Perspectives on Culture, Development and Identity:

The Musahars of the Middle-Gangetic Plain

"Give us power. What is the big deal in awakening the Musahars? When the hillock is removed, then why would the society not be awakened?

Dasarath Manjhi, Musahar Social Reformer

"People of the Musahar community make bricks. They plough the fields and cultivate rice. They construct houses, roads and bridges. Yet they are victims of untouchability even today. Their houses are demolished, their dwellings are set on fire and they are being murdered."

Bhagwati Devi, Former Musahar Woman Parliamentarian

I

In recent decades "culture" has occupied the centre-stage of development thinking both at the global and local level. It is believed that every community has values, ways of living, modes of expression, resources (entities and structures, skills and capacities) which amount to a set of cultural assets. These assets may allow people to innovate, create, grow enterprise, build social capital and coexist or they may be used or appropriated in a way that negatively impacts on innovation, creativity, enterprise, social health and coexistence. It is also believed that it can be used to re-value, grow or exploit cultural assets so that they can yield positive change. Traditional and popular modes of expression are thought to promote education, dialogue, debate and action among communities about various critical issues relevant to the community in question which can form the very plank of public action both at the global and local level.[1]Related to Culture and Development is the critical issue of "identity" since most

[1]the debate on the issue of culture, development and identity is vast and multidisciplinary. for an introduction to the debate see "Culture and Public Action: An Introduction" in Vijeyandra Rao and Michael Walton (eds), *Culture and Public Action*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.; Proceedings of the- *Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development*, Stockholm, Sweden, 30 March-2 April 1998; UNDP 's Human Development Report 2004; The World Commission on Culture and Development Report *Our Creative Diversity*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 1996; *Culture in Sustainable Development: Investing Cultural and Natural Endowments*, World Bank, Washington D.C., 1999.

communities coexist together in social space and demand mutual recognition from each other for peaceful societal coexistence in a democratic set up. The maintenance of cultural heritage is believed to support identity, values, beliefs, traditions, promote the development of cultural self-confidence and thus stimulate development at large.

Though, the proposition of importance of "culture" in development thinking has been widely recognised there still remains much confusion because of the ambiguity surrounding the word "culture" and "development" over the periods. More than the confusion regarding the meaning of culture in different communities the actual debates have been *how culture matters or rather how it can have relevance for liberative public action policies?* The answer to this question has never been an easy one since both at the global and regional level we are grappling with the same question. We believe that to develop an understanding to this vital question lies in exploring the texture of culture of a community and thereby analysing the threads by placing it in the local terrain of society, economy, politics and history to illuminate the interlinkage between culture, development and identity.

We firmly believe that a "bottom up" approach by hooking the "micro" with the "macro" forms the most relevant methodology for doing such an exercise. In this context our subject is the – Musahars of the Middle-Gangetic Plains of Bihar. And in this introductory essay we draw on the contributions to this Report to examine some of the positive and normative implications of considering "culture" as the crux of public action policies for the community. We begin with some snapshots drawn from the Musahar community in contemporary Bihar itself to place our arguments in context, go on to review the development thinking in Bihar especially on the Musahar community, both thought and action and then distil the contributions in this Report towards a conceptual and practical overview of the role of "culture" in understanding the notion of "development" in the context of the Musahar community for reducing all kinds of persisting exploitation and inequality. We end the chapter with the normative implications of the understanding by taking into consideration the multiple existing voices within the community. We should note that the Report is an attempt to understand the textures and meanings of "culture" and "development" among the Musahar community reflected in the emerging multiple voices under the changing historical circumstances of the state of Bihar.

II

Babuchand Manjhi is like any other young lad of his age of Bholabigha, a sleepy village near the township of Bodh Gaya which is some 15 kms from the district head quarters of Gaya. But unlike any other young Musahar from his village he does not have to bear the pain that comes with seasonal migration and the danger of falling into the death trap of debt-bondage. Today, Babuchand is the proud owner of a pig farm consisting of some 40-50 *desi* breeds of pigs and earning his living out of it. When he speaks about his endeavour, one feels the sense of dignity of earning one's own livelihood that has come with exploring one's own strength and capability. Being an untouchable belonging to the lowest echelon of the Hindu caste hierarchy and the demands of the market system the journey to entrepreneurship had never been a smoother one for him. Babuchand's stint with entrepreneurship began three years before when he started the farm with only 4-5 hogs. Pig-rearing does not demand much investment of money and time unlike the rearing of buffaloes or cows demand. But this advantage also does not give enough edge for a poverty-stricken community unable to manage a square meal in a day to start a small venture.

Pigs are an inalienable part of the cultural and material basis of Musahar society in the middle Gangetic Plain and is a part of their identity too. They are treated as an untouchable community involved in rearing an animal despised by the upper caste peasantry based on Brahminic ideology of purity and pollution. Historically, it has been the only entitlement that the community had from their transition from a part of pastoral economy to a part of an agrarian society. Pigs not only played a major role in economically sustaining the community throughout this transition but also became an inalienable part of their rituals and customs. According to Babuchand, pigs are a commercially viable animal for the economic sustenance of a marginal community like the Musahars. The Musahars knows that he does not have adequate resources like capital and land to start a pig farm. But he can sense the growing expansion of mass consumption of pork in public among the non-Musahar communities in his surrounding villages and the emergence of a separate rural weekly market for buying and selling pigs. Belonging to a community involved in pig-rearing for centuries, the nitty-gritty of rearing pigs comes easy to him. In the normal cycle of swine spanning about 15 years it produces nearly 45-50 hogs. During the initial period he used to sell the pigs while they were very young in the neighbouring rural market since he did not have enough money to feed them though it fetched less money. The money that he received by selling the hogs in the weekly local market was reinvested on buying

resources such as land and instruments required for further expanding his venture and today he is a full fledged pig farmer sustaining his family with ease.[2]

