

National Seminar on Culture and Communication in the Development of Musahar Community

The Social Configuration: Dilemma Speaks

Musahars are one of the largest caste communities among the lower castes of Bihar. They are also the most marginalised and are at the bottom of Hindu caste hierarchy. Though now part of the Hindu caste and social system, they still retain many characteristics similar to those of tribes. This community is one of the oldest communities and it claims to have genealogical links with the Bhil tribe. The Musahars may have come out of this tribal fold centuries ago, yet they are still not sure of their place in the Hindu social hierarchy because they are considered as untouchables, and are secluded from the mainstream Hindu castes. Unlike tribal communities, well known for their indigenous and autonomous traditions of subsistence and culture, Musahars have always been taken as a dispersed people, who have remained a peripheral but organic part of mainstream society, with nothing to speak of as their 'own' - culturally or materially.



The process of their Hinduisation is still going on. In this process, the tension and dilemma of caste and tribe, sometimes, become too obvious. This tension and dilemma get reflected in their mode of identifying and integrating themselves with the mainstream. They cannot own Rama directly, but they want to. So, they are doing it via Shabari. They own the mythical Shabari as one of their legendary ancestors. They believe that it was Shabari who inspired Rama to come upon Ravana by feeding him the charismatic fruit, that too after testing it. Shabari belonged to Jungle, she had good knowledge of chemistry and power of herbs and fruits. On the top of it, she was an inspiring force behind Rama's attack on Ravana. Today, they own Shabari and try to establish themselves as part and parcel of Rama's tradition. To accomplish this task, they also organise Shabari mela (fair). The occasion becomes a platform for them to raise the consciousness and awareness in the community, and to inculcate confidence in them to be part of the mainstream society.

The tension and humiliation of the present predicament of the community has been addressed very positively by the Kabirpanthis. As nonbelievers in the caste system, Kabirpanthis have been trying to bring the community out of the mess of caste conundrum and give them full respect and honour as simple human beings. Their modus operandi is to become a part of the folk life and respect the psyche of Musahars. This inculcates a sense of confidence, meaning and pride among the Musahar community and their being.



The Material Milieu: Battle for Survival

The material conditions of the Musahar community speak volumes about their social conditions. In fact, the former is the mirror image of the latter. Being the poorest of the poor, the Musahars have nothing in the name of property except the socially despised animal 'pig'. Pigs are intimately integrated into their day-to-day life. If we look at it as an outsider, it can be taken as degradation of the community. But in emergencies, they have nothing but pigs to fall back upon for livelihood and income.



Though traditionally they were intimately attached to land, today they do not possess any. They have been efficient land-reclaimers and excellent assessors of land and soil. However, deprived of any land ownership, they were gradually forced into bonded labour termed 'Kamia'. It was the worst kind of obligatory system in agrarian labour relations that also demanded service from children as inherited loanee. Until recent past they did not enjoy the status of free labour. Totally landless and usually settled on someone else's land, serving as attached labour to prosperous peasant families is still a significant occupation among them. Of their total population, 46.7% Musahars are workers, and among them 95% are landless

agricultural labourers. The rest are engaged in other kinds of manual work and services. As the cheapest labourers, they live 'from hand to mouth'. Modern machines and technology have turned their traditional skills of land-

reclaiming, soil assessing and digging irrelevant. To feed their families, they also depend on food-gathering from the agricultural farms. Of late, they have also started migrating to states like Punjab, Haryana and Delhi in search of better prospects mainly as agricultural labour. Groups of women also migrate armed with short sturdy brooms to gather left-over grains in the fields of Haryana and Punjab during each harvest season, twice a year. With a literacy rate of mere 2.5%, the prospects of their betterment in near future seem to be a dreamy proposition.

True, Musahars have had a history of impoverishment, with most of them leading a life of landless labour since centuries. Yet the fact that they survive with a strong resilience and an identity, is ample proof of the strength of their own traditions of knowledge, skills and culture. It is more a failure of our historiography and a general oversight by society, that Musahars' traditions still remain largely unknown and hidden. Their folk culture or folklore in particular, may help us to explore their inner world.

Folk Culture: Constructing a Future

In tune with their claim to a glorious history full of bravery and warriorship, the legendary Bir heroes in their folklore tell the story of their past. Dudhvir, Raghubir, Tulsibir, Dina, Bhadri, etc. invariably present in their myths, songs, ballads and other forms of folklore tell how brave, pure and prosperous people they were. At the same time these also narrate, how the deviations came in their life and how they became 'polluted' and subjugated because of certain devilish elements.



Now, Shabari adds a different dimension to their historicity. Even if these stories prevalent in their folklore don't tell the 'real' past, they certainly speak of their present mind-set and aspirations, and mirror the attempt to construct a future through constructing the past. They certainly want to get rid of 'the present'.

Musahars live with swine and swineries amidst fifth and squalor. They eat swine and drink liquor every day. This alone may not be the life of Musahars, nor can this be the reason behind their present predicament. True, swine and liquor are in the centre of their life. They drink to celebrate, to forget the pain and also offer it to their folk deities. They eat swine as staple food, celebrate and offer it to their folk deities, and also depend on it in financially difficult times. They celebrate daily life and enjoy community living. If they celebrate sowing, then they also enjoy harvesting. While sowing and harvesting, the agricultural fields become a vibrant and live production cum cultural venue with women and men singing farming songs. They celebrate 'Karma' (nature worship) and 'Jitia' (ancestral worship) apart from other worships of folk deities and festivities.

If one wishes to explore the world and psyche of the Musahar community, one will have to look into all these forms of folk culture and lore. If one gets into their inner channels and modes of communication, only then their outwardly stoic silence can be broken.

But these are traditions which are learnt and transmitted orally, and cannot be accessed or understood from afar and in non-participatory contexts. Also, as these are part of and in tune with their location and environment, these traditions cannot be studied in isolation from the general life-style and life practices of their locales.



Understanding Musahars: Unlearning Ourselves

Why do we fail to understand the sources of inner strength, sensibility and inspiration of the groups and communities living at the margins of the society? This is a vital question, and there are certain obvious reasons. One of them, very fundamental, is our caste system which squeezes the opportunities to think about and understand each other. Another factor is the class relations and structure of our society in which advanced section starts with the presumption that there is nothing to learn about the 'backward and undeveloped' people except that they live by selling their labour. But, if you expose yourself to the life and society of the Musahar community, you will feel that to learn and understand them one will have to unlearn oneself. There is an emphasis on 'unlearning' because the process of learning that we have is deeply influenced/ dominated by print or written culture. We want to learn and understand about a completely oral society the way we do about a print and written world.

Till date only 3% male and less than 1% female among Musahars are literate. It is a real challenge before us how to understand a world knit and woven in complete oral traditions. If we do not intend to go for a classical dialogue and just try to trace the elements of change/ transformation that have affected their life, then we have a straight answer to this question. Kabirpanthis have had a great influence amidst them. On the surface level, their technique may look very simple and ordinary. This technique is to enter into their world/ psyche and establish a dialogue. You cannot do this unless and until you win over their confidence. And this is possible only when you are a participant in their day-to-day life. Once you do this, they will accept you as friends and treat you as a part of the community. And then realization will come how wrong and unworthy was this popular belief that this community lives in silence. To establish a rapport with them means assimilation of self with them.