

Research Article

Social Exclusion of Musahars in Uttar Pradesh: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Belonging to the Scheduled Caste, the Musahar community in eastern part of Uttar Pradesh is socially, politically and economically one of the most marginalised and poorest community. People from the Musahar community are generally landless and deprived of owning property in village. They historically and (predominantly) survived on agricultural labour at the farms owned by the landowners in the villages and considered to be landless labourers even till date. Considering such an exclusion situation of the Musahars, this paper argues about the imperceptible post-independence development that has occurred in the lives of the Musahars of Uttar Pradesh through a comprehensive review in contemporary manner. This article attempts to highlight not only the knowledge about the Musahars of Uttar Pradesh but also helps to understand the essential measures required to improve their socio-economic conditions. This has been done through challenging the statusquo persisted with regard to the community and an attempt has been made to suggest alternatives to their plight.

Keywords: Exclusion, Musahar, Scheduled caste, Agriculture labourers, Dalit politics

INTRODUCTION

The cultural heritage of India is dominated by one of the social institutions called caste which emerged in India many centuries ago. Caste being inherent, unique as well as peculiar characteristic of Indian society became the base of all kinds of living attribute in people's lives. This not only divided the human lives in many ways rather recorded the hoary history of exclusion, exploitation and violence. It created a clear cut class divide and supremacy of upper castes over the lower castes. As a result, certain castes

were pushed to the fringes and their presence was only acknowledged when the higher ups in the caste structure needed their services specific based to their skills. Their life was/has been made conditional on the whims of the upper caste. There has been a history of process of exclusion which has been practiced against the lower and scheduled castes and there are glaring evidences of such exclusion against the Musahars of Uttar Pradesh which is the central theme of this article. To understand social exclusion Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2009) theorise 'social exclusion is a process by which individuals or groups experience may become cut off from full involvement in the wider society'.

Social exclusion is a systematic approach of discriminating persons on the basis of their lower caste identity and this is practiced as a result of structural features of society. It can be understood through discriminatory process of caste system in Indian society where lower castes had no place in the ancient four-fold Varna system and were referred to as untouchables, depressed classes or exterior castes. Discrimination was the main feature of social structure and status was determined by birth (Viswanath, 1993). This was/is so powerfully accepted and attested that every other institution such as marriage, education, employment, etc. All were in a way being guided through the caste order. Interestingly, Thorat and Attewell found that dalits are being forced to undergo the discriminatory process and exclusion in private jobs in India (2007). A particular section namely *Musahars* were forced to live the exclusionary plight and also debarred from their socio-political and economic rights due to lower position in the caste system which has been still persisting, though slowly losing vitality, due to the pressure of the forces of modern, social, economic and political developments is an unique institution unparalleled in the history of mankind (Desai, 1969). Ghurye (1962) in his book 'Caste and Race in India' claimed that *Musahars* ancestral aborigine is Uttar Pradesh and Bihar of India. Oral tradition suggested that they were ancient hunting tribals. They claimed that they are the descendants of great sage *Valmiki*, the author of the religious epic Ramayana written in Sanskrit language which is claimed to be the roots of all the vernacular and regional language. This also pose the contradiction that in one hand *Musahars* were/are excluded from the mainstream life and on the contrary the society accepts their origin as decedents of *Valmiki* who is considered a great Hindu saint and was titled as *maharishi*.

According to Bahadur (1978), the Musahars belong to an aboriginal tribe inhabiting a vast area comprising the districts of Faizabad, Sultanpur, Pratapgarh, Allahabad, Mirzapur, Varanasi, Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur and Deoria in eastern Uttar Pradesh, as well as some districts of South Bihar. The genesis and meaning of the term 'Musahar' is open to debate and it still remains an issue to be decided by anthropologists whether they descended from the Mundas through the Chero. He cited Nesfield that prefers to

call them 'Musahera' meaning 'flesh seeker or hunter' considered as jungle tribe derived from Masa, 'flesh' and Hera, seeker. The word also has the meaning 'rat eater' though according to Nesfield, this derivation is incorrect as rat catching or rat eating is by no means peculiar to or a permanent characteristics of the tribe. There is sufficient evidence to support the derivation 'rat eaters' authorities like Ghurye, Dalton, Stephen Fuchs, Russel, Hiralal and Risley prefer to accept the same derivation. However, it does appear from the cursory analysis of other words like paharia who are found in Santhal Pargana of Bihar that the word Musahar could very well refer to a group who was observed by the dominant group as those eating rats considering the word Musahar to be made of Moos and Ahar in Sanskrit and local Hindi language. The word 'Moos' is very well used for rat and the word Aharis for food. Thus, the groups having also the rat, moos as being food were called as Musahar. In Bihar, migrant labour working with the farmers for various works indeed have been observed to be hunting for rats while extracting wheat from the rat holes. For many coming from the rural areas, hunting of rats has been seen together through collection of wheat from the rat holes in the fields where wheat has been harvested and taken for collection of grains. Thus, for those who were settled earlier and saw the tribes working with them and eating rats received the name of Musahar.