Likewise Babuchand Dasarath Manjhi, now an octogenarian Musahar social reformer from Gehlor village of Gaya District set forth for the realisation of another goal of his life—the marathon task of constructing a route for transportation through the mountain range that spreads between Bodh Gaya to Rajgir way back in 1960. Because of the mountain range the journey between Gehlor where Dasarath Manjhi was born and Wazirganj, a block headquarter was tortuous and long earlier. It increased the distance between the distances between these two places by some 80 kilometres. Dasarath Manjhi began the task of boring holes in the mountains with a borer and hammers in 1960. Every day after completing his routine domestic chores, he used to spend two hours cutting into the mountain. Afterwards, he also got occasional cooperation and assistance from other members of his village and surrounding areas. When the first step was taken in the direction of constructing this road, there was no other site. Once the route came up across the mountain the distance between these places was reduced to 13 kms, saving an unnecessary 67 kilometres. Presently, the mountain route bears a tarred road and has become the life-line for people commuting between these two places. It is not only these two places but other places in the meantime got connected because of this.[3]

There are others like Babuchand and Dasarath Manjhi who are carving out new niches for themselves and their community in the changing and emerging dynamics of caste-ridden society in the middle Gangetic Plain of Bihar. At the very core of their survival has been the long-standing struggle for a living and dignity. Such struggles have always drawn their energy, vigour and sustenance from the social and cultural resources that these communities have nourished over centuries. Various versions of the theory of progress of both the right and the left have been primarily responsible for seeing this community as poor and oppressed, waiting for 'godot' to transform their lives through a journey in the unilinear path defined by development practitioners. The Musahars have often defied their well-wishers in the form of bureaucratic government and private aid agencies. Their rich traditional systems of knowledge; a well-organised thriving community structure has been successfully providing mutual support in times of social and economic crises; myths, legends, folkways, community-specific epics and modes of

[2] This account of Babuchand Manjhi was taken during Field Visits.

[3]Dasarath Manjhi's is taken from Radhesyam Mangolpuri's piece "Dasarath Manjhi: From Manjhi to Das", in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices:Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains*, New Delhi: Deshkal Publication, 2002.

artistic sefl-expression. Butwho are the Musahars? It is pertinent here to provide a glimpse of the community before we delve deep into the critical issues involved in culture and development within the community.

III

The Musahars, a Scheduled Caste, are now scattered over the Gangetic Plains mostly in the present states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Nearly 1.4 million in the state of Bihar they are spatially concentrated mostly in the districts of Gaya, Nadwa, Munger, Bhagalpur, Purnea, Muzzafarpur, Darbhanga, Saran and Champaran. It is in the Magadh region of Bihar (mostly areas falling under the present boundary of Gaya district) where they have the greatest concentration where they constitute 17 per cent of the entire Scheduled Caste population which around 25 per cent of total population. In the Magadh region they came to be known as the *Bhuinyas*.[4] Before the 1961 census, the Musahar and Bhuinya population was counted as one. In the 1961 census, they were counted separately for the first time. In Bihar, according to the 1981 census the entire population of the Musahars amounted to 13,91,000 and that of the Bhuinyas to 8,50,469. According to this count, the population of the Musahars and 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, Musahar is one of them, the other two being the Chamar (3 million), and Dusadh (2.7 million).[5]

But why are we discussing the Musahars here? What is so compelling about them? Presently almost the entire Musahar community belongs to agricultural labourers. 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. One of the most pronounced characteristics of the Musahar community has been the total absence of material entitlements. Although, the majority of the Musahar community are involved in agriculture but ironically they do not possess any sort of homestead land. In the absence of entitlement, Musahars have been the worst sufferers of chronic poverty. Looking horizontally, Bihar turns out to be the worst state in terms of poverty with 55.15 per cent population below the poverty level. Again, with respect to

[4]Subaltern historian Gyan Prakash in his famous book.*Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990, uses the word "Bhuinya" separately from more generally known as the Musahars almost uniformly in Bihar.
[5]Singh, K.S., *The Scheduled Castes-National Series Voll*, revised edition, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

the vertical spread of poverty it is concentrated among the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), and Scheduled Tribes. Musahars who form almost 2.5 per cent (around 2.5 million) of the total population of Bihar are at the lowest level of the vertical layer of poverty.[6] Their destitution is reflected in other developmental indicators. According to data maintained by the Planning Commission, Gaya occupies the sixth position among all India districts ranking. Literacy among the Musahars is abnormally low almost nil- 2.2 per cent (four per cent among the males and 0.3 per cent among the females).[7] The worst sufferers among the Musahars are women and children. A research study carried out by the Bihar Educational Society (1999-200) in the selected blocks of the three districts – Gaya, Jahanabad and Nawada found that schooling among the Musahar girls in the four districts is 0 per cent. Total literacy among the four selected blocks is between 4 to 7 per cent.[8]

Unlike other prominent Scheduled Caste communities like the Chamars and Dusadhs the Musahars have remained relating on the margins for centuries though it belongs to one of the three million plus Scheduled Caste communities in Bihar. In the changing socio-economic scenario and shifting power relations in the state of Bihar the Chamars and Dusadhs have been able to carve out a greater share unlike the Musahars. This can be gauged from a recent comparative study between the Scheduled Caste communities in the three states of Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. The household survey carried out by the Planning Commission in the state revealed that out of 392 Scheduled Caste households only 18.4 per cent own cultivable land, and 11.2 per cent possesses assets. The study found that the Musahar and the Chaupal in Bihar have neither land nor agricultural assets. The pattern of landownership and assets in Bihar clearly indicate a differentiation at two levels: a) between castes with land and agricultural assets (Chamar, Dusadh, Dhobi), and castes without these (Musahar and Chaupal) and within castes: suggestive of the formation of a small elite group within the Scheduled Caste.[9] So, there is enough reason to believe that the Musahars belong to one of the most marginal Scheduled

[6]Bhushan, Shashi, "Reflections in Material Conditions of Musahars" in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (edt) in *Asserting Voices,* pp.6-18, 2002.
[7]Singh, K.S.,1999.
[8]Bihar Educational Development Society." Research Study of Scheduled Castes with Focus on Musahar Women During 8th Year Plan Period and Action Plan for 9th Year Plan Period- A Study of Central Bihar Region", Gaya, Bihar,1999-2000.
[9]Planning Commission of India, *Scheduled Communities: A Social Development Profile of SC/STs (Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal*), New Dehi, 2004.see also Chakravarty G and Ghosh, P.K., Human Development Profile Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Selected States, NCAER, New Delhi, 2000.

