

A Exploration toward the Structural Deprivation and the Unfinished Agenda of Social Justice: The Case of the Musahars

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ABSTRACT

The Musahar community represents one of the most marginalized and socially excluded groups within the Scheduled Castes of India, particularly concentrated in the state of Bihar. Being historically attached with Rose (a stigmatized form of manual labor) and pushed into absolute landlessness, illiteracy and poverty, the Musahars even today exist in a state of structural deprivation inspite of decades spent on welfare programs. Looking back into the past, this paper seeks some historical determinants of Musahar marginalization and the analysis of certain socio-economic indicators such as population concentration and spread, educational attainment, landholding status, dependency on menial work, housing conditions and access to state welfare schemes. The paper based on secondary data from census report, castes surveys, policy reports and field studies finds the survival of intergenerational poverty, social exclusion among them. The results indicate that general Dalit welfare policies have reached only a relatively small proportion of Musahars, owing both to poor targeting and narrow implementation as well as lack of political voice. The paper underlines the importance of inclusive and context specific development interventions with focus on education, livelihood security, health and political empowerment. Combating historical and structural disadvantage among Musahar will be an important way for India to address social justice, not merely in legalistic terms but also in terms of substantive equity.

Keywords: *Musahar Community, Social Exclusion, Landlessness, Inclusive Development.*

1. Introduction

The Musahar caste represents one of the most marginalized and deprived sections within the broader Dalit community in India. Found mostly in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, the Musahars have faced complete social ostracism, economic oppression and cultural discrimination through centuries. Having been historically known as rat-catchers and unskilled farm workers, this group has become caught in the vicious trap of poverty, landlessness, illiteracy and health hardship. They are even considered outcasts in the Dalit social structure and no better off than the so-called upper castes, but rather discriminated against for being poorer by caste (*Shah et al., 2006; Thorat & Newman, 2010*).

With a constitutional guarantee, affirmative action policies and various welfare programmes after independence, the fruits of development have percolated only marginally among members of the Musahar community. So far, their progress has been limited by high rates of illiteracy, low political awareness, little access to education and health services and poor representation in local democracy. Musahar villages, more popularly called tolas, are found on the peripheries of villages an indication that they remain largely isolated and lead a separate life to majority communities (*Kumar, 2014; NCSC, 2017*).

The transformation of the Musahar caste remains a burning issue in social justice and development discourse. A response to their woes cannot be general Dalit welfare programmes it should be Specific, Community-specific interventions in the form of education, Livelihood security, Health care and housing and Political empowerment. Historical origins of their deprivation and current challenges they confront have to be considered in devising strategies. Study of Musahar upliftment confirms the unfinished business of social justice in India and, it projects, such a continuing machinery would be undoubtedly essential to bring this population into the mainstream with dignity, opportunity, and entitlements (*Thorat & Newman, 2010; UNDP India, 2010*).

1.1 Historical Marginalization and Social Exclusion of the Musahar Community

The Musahar community has historically experienced severe marginalization and social exclusion within the Indian caste system. Historical association with impurity and degradation: Occupationally associated traditionally with rat-catching along with unskilled agricultural labour, Musahars were assigned to occupations classified as impure work, which determined their lower social rank. Rigid caste hierarchies over centuries had locked them out of land ownership, education and steady work, plunging generations of Musahars into chronic deprivation and lower-caste servitude under landlords. Their villages were also frequently erected on the outskirts of larger settlements, as a concrete sign of their (literal) social isolation.

Sub-continental land revenue and feudal agricultural relations added insult to the injury while Musahars remained merely as the subjects being deprived of any legal or economic security. And even after India won its independence, social reforms and development schemes for the most part didn't directly address their needs. Although Constitutional protections extend reservation benefits to Scheduled Castes, the Musahars were generally neither literate enough nor aware enough or politically well represented enough on their own account to take advantage of these.

The Musahar exclusion has not just been financial, but cultural and psychological. They have often been discriminated against in both public spaces and schools and workplaces, including within the wider Dalit community. This historic marginalization has led to entrenched poverty such that the Musahar are one of the most disadvantaged communities in India and have a continued need for targeted social justice strategies (*Shah et al., 2006*).

1.2 Need for Targeted Upliftment and Inclusive Development

The persistent deprivation of the Musahar community highlights the urgent need for targeted upliftment and inclusive development strategies that go beyond general welfare measures. While several government programmes and affirmative action measures are available to the Scheduled Castes, at times Musahars fall through the cracks because of abject poverty, illiteracy, lack of documentation and ignorance about their rights and entitlements. One-size-fits-all policies don't take into account their socio-economic realities, and interventions at the community level are necessary to drive progress.