According to Russel (1975), Bhuiyas were once the rulers of Chota Nagpur and are recognised as the oldest inhabitants of the country. From this centre, they have spread north through Lohardaga and Hazaribagh and into south Bihar where large numbers of Bhuiyas are encountered on whom the opprobrious designation of the Musahar or 'rat-eater' has been conferred by their Hindu neighbours. Thus, it becomes clear that the word Musahar is an ascribed word for this group known as Musahars even now by those who are from their community though the fact of their migration and similarities with the tribal groups in several ways do indicate that they are indigenous groups in comparisons who are known with the name of Bhuiyas or Musahars. One of the explorations also records that the origin of the tribe is traced from lord Shiva. As Nesfield (1975), an authority on the subject writes 'the great active power in the universe according to Musahar belief is Banaspati, Bansatti or Bansuri, the goddess who personalities and preside over forests'. The Musahar of Uttar Pradesh has also begun to worship the family, village deity and other gods and goddess of Hinduism.

Patel (2012) earmarked that Musahars belong to the scheduled castes and are widely distributed in various districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In Uttar Pradesh, they are called Banmanus, Banjara or Gonr and are mainly distributed in central and eastern districts of the state. The Musahars have remained socially excluded and marginalised community and in the era of globalisation and information technology, they are forced

to lead a life of hunters and gatherers. Exploitation, starvation, deprivation, untouchability, indebtedness and bonded work (begar) are synonyms to their daily life. Singh (2013) wrote that *Musahar* community lives in small and scattered hamlets along the banks of the river Gandaki. This Musahar belt extends from the neighbouring state of Bihar, where they have a noticeable presence. In Uttar Pradesh, the community is densely concentrated in Jaunpur, Ghazipur, Kushinagar, Maharajganj, Varanasi, Deoria and Gorakhpur districts.

It is a fact that the location of state of Uttar Pradesh is privileged with certain distinctive characteristics amongst other states of the Indian union Geographically, it is well placed, physically quite sound, historically greatly glorified, culturally profoundly rich, socially very significant and politically utmost virile. Uttar Pradesh, one of the border states of the Indian Union, is located in the Indo-Gangetic Plain (Jha, 2007).

Uttar Pradesh is India's fifth largest state, located in the northern part of India. At present, the state is divided into four economic regions, namely, Western, Central, Eastern and Bundelkhand. Uttar Pradesh has an area of 2,40,928sq km and its population is 19,95,81,477 (Census, 2011). The state's percentage of Scheduled Castes (SCs), which constitute a major chunk of Dalit population, is 21.1%. As per census of 2011, Musahar total population in Uttar Pradesh is 2,57,135 and mostly inhabited in eastern part followed by three prime districts Jaunpur, Kushinagar and Ghazipur. Table 1 represents a district-wise scheduled caste population of top three districts with *Musahars* population in Uttar Pradesh.

Table 1: District-Wise Scheduled Caste Population
State - Uttar Pradesh 09
Top 3 Districts with Musahars Population

District	Total Persons	Male	Female	Rural	Male	Female	Urban	Male	Female
Jaunpur	37,229	19,296	17,933	36,730	19,051	17,679	499	245	254
Kushinagar	34,843	18,035	16,808	34,793	18,010	16,783	50	25	25
Ghazipur	22,123	11,448	10,675	21,923	11,337	10,586	200	111	89

Source: GOI Census (2011)

Table 1 reflects that primarily *Musahars* are living in the villages in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh. Their socio-economic status of this community is that their livelihood is dependent on agriculture. Some of them are engaged as labourers in Brick Kiln industries, forest and fishing too. A few others pull rickshaws, stitch leaf plates. Women from Musahar community have role in agriculture, economy, social and ritual spheres and contribute to family income. Only few Musahar community own cultivated land they

have received from the Bhoodan movement¹ and Gairmajarua land². They are not engaged in regular work and so they earn from unorganised sectors. The men and women work as agriculture labourers in agriculture field for their survival. Prevalence of bonded labour is in practice but they are not ready to give their names as bonded labour because they fear to lose whatsoever little earning they are making. Earlier there was a variety of other work available in the village vicinity like making of ropes, weaving of baskets, husking of rice, etc. but these opportunities of employment are gradually disappearing. This transition has been forced upon them over the years on account of the declining opportunities in their traditional occupations. The cases of violation of human rights are maximum among Musahars. In addition, housing condition is also pathetic; they live in one room hamlets which are not proper constructed (Narayan, 2005). The 2001 and 2011 census data records slow progress in their literacy rate. There were 19% (49,287) literates against the total population 2,57,135 of Musahars in Uttar Pradesh in 2011 census compared with 10.2% (21,052) in 2001 census. The 10 years progress speed is very slow and self-explanatory regarding their exclusion and distance from the mainstream developmental process.