Caste communities in contemporary Bihar. *But the question arises here that is the destitution of the Musahar especially a post-independent phenomenon? In what respect is the destitution of the Musahars different from other marginal communities of Bihar?* Perhaps a look at history will provide some hints to these questions.

The Musahars are believed to be related to the Kole tribe of Chotanagpur plateau probably who came down from the foothills of the plateau towards the plains in the north characterised by permanent agriculture in the 12th century.[10] The major reason behind this migratory move is considered to be the widespread deforestation towards the southern part of the Middle-Gangetic Plain. Paddy cultivation is a dominant mode of economic practice for centuries in south Bihar. However, unlike the northern plain of Bihar being flat and criss-crossed by many rivers the southern plain of Bihar is characterised by rugged terrain where the veneer of thick alluvium diminishes as one gets closer to the hills of the south. As the terrain in southern Bihar is marked by slopes from the south to north and the soil cannot retain moisture. Paddy cultivation being water intensive agriculture different types of innovative irrigation practices have evolved over the period of time, for example the *ahar*-based tank irrigation during the feudal system.

High agricultural seasonality is another pronounced characteristic of the southern region of Bihar. Availability of moisture through the year and fertile alluvial soil in the northern part of the floodplain of Bihar allows the expansion of agricultural activities throughout the year while in the southern region the agricultural season is restricted to the cultivation of *aghani* rice during the winter season with the help of irrigated water. Because of the high agricultural seasonality and restricted agricultural season the south Bihar region had always greater demand for permanent agricultural labour. These two factors necessitated the developing of a land-labour system having long-term ties to the *maliks* or landlords. The *Kamiauti* system grew out of historical circumstances whereby the whole Musahar community was transformed into bonded labourers. Their fate was tied to their different *maliks* for generations. Under the *kamiauti* ties a *kamia* worked all his life for the same landlord, earning wages for the days that he worked and expecting assistance when needed. For his son's marriage, he received some grains, money and a small plot of land from the landlord. After the conclusion of this transaction, called *kamiaut*i,

[10]Gyan Prakash, 1990.

the son too become the same *malik's kamia*. Women also became attached to the same master through their labour relationship with their *kamia* husband.[11]

On the other hand, the agricultural society that Musahars came into contact with was based on the Hindu caste system characterised by the Brahminic concepts of purity and pollution. Under the Hindu hierarchy based on the caste system the Musahars found their place in the lowest echelons of the ladder. They became untouchables since they were kept outside the four Hindu *vernas*. It is not clear whether the Musahars initially became *kamia* and then they were included into the Hindu fold of the caste system or it was the other way round? Though it is a debatable matter there is enough reason to believe that by their very inclusion as untouchables into the Hindu caste hierarchies the feudal system derived sustenance through permanent labour and legitimacy of ruling over their subjects—the *kamias*. From mountains and hills to the plains of paddy fields, the fate of the Musahars appears to have a clear slope. The closer they came to the rice bowl, the deeper they got into indignation 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. In the plains, they settled as untouchables and were coerced into labour bondage. So, on one hand, they became bonded labourers and on the other, the Musahars became the untouchables under settled agricultural society based on Brahminic ideology.

This brief historical description suggests that historically the Musahars never enjoyed minimum homestead entitlements even in the days of sufficiency unlike any other Dalit communities in Bihar. The obligation of living on someone's (the master's) land inadvertently bound them to continue a land-labour relationship with the landowner.[12] Post-Independent Bihar finding itself midway in transition from a feudal economy to a part of state-sponsored mixed economy; inherited an agrarian economy characterised by the increasing pressures of the market. The *kamiauti* system which was the prominent land-labour relations in operation for centuries was weakened and diluted. The long land-labour ties that tied the *kamias* to their *maliks* got dissolved into short-term wage labour contracts. The dilution of the *kamiauti* system witnessed the breakdown of the backbone of the feudal economy, i.e. the tank irrigation based on coercive labour. An individualised form of irrigation system has now replaced the earlier system of feudal-owned tank irrigation.

[11] ibid.
[12] Shashi Bhushan, 2002.

Migration of labour has become a prominent feature of the latest round of restructuring of the nation-states especially the developing countries like India under the influencing of policies of globalisation and liberalisation demanding for the integration of the world's economies. Increased circulation of capital and labour mobility is a prime concern of such policies. Under such circumstances, landless Musahars with their almost negligible daily wages at home are sucked into the whirlpool of circulation of labour in the national economy. A large chunk of the Musahars in the state of Bihar are seasonal migrants working as cheap labourers in the cities of the north in petty commercial and industrial ventures such as brick kilns, carpet and embroidery industries, construction industries, collieries in the south, etc. The rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the northern plain over the periods have fuelled this flow of outward labour migration from the state of Bihar. Besides this a majority of the Musahars migrate seasonally to agriculturally rich state like Punjab and Haryana to work as agricultural labourers in the farms during the peak seasons. In fact, post-Independent Bihar has witnessed a new intermediate class—the contractors who recruit labourers from interior most areas to the commercial and agricultural centres outside the state. All such transactions take place against the advancement of money to the landless Musahars who work hard till they are able to repay their debts and in most cases they fail to snap this vicious cycle and get entangled throughout their lives. Most of these migrants have become the new untouchables severed from the social and cultural activities at their home.[13]