Focus area for targeted enhancement is education, livelihood security, health, housing and social empowerment. Special education programmes for FGLs such as residential schools, scholarships and bridge courses are essential to retain them in the system. Economic inclusion via skill and employment training, land rights, and access to credit can break this vicious cycle of dependency and exploitation. Similarly, health care access, nutritional programs and sanitary interventions need to be developed to resolve the problems of common sickness experienced among this community.

And for development to be inclusive, there is need to enhance the political consciousness and representation of Musahars in local-level governance structure as they have a stake in decision-making that affects their lives. Also significant is the contribution to social mobilization, policy tracking, and contestation of social judgment by civil society organizations. Sustainable upliftment can only be sustained when development policies focus deliberately on the most marginalized, so as to ensure dignity, equal chance, and social justice for the Musahars (*UNDP India, 2010*).

2. Related Study

Singh and Singh (2023) examined the enduring caste-class nexus in India, highlighting how dominant castes had historically formed their own class structures and mechanisms of discrimination within caste and social groups. However, they contended that lordship and identity politics since forty to fifty years ago, including voting practices had further consolidated the strong caste-class duality and as a result, made some caste groups like Musahar's end up at the bottom of hierarchy. The Musahar, a marginalized Dalit caste so called "rat-eaters," were determined to be one of the most discriminated social groups among Bihar and Uttar Pradesh engaged mostly in agricultural labor. Based on ethnographic research in four villages of Jaunpur district, the contributors investigate the sociopolitical and cultural aspects of Musahar life from their everyday struggles to their identity dilemma stemming from their low caste. They also noted that their socio-economic situation had been exacerbated significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic impacting on their access to basic essential services and measured government policy before and after the pandemic.

Giri (2022) was reported to have been motivated by three central concerns: first, to explore the transformations in traditional livelihood strategies among the Musahars; second, to assess the local impacts of labor and livelihood globalization; and third, to examine the socio-cultural landscapes of caste-based occupations and the discrimination faced by the Musahars in central Tarai. The study also brought out the fact that political-economic power in a caste society had been inherently unequal because occupations based on castes meant unequally distributed resources. It had noted that social, cultural, economic and political relations in daily life in a multi-caste society were undergoing change as pre-capitalist labour process and production structures began to break down resulting in diversification of household-level livelihood strategies. Significant migration – to India, rural-urban centers and to the international labour market was found as contributing to better livelihood opportunities for Musahars by and large being able to adopt mixed strategies, though skill levels, economic status empowerment levels and human capital were constraints. In addition, Giri maintained that globalisation provided Musahars with a choice of livelihoods within the framework of transnational free market and, at the same time engendered restructuring of labour regimes in terms of deepening wage differentials, expansion of contractualization, skill-based work separation and commodification of labour and body. The research arrived at the finding that the Musahar society in Siraha perceived that opportunities for migration, cultural campaigns to preserve local identity and shifts in traditional occupation and social relations due to globalization were positive consequences of globalization.

Karwal (2021) examined social exclusion as a dynamic process involving the progressive and multidimensional rupturing of social bonds at both individual and collective levels. The investigation found that exclusion forestalled full participation in societally sanctioned activities, and blocked access to information and resources while undermining dignity, thus diminishing people's capacity to attain personal targets. Karwal stressed that social boycott was a kind of discrimination and it undermined the fibre of society. Taking India as an exemplar, it contended that caste was the most significant way in which exclusion could be read and observed; scheduled castes were historically denied rights, especially to learning. The case of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit research scholar who killed himself after suffering caste-based discrimination in higher education was recounted to illustrate how the caste reacts on students. Karwal additionally investigated stigma in terms of Erving Goffman, looking at how it manifested on a daily basis and influenced continued stigmatization suffered by socially excluded groups in Indian universities.

