strong downward slope from north-south. Availability of moisture through the year and the fertile alluvial soil in the northern part of the floodplain of Bihar allow agricultural activities through the year, while in the southern parts the agricultural season is restricted to the paddy cultivation during the winter season with the help of irrigated water.

It is believed that historically, descendents of the tribes of the Chotanagpur area, the Musahars had migrated from the hills to the valley.ⁱ Today, they live in the districts of Gaya, Nawada, Munger, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Muzzafarpur, Darbhanga, Saran and Champaran.ⁱⁱ In this region, high agricultural seasonality has created a high demand for permanent agricultural labour. Paddy cultivation being a dominant mode of economic practice for centuries in the middle Ganga plains, this persistent demand for agricultural labour has been primarily to maintain the irrigation system of the southⁱⁱⁱ during peak agricultural season. It also produced a land-labour system by which labourers were compelled to function through long-term ties to the maliks or landlords. Kamiauti, a permanent land-labour arrangement, emerged out of the historico-geographical characteristics of this area, whereby the whole Musahar community was transformed through time into bonded labourers. Under the kamiauti system, a kamia worked all his life for the same landlord, earning wages for the days that he worked and in principle, expecting assistance when needed. For his son's marriage, he received some grains, money and traditionally, a small plot of land from the landlord. After the conclusion of this transaction, called kamiauti, the son too becomes the same malik's kamia. Women also became attached to the same master in a labour arrangement in perpetuity, through their marital relationship with the kamia husbands. The obligation of living on the malik's land bound them to continue with a long land-labour tie with the maliks.



At the same time, having come down from the hills into the plains, the Musahars came into contact with the sedentary, agricultural, caste-based society, characterized by Brahminic concepts of purity and pollution. Musahars were incorporated into the hierarchy as the lowest echelon. They became untouchables since they were kept outside the four Hindu varnas.^{iv} From mountains and hills to the plains of paddy fields, the fate of the Musahars appears to have had a clear downward slope. The closer they came to the rice bowl, deeper they got into indigence and misery. Those settled in Bhagalpur and Munger regions worked as ghatwals and tikaits, collecting transit fees at the mouth of the valley or pass under the local lords, enjoyed privileges. Into the plains, they were settled as untouchables and coerced into labour bondage. Contemporary social and economic positioning of Musahar community within the larger societal structure bears the twin impact of being a kamia and an untouchable, marked by almost total denial of entitlements, especially land which forms an integral part of their everyday struggle for existence.^v Of course, as agricultural labourers,^{vi} they carry out the toughest agricultural work of soil-cutting, earth-removing and heavy spadework particularly on barren and uncultivable hard soils and form the backbone of the present agricultural economy of Bihar.

Project Purpose

Notwithstanding their perpetual oppression at the hands of malik and their heart-rending poverty, the Musahars have been able to preserve a rich and complex body of cultural practices. This project sought to unravel this reservoir of cultural resources that is their real strength, allowing them to negotiate the opportunities available in the contemporary world.

Representation of marginal communities as powerless, voiceless, lacking in agency and therefore in need of aid and emancipation is part of the dominant discourse of today's world. However, this very kind of representation has led to a resistance to it – indeed, collaborative resistance to stigmatized representations has been always a central part of the articulation of identities.^{vii} There is no doubt that for the Musahar, the ongoing struggle is for basic material entitlements. However, we shall miss the point entirely if



we seek to homogenize their experiences with a monolithic and faceless category called the poor in India. For what we see here is a very specific social and cultural subalternity – but, above all, also empowerment and critique – that is a product of dominant representational strategies about caste and untouchability, exclusion, and pollution. Whether it be stories about their past wars being redeployed in the contemporary arena of electoral battles, whether it be stories about unique life-histories and individual heroisms, whether it be practices that use mobility as cultural capital or strategies that own up the pig and take it to society, only an understanding of the specificities of such Musahar narratives enables us to read the insurgent and dignified prose that takes shape, often wordlessly, in the everyday life of the Musahar.

Major Outcomes

i. Development of Archives

a. Audio Documentation

Audio recording of around 200 hours of cultural performances which include marriage songs, plantation songs, jhumer songs, teej songs, karma songs, sohar epics, devas, etc.

b. Visual Documentation

Photo Documentation: 6,000 digital and 800 non-digital photographs covering various aspects of the day-to-day life of the community.

Video Documentation: Around 25 hours of video documentation through mini-digital camera covering various aspects related to life of the Musahar community, their folk performances, cultural practices and everyday forms of resistance.

Documentary Film: A 30-minute documentary film on the culture, identity and resistance of the Musahar community titled 'Aaropit Pahchan ke Paar (Beyond Imposed Identities)'.