Over long decades of development intervention towards improving the socio-economic conditions of the Musahars have produced the least expected results. Despite all the booster dosages of development, Musahars have remained at the margin of development. The very idea of putting the Musahar community into progress has fallen apart. Although the recent economic and political changes have dissolved the long-term *kamia-malik* ties into short-term wage labour contracts in most parts of the region, the abolition of debt-bondage remains one of the prime issues where the post-Independent state of Bihar stands out as an agent of modern progress in a land of feudal backwardness. Quite ironically, the Musahar community itself had been declared unfit for modernisation because of their resistance to part with their traditional lifestyle, norms and values. Thus, they have to carry the double baggage of criticism of not only being underdeveloped but also the cause of their own backwardness. *But who has failed*

[13]Sharma, Mukul, "The Untouchable Present: Everyday Life of the Musahars in North Bihar", in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices,* p.28, 2002.

*whom?*This necessitates a clearing of rubble from the ruins of development by critically examining the conceptual vehicles on which development thinking made benign sojourns discovering the Musahars on its way.

IV

The archaeology of knowledge construction around the Musahar community hides their secrets on the piles of earth and rubble behind the ruined buildings of development thinking. One needs to shovel in hand, work through the layer upon layer to reveal underpinnings and thus discover the origins of the dilapidated monument. For this one needs to dissent the writings on the Musahar community, in particular some important writings on the other Scheduled Caste communities in Bihar in general with respect to their long-standing marginal position within their social structure. A cursory look at the literature points to the scarcity of writings on communities like the Musahars by outsiders and themselves. A major reason behind the lack of writings in print could be gauged from the fact that societies in the Magadh region are mostly rooted and steeped in strong oral traditions. Nevertheless, it was in the colonial ethnological writings that one comes across the first glimpse of the Musahars which makes an imperative to start with.

For the colonial ethnological discourses the Musahars had been a matter of invention in the 19th century when the colonial power encountered them in the eastern provinces of Bihar. Most of the earlier colonial writings came from a group of colonial ethnologists. Their writings in various forms of ethnological reports and treatises on tribes and castes engaged the etymological explanations surrounding the word "Musahar" and "Bhuinya" often buttressed with ethnological fieldwork based on anthropometrical indices to sharpen their arguments. Through such explanations they tried to relate the Musahars to the different existing tribes—Kole tribes of Chotanagpur plateau, to as faraway Barabuinyas of the eastern most part of Assam and to the Dravidians of the south. Nesfield used the word *Mushera* for the native population that he observed inhabiting the eastern part of the Gangetic Plain near the present Mirzapur.[14] According to the word, *Mushera* signifies flesh-seeker or hunter derived from the word *masu* meaning flesh and *hera* meaning seeker whose ancestors had the Banmanushs. Similarly, Risely uses a barrage of synonyms for the word "Bhuinya"- *Bhuinya, Bhuinyan, Bhuinhar, Bhumiya, Mushar, Naik, Khandayat, Khandayat-Paik, Ghatwal, Ghatwal, Ghatwar,*

[14]Nesfield, J.C.1888. "The Musheras of Central and Upper India", *Calcutta Review*, No. 172, pp.53-284.

Tikayat, Puran, Rajwar, Rai, Rai-Bhuinya, Ber-Bhuinya, Sardar while recording them in his treatise on 'Tribes and Castes of Bengal'.[15] From Nesfield's explanation of the word "Musahar" as flesh-seeker or hunter in the latter's version, it becomes *rat eaters*.

The second group of categories emerged from the writings of the colonial officials and bureaucrats most of whom were in charge of various parts of provinces and commissionaires. Classified as slavery and serfdom initially after the abolition of slavery in 1843 the *kamia-malik* relationship was increasingly reported and studied by colonial officers who encountered the orient in the backwaters of Bihar. Under such an observation the erstwhile "kamias" came to be viewed as "unfree labourers" in colonial documents since freedom in post-European Enlightenment claims that it constitutes humanity's natural beings.[16] On the other hand, they also appear as "bonded community" engaged in debt bondage tied to their *maliks* in colonial documents since in bourgeoisie political economy money is considered as having the power to bind people. One gets ample glimpses of the description of *kamiauti* transaction in Francis Buchanan's survey report of south Bihar districts in 1809-12. Likewise in a reference to the Musahars in the Report of the Assistant to the Board Commissioners on deputation in 1820 in south-eastern Gaya begins like this— "Moosher or labourer who resembles a slave in every respect, except that of being at liberty to reside where he pleases…". In another 19th century colonial document – the Report from the India Law Commissioners describes the *kamias* as— "The household of the Raja (in Palamu), and every considerable *jaagirdar*, was a perfect feudal establishment. It was a matter of pride surrounded by a train of …….and a still larger retinue of serfs called *Kumeas*, whose state of bondage is the counterpart of the condition of the *servi* of the 8th and 9th centuries in Europe".[17]

Then there was segregation of marginal communities through a series of enumerative exercises undertaken by the colonial state at various points of time. The census became the major reference point through which communities were demarcated through objectified criteria. The categorisation and classification of untouchable communities by the imperial rulers began by the first half of the 20th century. During the Census of 1901. Risely first tried to make a list of communities according to caste hierarchies but he failed. Categories such as Depressed Class, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Criminal Tribes etc. were sieved out of the colonial

[15]Risley, H.H., *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol 1, Calcutta: Bengal,1981, rpt.
[16] See particularly Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-12*, Vol. 1, Delhi, rpt. 1986.
[17] Cited in Gyan Prakash, pp.153.,1990.