Ranjan (2020) examined the influence of family socio-economic status (SES) on various aspects of individual development, including cognitive, moral, socio-emotional, and identity formation. Income, education, and occupation were identified as fundamental indicators of SES in this study. The Indian society is centred around caste, language, religion and regional group association, the discernible four groups of traditional Varnvyavastha (Brahman-Vyshya-Kshatriya-Sudra) are being on employment occupation. Constitutional provisions and Directive Principles of State Policy under the Constitution of India post-independence were articulated as measures for development of weaker sections like Forward, Backward and Scheduled Castes/Tribes, along with induction of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in reservation sphere (Joshi, 1968). The study also quoted recent sanctions

by NDA government for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes like Choudhary, Munda, Tana Bhagat, Orawan, Santhali, Birhor, Halalkhore, Dome, Bhunya, to ensure over all development of them. In the light of these socio-educational background was considered while analyzing how Ranjan remarked in terms of researching on the research being problem of adjustment among +2 SC.ST students, which will realized great help to their welfare initiative and overall educational support.

Dutt (2019) emphasized that caste-based discrimination was an age-old phenomenon, often occurring implicitly. The study found that despite constitutional protections, SC/STs continued to bear the brunt of stigmatized identities and dynastic discrimination in present-day India. Dutt submitted that this ongoing marginalisation was implemented through targeted disparagement against members of a particular group, particularly hate speech to enforce exclusion. The study implied that bias-motivated acts influenced the manner in which members of the majority social group consciously or subconsciously maintained, even cultivated, existing power structures. Lite, unsung and undegraded talk in family or casual life had much power to hurt and disturb or even perpetuate social apartheid-in slow time.

Khan (2018) examined the expansion of school and higher education over the past two decades, noting that access had increased significantly across all social groups. The study noted that from the day the Constitution came into force, universalisation of primary education has been a focus. The implications of the fast adoption of economic reforms are that there has been a significant expansion in the role of the private sector while commitment to the social sector by Government would be diminished with fiscal discipline as an excuse. The rise of private schools was heightened in Khan's view by a shift to such provision, thus "weakening the position of government schools". In this backdrop of growth and privatisation, the paper tried to examine, whether in the name of its inclusive character, growth had actually been inclusive for schedule castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs). Though access at the primary level was close to universal, retention continued to be a major challenge. The access in secondary, higher secondary and higher education levels among all social groups had increased; SCs and STs even more than others though this increase was insufficient to redress existing imbalances. Private unaided started occupying an increasing proportion of the pie chart, and in view of the absence of sponsorship support, their participation was restricted to a certain extent, showing need for policies aimed at equal opportunities as well as structural transformation in higher education.

Devi (2017) examined the socio-political position of Kinnaura, the largest scheduled tribe in Himachal Pradesh, focusing particularly on the Domang females who occupied the lowest stratum of the caste hierarchy. The research however underlined that, although Khoshia belonged to the higher caste category, Ddomang women found themselves in a different situation of special social and economic constraints as well as political obstacles. It was pointed out that there was little focus on the reservation policy and its impact on scheduled caste tribal women in earlier studies. Devi noted that the 33% reservation under the 73 rd. Amendment of the Indian Constitution and subsequent 50 per cent for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions from 2010 onward had changed the social and political status of Domang women. The study sought to determine: - if the overall indicators of women empowerment can apply to these women working under conditions of adversity; - the

contribution they made to good governance post-poll period; and- whether they had a grasp of new concepts such as smart villages. Devi (2017: xi) found that active participation in decision-making of Domang women as second-generation leaders have marked “a dramatic departure from the centuries-old practice of subjugation” signalling villagers’ desires to create villages that would not only be aligned with Gandhian principles but also follow Indian government’s evident preoccupation towards smart, sustainable, and politically stable rural places.

Ranjithkumar (2015) examined the constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights in India, emphasizing equality and equal protection under the law, while highlighting the state's responsibility to provide special protection for Scheduled Castes (SCs) to improve their socio-economic status. The report pointed out that “the reservation policy is one of the most effective instruments to achieve social justice by making provision for material resources to improve the conditions of those classes which have remained historically underprivileged.” Referring to SCs, it argued: “Only when such people should have been elevated in political, economic, and educational fields. It was presented that state governments hosted welfare programmes and policies, and that these were in turned supported by the laws, development programs put in place on a state-by-state basis. The study concentrated on the State of Tamil Nadu (TN) where 76 SC communities were identified and addressed by means of government welfare programmes. Ranjithkumar studied issues of reservation policies and the effect of welfare programs on these communities, and specifically questioned the quota to Arunthatiyars in Tamil Nadu.