The film captures the everyday life, the day-to-day struggle of Musahars. Aware of plural voices among the community, the film deals with the question of emancipation and the importance of Musahar legends, myth and tradition in seeking that emancipation. It also focuses on the contrasting views on Musahars' association with the pig and liquor. The voices of self-assertion mark the narrative of the film that shatters the centuries old, and incessant, myth about the Musahar as a rat-eating community.





ii. Capacity Building of the Community

Since the beginning of the process of documentation and research, young girls and boys from the Musahar community, particularly cultural activists, were involved as facilitators and resource persons at the grass-roots level, and were at the forefront in the processes of documentation and workshop. By the end of the project, around fifteen youths from the Musahar community were directly involved in facilitating grass-roots development processes among the community. Two Musahar youths were provided sound training in photography and documentation, and became professionally capable of joining the mainstream media. Besides these, around

one hundred persons who actively participated in the processes of research, documentation and workshops, are now playing the role of facilitators in constructive programmes for the community in the area.

iii. Network Building

Coordination and networking with the local intelligentsia, development practitioners and cultural activists was developed in around sixty-five villages during the initial processes of documentation and workshops. During the next stage, while disseminating the project outputs like visual CDs, documentary film and bulletins, this network was further developed to ensure active involvement of the local NGOs, government administrators and intelligentsia as well as national level policy makers, bureaucrats and intelligentsia.

iv. Development of a Library

A substantial number of articles, books, policy reports and other archival materials in Hindi and English have been collected on themes like culture, particularly folk culture, of Dalits, and their history, politics, identity and sustainable development. A library has been developed with this rich collection which can serve as a reference and resource centre for further studies on the culture, history, identity and resistance of Dalit and marginalised communities.



v. Research

The consolidated research outputs of the project are to be published soon as a book on Representation, Resistance and Identity: The Musahars of Middle Gangetic Plain.

Notes

- (i) The origin of the Musahars, who are known by different names in Bihar and its adjoining states, has still re-mained debatable. In colonial ethnographic works they have been related to different tribes both within and outside the region based on etymological explanation and anthropometrical indices. While J. C. Nesûeld, 1888, 'The Musahars of Central and Upper India', Calcutta Review, 171: 1–52, linked their origin to the Kol and Cheru tribes of Chotanagpur based on legendary myths of 'Deosi', H. H. Risley's, 1891, Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Vol. I & II, Kolkata: Firma KLM, hypothesis based on the etymological explanation of the word Musahar (rat-eater or rat-catcher) traces their origin to the equally Dravidian Bhuiyas of southern Chotanagpur. Meanwhile, Indian ethnologist S. C. Roy, 1935a, 'Report of Anthropological Work 1930-31: Hill Bhuiyas of Orissa', Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, xviii: 51–78; and 1935b, 'Report of Anthropological Work in 1932-33: The Bhuiyas and Their Congeners', Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Past I, xxi: 1–19, links their origin to the independent section of the old 'Desh Bhuiyas' or 'Pauri Bhuiyas' in the tributary state of Orissa. For detail discussions see Gyan Prakash, 1990, Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (ii) Presently it is in the Magadh region of Bihar where they have the greatest concentration, and are known as 'Bhuiyas'.
- (iii) Traditionally tank irrigation was the most popular mode of irrigation in south Bihar. Locally known as Āhars (tanks) consisting of a maze of Pains (irrigation channels) to store water from rainfall and rivers.
- (iv) In the 1935 census, Musahars (together with Bhuiya population) were considered as tribes but for the first time in the 1961 census they were put in the Scheduled Caste category. In Bihar, according to the 1981 census, the entire population of the Musahars amounted to 13,91,000 and that of the Bhuiya as to 8,50,469. Ac-



According to this count, the population of the Musahars and the Bhuinyas taken together made up nearly 20 per cent of the entire Dalit population. In short, out of the three 'millionaire castes' in the state of Bihar, Musahars is one of them. The other two being the Chamars (3 million) and the Dusadhs (2.7 million).



- (v) A recent household survey carried out by the Planning Commission of India, 2004, *Scheduled Communities: A Social Development Profile of SC/STs (Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal)*, New Delhi: Government of India, revealed that out of 392 Scheduled Caste households, only 18.4 per cent own cultivable land, and 11.2 per cent possess assets. The study found that the Musahars and the Chaupals have neither land nor agricultural assets.
- (vi) According to the 1981 census, out of the total population in Bihar, 46.7 per cent are workers and among them 95.34 per cent are agricultural labourers. Only 2.52 per cent are involved in cultivation and the remaining 2.14 per cent are in other services.
- (vii) H. Joffe, 2003, 'Risk: From Perception to Social Representation', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42: 55–73; I. Markova and P. Wilkie, 1987, 'Representation, Concepts and Social Change: The Phenomenon of AIDS', *Journal For the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 17: 389–410; M. Murray, 2002, 'Connecting Narrative and Social Representation Theory in Health Psychology', *Social Science Information*, 41 (4): 653–73; Paulo Friere, 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.