archives which were always tentative and followed the logic of colonial administration and bureaucracy. Noteworthy here is Buchanan's survey of Bihar whereby the colonial sociology of lower castes was constructed over time through categorisation of various castes based on the world-view of the native elites majority of whom were the Brahmin landlords. His accounts of different districts of Bihar are thus ordered neither alphabetically, nor on the basis of population. Instead they all begin with the Brahmans down to the abominables where the Musahars are marked the "Vile Castes" which reflect clearly the religious-social schema drawn from a Brahminical standpoint. During the Census of 1911 for the first time the colonial administrators tried to identify the certain objectified criteria on the basis of which the untouchable population could be classified from the rest of the population mostly based on inclusion of untouchable communities whose is more than one in per thousand population and communities who were disqualifies to be included in the major practicing religions. It was the first drive on the part of the imperial rulers to demarcate the Hindu population from the untouchables on objectified criteria. Most of the untouchable population who were *kamias* were described as Criminal Tribes in colonial records. It was in the 1931 Census that these communities were declared as "untouchables" (it was 15.5 per cent of the 18.5 per cent of the Hindu population). In both Bihar and Orissa, some 31 untouchable communities were identified.

Development came as a justification for segregating communities under colonial rubrics of classification. As categories started coming forth the Musahars careened through such constructions. With respect to the sixth Quinquennial Review of Education that went to work in tandem with the Census of 1901 and 1911 and a consideration for reworking of the Depressed Classes were undergoing the then magistrate of Patna B.K. Ganguly in his response to the government's directive put the Musahars in the "Depressed Caste" in his sevenfold classification of Depressed classes and with regard to specific schemes for each of these where Musahars were sought to teach primary education. The District Officer of Shahabad, J.D. Seton also suggested that the Musahars should be put into the Depressed Class category and was thought that industrial education had little meaning for the Depressed Classes. What was required to improve the condition of the Depressed Classes, he argued, was a change in social relations, most notably 'slavery'. They should be, he further argued, 'relocated by their transfer to labour districts where some social and economic betterment might be brought about in the course of one or two generations'. G.C. Banarji, magistrate of Monghyr, suggested that Musahars and others whose members be classified as "Criminal Caste" should be brought together in colonies

and taught trade. J.R. Makeig Jones, the district officer of Saran put the Musahars in the list of "Untouchable Classes" and suggested that since these castes "perform work which is indispensable to the health and well-being of the community' therefore the aim of their education should conform to this role. In his judgement the kind of education envisaged by the State would make them learn nothing 'except to despise their own caste and trade to which they have been accustomed' so that effects of education upon the untouchables will be to make them unfit for duty which they must perform'.[18]

The stubborn hopes of the colonial officialdom in turning the bonded Musahars free saw another phase of intervention but this time with a different methodology since the earlier legal remedies through various legislations failed to incur any results. Providing small plots of land to the *kamias*, training them in cottage industries, utilising the Salivation Army as a labour bureau to help them secure work in timber cutting and in the construction of forest road were all offered as instruments to transform the *kamias* to awaken them from the stupor of unfreedom into free labourers in the pre-Independence period, worthy task of the enlightened governments and philanthropists. With the rise of India as a nation-state the post-Independence period witnessed another marked shift in the development thinking, a reflection of which can be found in the country's first Prime Minister Nehru where he made a point in 1949: *It is not a question of theory; be it communism, socialism or capitalism, whatever method is most successful, brings the necessary changes and gives satisfaction to the masses, will establish itself on its own... Our problem today is to raise the standard of the masses... Economic development as the primary aim of the state; the mobilisation of the country to increase output*.[19] Development in this new phase came with the modernisation of agenda of uplifting the economic status of the Musahar community and putting them in a single 'progressive' track. *But was the method applied a different one?*

The first effort towards this was to build up a comprehensive database with respect to Scheduled Caste communities in India. The Census again revisited as a building block and storehouse of information on which subsequent planning and policies were based. Under the census enumeration of 1961 the Musahars were counted separately from the Bhuinyas and emerged as a "Scheduled Caste" which marked a full circle from their journey from Untouchables, Depressed Class, and Criminal Tribes. But quite ironically their journey did not

[18] Cited in Awadhendra Sharan.2003."From Caste to Category: Colonial Practices and Depressed/Scheduled Castes of Bihar", *IndianEconomic and Social History Research*, pp.297-298.
[19] Quoted in Wolfgang Sachs, *On the Archaeology of the Development Idea,* 1989.

end here. There were other newer categories waiting for them. According to Sach, on a global scale, 'Poverty' was discovered after the Second World War; before 1940 it was not an issue.[20] With the discovery of poverty there is a drive for collecting data on size income, consumption of calories etc. and the attention switched to declare marginal communities in India as 'absolutely poor' based on sophisticated measurements and techniques. The Musahar community who are traditionally branded as surviving on field-rats, tubers, roots, etc. did not escape this ire. Another category that followed the discovery of poverty among the Musahars is to put them in the lowest position under the poverty line defined through objectified criteria. Bhushan using the Poverty Gap Index while analysing the poverty data of Bihar for the year 1991 declared the Musahars as the "Poorest of the Poor" who occupy the lowest rung under the poverty ladder among different marginalised social groups in Bihar.[21] Then there are the land surveys by government revenue departments at various points of time for keeping land records for various development purposes and with each of these surveys the homesteads of the Musahars where they have lived for centuries got frozen into the sheets of paper. Their fates were sealed into these sheets and much to their bewilderment, they failed to find their own of piece of land in these papers turning them into "Landless" in the lockers of government records in dusty rooms of revenue departments. Next comes the categorisation of works. The Musahars since their migration into the plains are associated with agricultural works and under the feudal economy based on the caste system in Bihar they had been performing the toughest part of agricultural work levelling, shoving and cutting of land which is not enough to put them into the category of agricultural laborers, thus, they were simply "labourers" or "marginal labourers" under state categorisation of work.