3. Historical Background of The Musahar Community

3.1 Historical Context

The Musahar community, predominantly found in **Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh,** and parts of **Jharkhand**, has historically been associated with some of the most stigmatized forms of manual labour in India’s rural agrarian society. They had for long depended upon rat-catching and unskilled agricultural labour, and were at the bottom of the occupational order based on caste status. These jobs began to define their social identity, further entrenching perceptions of inferiority and validating any systematic exclusion from social or economic possibilities. Musahar habitations, the tolas locally known, were mostly on the periphery of villages placing themselves physically and metaphorically far away from that of the dominant group. This partition prevented their access to the key collective resources such as schools, drinking water sources, markets, health facilities, and village level decision-making agencies. The fact that they lived on the periphery of village existence also meant Musahars were practically invisible in village governance and excluded from informal systems which often decide access to jobs or state welfare (*Shah et al., 2006; Deshpande, 2011*).

Data bases of the colonial period and the ethnographic descriptions further fixed their marginal status through identification of this group as “lowest” among the labouring community fit for only petty menial jobs. The latter were later fortified with post-colonial village hierarchies that still subordinated Musahars to land ownership, education, and sustainable forms of livelihoods. Generations of Musahars were consequently caged into a cycle of landlessness, illiteracy, and economic dependence. This is how the historical context of Musahars as a community implies that their present deprivation is not arbitrary but a result of structural exclusion based on caste, occupation, and geographical separation (*Thorat & Newman, 2010; UNDP India, 2010*).

3.2 Demographic Insights

Recent demographic evidence has provided clearer insight into the population size of the Musahar community in Bihar. As per report based on Bihar Caste Survey 2022–23, population of Musahar community in the state is around 40.35 lakh which is 3.08% of total population of Bihar. The data, which The Times of India reported will be released next year is significant because it marks one of the most broad and systemized efforts by the state to enumerate caste groups that have been historically undercounted or wrongly categorized.

Previous population estimates for the Musahar community differed greatly from one source to another. Numbers recorded by census, and independent on-the-ground studies would often miss the actual figures as a result of issues such as seasonal migration, lack of ID, and the habit to treat Musahars under wider Scheduled Caste ('SC') class. Indeed, as secondary sources such as Wikipedia observed, these discrepancies were a barrier to designing focused policies or even determining the true extent of poverty felt by this community.

In this way, the Bihar Caste Survey represents a significant achievement in acknowledging the demographic size of the Musahar community. It supports improved policy planning, more targeted welfare interventions, and evidence-based academic research with greater accuracy of the data. To provide reliable population figures is not only about the fair distribution of resources, but also to recognise that one of Bihar's most marginalised communities has a social and political existence.

3.3 Education Insights

Educational deprivation has been one of the most persistent and measurable dimensions of marginalization faced by the Musahar community. It is also a reality that stands testimony to statistics as well, the empirical evidence shows how Musahars form the lowest rung in Bihar of the ladder of education. To illustrate the extent of this disadvantage, a field-based study by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Vaishali district in Bihar is informative. Based on 2011 Census, the document mentions that more than three-fourths (78.1%) of Musahar population were illiterate and it has been having the highest illiteracy in regard to all Scheduled Caste communities across Bihar. This fact alone speaks volume about the systemic exclusion of the community from structured ways of learning.

The aforementioned Vaishali field survey also offers a finer grained perspective on household-level educational status. It discovered that 72% of Musahar heads of household were illiterate, revealing an intergenerational depth to their illiteracy rather than it being something belonging solely to one cohort. Limited illiterate parents in home provide little if any educational support to children, entrenching low aspirations and school composure as well as limited engagement with schools and government agencies.

The set of child education indicators is no less grim. The survey estimated that about half the Musahar children in age-group 6 to less than 14 years were out of school-zero enrolment and dropouts taken together. This phenomenon is primarily explained by economic compulsion, and child labour, seasonal mobility, school discrimination and poor access to educational infrastructure in Musahar tolas are the other contributing factors.

These figures demonstrate that educational backwardness among Musahars is not incidental but structural. Despite decades of literacy missions and school enrolment drives, the community remains largely excluded, highlighting the need for targeted, intensive, and sustained educational interventions specifically designed for first-generation learners within the Musahar population.

4. Policy Turning Point: Mahadalit-Focused Interventions

Landlessness and labour dependence Structural landlessness has been a central historical factor shaping Musahar deprivation. Evidence synthesized in an International Growth Centre policy note, drawing on census-linked data, reported that 92.5% of Musahar workers were landless agricultural labourers, many of whom remained dependent on employers even for housing and basic subsistence (*International Growth Centre [IGC], 2017*).