The studies on Musahar community have shown about their low rates of education in past due to poverty, lack of awareness and motivation. Children from Musahar community are forced to work at early age for helping their parents to contribute to the economy of family. They possess low income as a result of poor employment opportunities and low wage rates. This has compelled the bulk of the community to borrow even for its bare subsistence. Necessity has forced them into the vicious habit of indebtedness. Having no savings of their own, the Musahars are unable to repay even the small consumption loans once incurred. In lean months they have no choice but to borrow again on more onerous terms and thus the grip of the village shop-keepers and landlords continues further to get tightened over them (Narayan, 2005). Their vulnerability due to the socio-economic conditions leaves them with no choice but to undergo process of exploitation and further exclusion. Ironically the community too has internalised this process of exclusion and keep themselves away from assertion for their own rights.

Specifically, while talking about the cause of social exclusion, the caste discrimination is the major factor causing dalit deprivation leading to a worse situation in our country. Dalits have low access to education, employment, resources, property, security and

¹The Bhoodan Movement or Land Gift Movement was a voluntary land reform movement in India, started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave in 1951.

²According to Department of Revenue and Land Reforms Bihar, Gairmajarua land is common land of Gram Panchayat and if such land had lost its *Aam* character and is no longer used for community purposes, such land can be utilised for SC/ST betterment.

livelihood. They are facing manifold problems. Poverty, caste discrimination, exclusion in every sector of life, Caste discrimination upon them is not only vertical but also horizontal. Caste discrimination by so-called upper caste is vertical and they are also discriminated by the little affluent dalits who are in upper ladder than them and follow the brahminical order of exploiting the group within, the dalits horizontally. The health status of the Musahar women is highly affected by their illiteracy, early marriage, food deficiency, malnutrition and other various socio-economic factors. Due to caste-based discrimination and socio-economic exploitation by higher caste and classes; they could never get out of the vicious circle of poverty.

Post-independence, the concept of 'protective discrimination' was adopted. The term 'protective discrimination' implies that the Government under the Constitution of India considers them, that is, the Scheduled Castes a separate category which has to be helped through welfare measures, reservation of seats in educational institution, jobs, etc. No-doubt, these measures helped a lot to large section of Scheduled Castes communities in terms of upward mobility but Musahars almost are still out of the line. Hence, it becomes also important that other measures which are rights based are required to adopt to minimise the discriminatory process. According to Badri (2014) with regard to Musahars, State Government officials, such as District Magistrates (DMs), Sub Divisional Magistrates (SDMs) and Block Development Officer (BDOs) are not taking are not even aware about the Musahar caste whereas they are responsible for protecting and developing the community. In Kaushambi district of Uttar Pradesh, one of the state government officials was not even aware that there was a settlement of Musahars just a couple of kilometers away from his residence.

It is well-known that after 80s many political leaders were emerged from the lower castes and raised the voice of self-representation in society which was the tremendous sign of transformation in Indian polity. They attacked on the domination of a particular section or caste in Indian politics and succeeded to a great deal. After establishment, somewhere selected groups of dalit got the major benefits due to their more population but they couldn't reach out to the less populated scheduled communities such as Musahars in Uttar Pradesh. The absolute win by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the 2007 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections confirmed that dalit political assertion is a powerful force. Wankhede (2008) had noted that the year 2007 will be contemplated in the history of dalits as one of the most significant years as it witnessed a new rise of dalit assertion in the arena of politics. Ironically, with reference to Musahars, its political representation is almost nil in the BSP in particular and they are grossly excluded from mainstream politics of Uttar Pradesh. Verma (2010) has clearly argued that the subalterns are not a homogenised social denomination. They are themselves highly differentiated and a

hierarchical social block with intra-caste discrimination. The dalits in UP are divided into 66 sub-castes of which the *chamars* (also called *Dhusia/Jhusia/Jatava*) are most dominant and also consider themselves superior to the remaining 65 dalit sub-castes and they are indulged in discriminatory practices against them. These 65 sub-castes of dalits (known as *ati-dalits*) are further divided horizontally and there are prohibitions of *rotibeti* (bread and daughter) relations not only between *chamars* and non-*chamardalits*, but also among many of *ati-dalit* sub-castes. This is alleged on Mayawati, leader of BSP to favour *Jatavs* more, which is already in the upper ladder in dalit caste hierarchy and the other scheduled castes including *Musahars* remain excluded in the political process as they are not included by their own dalit leaders.