In addition to the drive for categorisation on an objectified basis juridical and legislative measures also came up as a part of development philosophy. Ambedkar, who was the principal crusader against untouchability, assumed the historic role of drafting the Indian Constitution of free India. He introduced the famous Article 11 of the Drafting Committee on 1 November 1947 which carried through the following resolution: untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability' shall be an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law.[22] In free India the Schedule Castes

[20]ibid.
[21]Shahshi Bhushan, 2002.
[22]Shiva, Rao, *The Framing of the Indian Constitution*, New Delhi: Indian Institute for Public Administration, pp.298.1966.

were provided with separate reserved constituencies and reservations in jobs and educational institutions. The first half of the post-Independent period also witnessed state-sponsored land reform policies. In fact, Bihar is the only state in India where for the first time *Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus Land* was enacted way back in 1955. But it could only be passed in 1962 due to intervention of some influential members of the upper house of the state assembly. Again in 1973 the Land Ceiling Act was reformed and the ceiling limit was not only reduced but also some of the concessions which were part of earlier enactments were reduced. In the post-80s again with the resurrection of decentralisation policies came as a boon for development philosophy and the 73rd and 74th Amendments were passed in Parliament to provide greater power to the people at the grass-root level. Under the Bihar Act Panchayati Raj Act, 1993, provision has been made for reservation of seats in the Gram Panchayat for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the backward classes in proportion to their population in the area.

From this brief dissection it is evident that the post-independent development philosophy has been essentially following the tracks made by their colonial predecessors. It allows the neat classification of the clientele—the Musahars without which the development strategy seemed pointless. Such benign development thinking has percolated down to the text on the basis of which policies have been churned out periodically. An off-shoot of this had been a series of studies mostly drawing quantitative data from various sources carried out by government agencies. The most recent of them is the Planning Commission Report entitled *Scheduled Communities: A Social Development Profile of SCs/STs of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal*.[23] Developing a huge database at the household level from selected blocks in the three states the report mentioned some "grand findings" in its concluding remarks, "with respect to the Scheduled Caste communities there *seems* to the emergence of Bihar as a state where the resource base enjoyed by Scheduled Castes do not have a wide mass base…" (emphasis mine). On the basis of this finding it suggested widening instruments of forces of production and market accessibility for their products. In its framework it tries to make divisions of words like—"Secular" (literacy, education etc. related to the economic sphere) and "Sacred" (rituals, socio-cultural transactions related to the cultural realm). With regard to the role of power in political ramifications of development it tries to overlook such aspects under the cover of lame excuses

[23]Planning Commission Report, 2004.

"we realise that this could not be circumscribed because of constraints of time it had to be kept in abeyance."

Similarly, in a study carried out at the G.B. Pant Institute by A.D. Pant on the Musahars of the Ghazipur entitled *The Musahars of Ghazipur (An Economic Profile*) drawing data from primary sources it takes note of the acute poverty of Musahars and suggests a massive redistribution of assets.[24] In another recent study carried out at the A.N. Sinha Institute entitled *Musahar: A Socio-Economic Study* is also based on household data collected out of 10 per cent of the Musahar population and emphasises the fact that "most of the data are collected by the Musahars only". Three-fourth of the report is submerged under tables where various kinds of quantitative data presented under different rubrics and in its summary it holds "the economic life of the Musahars revolves around his physical strength which is the only capital he is born with….the social life of the Musahars reminds us of the life of the primitive men just better than that of an animal…no dignity no self-respect, no self-esteem, life seems to be a breathing activity only".[25] In a pre-doctoral dissertation written at the Banaras Hindu University on the religious faith and cultural practices entitled *Dharmik Viswas, Karmakand Abom Sanskritic Kriyakalap* provides a "percentage view" of the cultural practices of the Musahars through a primary survey-"94.5 per cent of the Musahars are influenced by Hindu religion, 80 per cent of the Musahars practice spirit cults, 100 per cent of the Musahars take alcohol, 64.5 per cent of the Musahars consume pork," etc.[26] Yet in another research report on a study carried out on behalf of the Bihar Adult Education programme (2002) entitled *Ek Adhayan: Musahar Jaati Ke Samajik, Shaikshainik, Arthik Wo Sanskritic Vishion Par* which starts like this, "it is told that Musahars *do not have culture*. Mushars are like *Negroes* who remained bonded for a long period" (emphasis mine).[27]

Having a brief look at the state-sponsored views we would also like to reflect on the voluntary organisations, some of whom have been working with them in various capacities for their upliftment spanning for a longer period of time. Prominent among them is the Samanway Ashram in Bodh Gaya set up by Vinoba Bhave in 1954. It has been working for the welfare of

[24]Pant, A.D, *The Musahars of Ghazipur*, Project Report No. 1, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 1981.
[25]Narayan, S. (2005)." Musahar: A Socioeconomic Study", in S. Narayan *Sustainable Development*, Commonwealth Publishers, New Delhi.
[26]"Dharmik Biswas, Karmkand Abom Sanskritic Kriayakalap", Dissertation written in Banaras Hindu University.
[27]Deepayatan, *A Study on Social, Educational, Economic and Cultural Aspects of the Musahar Community*, Bihar State Adult Education Programme, Patna, 2002.

Musahar boys and girls and is running a large non-formal education centre for Harijan children. Associated with the ashram from the very beginning is the veteran social activist and Gandhian Dwarko Sundrani who observes in his various writings, "Bodh Gaya presents a paradox – ignorance in the land of Enlightenment. The culture of poverty which they (Musahars) breathe has left deep scars on their personality and behaviour. They show no initiative in any work. They are totally submissive and agree to any suggestion given by any other without applying any reason of their own. The main reason behind the underdevelopment of Musahars is the lack of awareness. They are not aware of their own level of development. When we gave them seeds for sowing they used to eat these without taking any interest in sowing.[28] When we used to give them oxen for ploughing they used to sell them. Not just this, but when we built their houses they razed these to the ground and sold their tiles." Father Philip Manthara who have been actively working for the education and economic upliftment of the Musahars through his missionary welfare organisation Manthan also express similar views in his writings, "Their (Musahars) sorrow is so deep-rooted that only wine could help in normalising the mourning of the Musahar. Their negative self-image makes them accept servility easily. As they are assetless they are vulnerable in every aspect. They are a 'futureless people'. They just live for the day".[29]