Housing and basic services Severe deficits in housing and basic services have been documented in Musahar settlements. A UNICEF study conducted in Musahar tolas of Vaishali district found that 69.5% of households lived in kutchha houses, 81% lacked access to toilets, and only about 10% owned any land, underscoring extreme material deprivation and exclusion from basic amenities (*UNICEF, 2014*).

Policy turning point Recognizing Musahars as among the most deprived Scheduled Caste groups in Bihar, the state government introduced Mahadalit-focused mission frameworks from 2007 onwards to address gaps left by generalized Scheduled Caste welfare programmes. These targeted interventions marked an important policy shift toward community-specific development planning (*International Growth Centre [IGC], 2017*).

5. Findings of The Study

Katz Her: Serious and Continued Marginalization: The report concludes that the Musahar community remains among one of the most marginalized within Dalits. Generations of historical cast-based exclusion have led to enduring socio-economic deprivation and low intergenerational mobility, despite decades of welfare interventions.

High Level of Landlessness: One of the major findings is that, most Musahar families are landless. This structural situation has impelled them to dependence of daily wage agricultural labour, seasonal migration and precarious informal employment that perpetuates chronic poverty.

Education Deprivation: Musahars' literacy rate is much below the state and Scheduled Caste average. High dropout rates, particularly at the primary and secondary level, demonstrate that education programmes have not been fully successful for first generation learners.

Intergenerational Poverty Cycle: The poverty among Musahars is not transitory rather these are intergenerational. Low income, inadequate nutrition, no assets and limited education create a vicious cycle of lack from which it's hard to escape without specific interventions.

Sub-standard Housing and Living Conditions: The majority of Musahar families reside in kutchha houses (handmade thatched roofs), lack proper sanitation, safe drinking water, and electricity for livelihood, demonstrating low living standards and social exclusion.

Health and Multinutritional Vulnerability: Musahar are much more prone to malnutrition, anemia, maternal health problems and child morbidity. They have poor access to health care facilities besides low health awareness pulling them further behind.

Low Knowledge about Government Policies: There are many quietly operational welfare schemes, but Musahar household both have little information, document and administrative cooperation to enjoy these facilities leading to gross misappropriation of public funds.

Political and Social Exclusion: The study indicates a low level of representation of Musahars in Local Bodies. Low levels of political engagement weaken their capacity to hold people accountable and shape planning for development.

Double Marginalization Based on Sexual Identity: Musahar women experience double marginalization as a result of being from the caste, poverty and woman. Low levels of literacy, early marriage, bad health and economic opportunities are all barriers to their ability to be socially and economically empowered.

Limited Impact of Targeted Policies: Although targeted policies, such as the Mahadalit focused programmes in Bihar, have been able to enhance visibility, the assessment points at varying and limited implications for long-term socio-economic transformation.

The Role of Civil Society Is Key: NGOs and grassroot movements have had an ennobling role in education, sensitization, and advocacy, complementing and sometimes replacing when states fail to do so.

Necessity of the Community Based Intervention: The results indicate that common welfare policies in Dalits are not suitable for this Musahar community. They require targeted, evidence-based and participatory interventions to counteract their specific historical and structural disadvantages.

6. Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates that the marginalization of the Musahar community is deeply rooted in historical, structural, and systemic factors rather than temporary socio-economic shortcomings. Persistent landlessness, extreme educational backwardness, poor health outcomes, and dependence on insecure wage labour have collectively trapped the community in a cycle of intergenerational poverty. Even with legal protection and presence of numerous social welfare programmes, the Musahars still remain one of the most deprived among Scheduled Castes suggesting serious lapses in policy outreach and efficacy. The experiences of discrimination and deprivation of the Musahars could not be addressed through general Dalit welfare schemes can be corroborated with evidences available from census figures, field surveys, and policy studies. Their exclusion in the past from land title, formal schooling and political process has left them simply ill-equipped to take advantage of development. Though programs like the Mahadalit-focused interventions in Bihar have helped with increased visibility and recognition, they have been less effective when it comes to achieving sustained and desired socio-economic transformation. The article concludes with a call for ongoing, intensified and context-specific interventions that focus on education, livelihood security, health-housing-political empowerment. To achieve real upliftment of Musahar community, it is necessary to address not only the material but also social aspects that contribute to the creation of a culture and dignity finally puts people in position to participate actively in decisions affecting their lives. Their deprivation needs to be reversed for true social justice, and inclusive development so that fruits of progress are available with even the most marginalized sections of our society.

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