Inter-caste relation is still complex in rural society. Over the centuries, feudal mind set followed by the particular section of upper castes and also adopted by an elite section of dalit groups has been part of the rural structure as well. There are so many cases available of human rights violation against scheduled castes. They are still prohibited to enter in temple, treated as slaves, non-participation in religious processions, drawing water from common public wells and tanks, entry into caste Hindu streets and mix-up with upper castes. They are still deprived to enjoy their public life in the present society. In the context of *Musahars*, it was noted that their relation with upper castes and elite dalits is not still acceptable due to their less representation and less resources. They have only employee and employer relations which is again not refrained from being discriminatory by all means like there are clear discrimination in communication pattern, sitting, eating, etc. It will not be an exaggeration in writing that still *jehuzoori* system is in practice in the eastern zone of Uttar Pradesh which needs to be reviewed strictly.

There have been made some efforts gradually to raise the voices of assertion of dalit community especially *Musahars* in the eastern Uttar Pradesh. The efforts of civil society organisations, that is, Action Aid and Department for International Development (DFID) funded projects to the local grass root organisations are opening up the avenues to unite the *Musahar* population and raising their voices on their respective issues. In Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the Action Aid project was spearheaded by a body called the *Musahar Vikas Pahal Samiti*, which ensured the participation of members of the same community. This way the *Musahars* had ownership over the project and a say in its planning and implementation. Subsequently, a larger, community-based organisation (CBO) known as the *Musahar Manch* was promoted by the project itself covered around 1,800 households living in 75 *Musahartolas* (hamlets) in 25 villages in three tehsils. *Musahar Manch* emerged as a representative body of a larger part of the *Musahar* population of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The formation of the *Musahar Manch* is one of the notable successes of the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) program. The program objective

of the project was to empower Musahars socially, politically and economically. The Musahars of eastern Uttar Pradesh were politically voiceless; their representation in local self-government was almost negligible. The project therefore built up the capacity of the community to participate in the political mainstream. In the 2005 elections, 37 candidates belonging from Musahar community were elected as ward-level representatives. However, the Musahars have little immediate scope of playing significant role in the block and district levels of Participatory Rural Institutions (PRIs). The famous slogan of renowned *Dasrath Manjhi*, an icon of Musahar community on whom a Bollywood film has been cast also drew an attention of public across the nation and world, rightly said *Jaat hi Jaat ko Jagayaga* (only fellow members the caste can awaken the community). It is important to share that Bihar has hosted a strong political leader Mr Jitan Ram Manjhi belongs to Musahar community and served as a Chief Minister of Bihar during May 2014–February 2015. Comparatively in Uttar Pradesh, it is yet to be harnessing political leader from Musahar community as Member of Legislative Assembly or Member of Parliament. However, there have been exceptional to this as there are number of Pradhan selected from the community in several villages of Ghazipur.

One can conclude that while the review of their socio-economic condition, it is clear that they do not own means of resources and non-acceptance by other communities due to their depressed position in society. It has been observed that structural exclusion is prevailing and deep rooted in society which requires as serious and longitudinal efforts to transform the situation. Earlier, exploitation was occurred from upper caste groups but now scheduled casteelites have been also part of this discriminatory system. The practice of caste based exclusion and discrimination does not only stop to access civil and political rights but also creates the barriers in intellectual growth of individuals or groups.

An integrated development programme is required to make a pathway for the well-being of Musahars of Uttar Pradesh. The government policy MNREGA was a meaningful initiative which tried to make space for participation of people belonging to lower caste in the development process and involving them in employment. More serious initiatives and actions are required which will force the population to think and above caste based politics and eradicate this discriminatory caste system. The constitutional ethos of the country needs to be protected and it is only possible through upholding the principles of equality, justice, freedom and peace which will allow every citizen to live their life with dignity. There are so many welfare policies for the marginalised section but its implementation on ground is not as expected due to communication gap between public institution and public. It is also suggested that more researches needs to be undertaken at central, state and regional level to plan programmes which are specific to the Musahar

community. In addition to this the grass root civil society organisation needs to be given more power through funding so that they engage the community in the process of empowerment and development. Last but not the least it is necessary for Government and its allied social welfare bodies to pay more attention towards the conditions of Musahars of Uttar Pradesh and take necessary steps to improve their socio-economic conditions.

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