From the ruins, resignation, decay and squalor, out of the steamrollers of development thinking emerges a "functional" view of the Musahar lifeworld where they are stereotyped into homogenised categories. Here the whole community's achievement is measured on the scale of 'economic development' or their adjustment to modern means of development as desired by development practitioners and the rest considered as just folklores or private affairs. Through the lens such development paradigms the Musahars are always seen as the "other" of modernity where 'traditions' get defined as a combination of sources of backwardness—social, economic and cultural. From this view point the Musahars appear as destitute, powerless, a voiceless community hitherto living on the margins of society for centuries. In this colour-blind functional logic of development thinking, Musahars appear as monolithic uniform categories devoid of a "culture" which can liberate the community from the stupor of underdevelopment. The question arises here *did not the Musahars' centuries survival in most difficult circumstances have more substantial things to offer?* Perhaps an exploration into finding answer to this

[28]Sundrani, Dwarko, "Poverty and Education: The Samanya Ashram" in Badiyanath Saraswati (ed.) *The Cultural Dimension of Education*, IGNCA, 1998;and Sundrani(2002). "Education is the Foundation of Culture", in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices*, 2002.
[29]Father Philip Manthara,"Communication Through The Dialogue of Life", in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices*, 2002.

question necessitates pushing aside the rubbles of ruins of defunct categories to open up new grounds. This will require one to look into the whole texture of cultural meanings in the Musahar lifeworld— their very source of living with hope and a distinct identity.

V

The meaning of development has undergone a paradigmatic shift in recent decades with the changing social and economic landscape both at the global, regional and local level. In recent years development thinking seems to arrive at an interesting crossroads. At the very core of this paradigmatic shift had been the increasing recognition of "culture" as a basis for economic development. UNESCO's widely acclaimed report on culture and development entitled *Our Creative Diversity* concludes with a note, "Unless economic development has a cultural basis it can never lead to truly lasting development. Culture is not something 'to be taken into consideration'.[30] It is fundamental to development. While in practice culture may often have led to a lack of understanding, it is also the lifeblood of creativity". In his opening address to World Bank Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel remarked: "Culture may be termed as the soul of economy, just as economy may be termed as the arm of culture".[31]*But what is culture?* More importantly, *what does "Culture" and "Development" mean to the Musahars?* This is a very critical issue since "culture" as a concept has remained as elusive as the concept of development.[32] It has been defined in myriad ways in the wake of shifting winds of discourses under the rubric of different disciplinary borders. To explore the myriad definitions of "culture" and "development" will require lengthy discussions and is beyond the scope of this report. The best imperative in such a situation is to explore the multiple voices of the Musahar community and to draw meanings from the textures of these emerging voices in the changing social and economic context. Walton and Rao in a similar vein rightly point out that rather than a set of primordial phenomena permanently embedded within national or religious or other group, "culture", is a fluid concept constituting a set of contested attributes, constantly at flux both shaping and being shaped by social and economic aspects of human interaction.[33]

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[30] Quoted in The World Commission on Culture and Development Report *Our Creative Diversity*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 1996.

[31] Opening key note address by Elie Wiesel "Sustaining Culture and Creative Expression in Development" in *Culture In Sustainable Development: Investing Cultural and Natural Endowments*, World Bank, Washington D.C., 1999.

[32] According to cultural sociologist Raymond Williams there exists some 1032 definitions of the word "culture" quoted from Rao and Walton, Culture and Public Action,p.136., 2004.

[33] See Introduction Rao and Walton, Culture and Public Action, 2004.

The Musahar community has withstood the shifting social, political and economic landscape of Bihar. In fact, their thinking on the lines of development and culture also bears a mark of the stamp of Bihar's changing trajectory as a hinterland in the national space. Far from the centre of the medieval empire, and overshadowed by the energy of colonial commerce in Calcutta during the colonial period, Bihar was looked upon as relative backwater of the British Empire in India being tagged to the prosperous province of Bengal. With the rise of the nation-state it evolved as an independent state of modern India. Like it's pre-modern past contemporary Bihar also evokes revulsions in other parts of India. It is looked upon as a region where feudal domination and terror continues unabated the whole state being in violent conflict with agents of modernity and progress. Agriculturally relatively backward and stagnant, socially mired in caste oppressions and class exploitation, its political structure eroded by corruption and wracked by landlords Bihar was hurriedly bracketed into one of the lasting development categories as part of the "BIMARU" state.[34] Although economically stagnant, Bihar's political sphere had witnessed great activism, vigour and energy and within this sphere one can get a glimpse of the voices of the Musahar community.

Social stratification in Bihar is primarily based on the caste system and the middle level landlords who belong to majority class here are the upper castes- such as the Brahmans, Rajputs and Bhumihars. Historically, it is this section of people who were responsible for the means of production as well as the forces of production. Bihar being predominantly a peasant society "land" had been the most important resource for marginal communities belonging to the lower castes engaged in agricultural activities. Defined by a patron-client relationship the lower castes had been earning their livelihood by working in the fields or in other capacities for the upper caste landlords since the emergence of the feudal system. But historically this patron-client relationship had undergone subsequent transformation in the reciprocal power relations between the upper caste landlords and the lower caste labourers in Bihar.

In the cases of the Musahars, "Wages" and "Homestead land" had been the major issue on the basis of which they began organising themselves. Way back in 1936 in Samastipur under the Commissionaire of Darbhanga the Musahars protested against the owners of the Harsinghpur Indigo Factory to raise their wages and protested against several indigo factories which were brutally turned by the colonial administration through lathi-charge and mass arrest

[34] The acronym BIMARU which connotes "sick'' in Hindi and in which "B" stands for Bihar was first coined by demographer Ashish Bose.

under criminal cases. In September 1937 the Musahars under the leadership of Santdas (popularly known as Dadaji) and Kamlawati (popularly known as Sati) clashed with the colonial administration demanding the release of their associates in jails.[35] After the post-Independent period increased fragmentation of landholdings and demographic changes intensified the clashes between lower caste labourers and upper caste landlords. This time it was "Homestead land" usually the *Gairmazarua* land (ceiling surplus or public commons). The centre of this movement for homestead land was Bodh Gaya where the Buddhist Monastery which owned thousands of acres of agricultural land earning revenue from the agricultural produces based on Musahars' labour. Spearheaded by the Bhudan Movement under the leadership of Binova Bhave the Musahars of Magadh region of Bihar played a critical role during the whole movement.[36] An offshoot of this has been the mid 70s and early 80s Naxal movement which began an armed struggle for securing minimum agricultural wages for the labourers as usually they got half of the minimum wage under their upper caste maliks. The districts of Gaya, Aurangabad, Jehanabad and the old centres of Bhojpur belt especially in the district of Bhojpur and Rohtas became the hotbed where thousands died in violent clashes between lower caste agricultural labourers and the upper caste landowners. Ideologically the whole movement was spearheaded by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India (CPI) which was reflected in the electoral politics where in the 1967 Vidhan Sabha elections the Socialist Party won 147 seats and with the CPI went on to form the government in the state.

A new change of waves began after the post-90s in the wake of failure of political parties associated with the Dalit struggle in fulfilling their promises in Bihar. This time the issue of "dignity" (*izzat*) became the prime motive for mobilisation against the upper caste landlords. This phase of the struggle took the form of a fight against the assault of Dalit womenfolk by upper caste landlords. The centuries old-exploitation of the lower caste womenfolk by upper caste landlords by extra-economic means through system like 'dola' whereby the newly married Dalit women of the village had to spend the night with the local landlords. Though such a practice was abolished on paper through juridical measures it was in practice in the villages till the 1960s in Bihar. The struggle for dignity was not confined to the issue of Dalit womenfolk but of late has been an extension of the democratic rights of the Dalits which had been denied them

[35] Cited in Choudhury, P.K. and Srikant(eds), *Swarg Par Dhaba:Bihar Mein Dalit Andolan 1912-2000*, Vani Prakashan, New Delhi,2005.
[36] See Prabhat, *Jamin Kiske Jote Uski: Bodhgaya Bhumi Andolan*, Kisan Vikas Trust, Patna, 1999 for a detail account of land movement for Homesteads Land by Musahars in Bodh Gaya against the Bodh Gaya Math.

by the upper castes for long periods. The right to vote as a constitutional right denied them in elections regulated by the upper caste landlords became an issue of dignity for the Dalits and in the 1990 Lok Sabha and Vidan Sabha elections in Bihar for the first time Dalits in large number particularly from central Bihar, voted for the first time in their lives a large number of whom were women.[37] Bhagwati Devi, the former Musahar woman parliamentarian, once observed in her writings -- *what does the word prestige mean to us? will the society give us the right to live? I think I am a citizen of the country. However, it seems we have no right to vote freely..we are deprived of the most fundamental right to live..how would we save our prestige your honour? When it comes to saving your honour and dignity we work so hard, but when it comes to saving our honour, you mock at us and jeer at us. You will never allow us to hold our heads high.*[38]

Culture is considered to be concerned with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange, coordination and structures and practices that serve relational ends like ethnicity, ritual heritage, norms, meanings and beliefs. The defence of identity and livelihood is deeply woven in the cultural practices of the Musahars. In almost all the linguistic zones, Bihar has the following genres of performing arts—Ballaads(Lorikayan, Reshma Chuharmal), Ballet, Music (Debhari, Jitiya), Instrumental Music (Dhak, Dhol, Mridang, Khol, Kartal, Tasha, Pipihi,), Dance of various kinds. The Musahars who are busy constructing their new identity use the rich repository of cultural practices of Bihar of a different kind since being declared untouchables, they had been debarred from practising the cultural practices of the Great Traditions restricted to the upper castes. In a rigid caste-ridden society of Bihar this has taken the turn of demanding and acquiring new space within the Hindu caste hierarchy. A new genre of cultural practices has emerged over a period of time. The increasing popularity of the folktales of the Birs- Tulsivir, Dularvir, Naduvir, Dina Bhadri, Chuharmal and Rani Reshma, etc. A common characteristics of bravery of these characters whom the Musahars worship with local variance is that most of them fought against oppressions of the upper castes immediately above the caste hierarchies of the Musahars. For example, Tulsivir fought against the oppressions of the Dusadh king to save the dignity of the lower castes. Traditionally, the brave tales of the virs were passed on to communities through oral reproductions. But of late the *Melas* (fairs) haveemerged as an important public gathering in rural Bihar where the folktales and folklores of the virs are performed in public through art forms like Nuatankis. Besides these tales have also appeared in

[37]Bharti, Indu, "Dalists Gain New Izzat, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 5-12.
[38] Quoted from Bhagwati Devi's speech published in her piece "Our Whole Existence is Burning" in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices*, 2002.

print in the form of booklets and leaflets that cater to the popular readerships in small towns and kasbas and sold in large numbers when the melas are held. All these melas are witnessed in large number not only by the Musahars but their popularity has attracted other caste members who come in large numbers. Through their cultural practices they have also influenced other castes. The Jitiya festival which is traditionally observed by the Musahars is now celebrated by the upper castes of course without its aesthetics.[39]

The mystic consciousness of the Musahars has not only its source in the Hindu cosmology but has also evolved from the reformist thought of Hinduism- the Kabirpanthis. There has been an overpowering presence of the Kabirpanthis in recent decades among the Musahars in Bihar. The Kabirpanthis do not work as external agents but as insiders. Their influencing presence in the Musahar community has unleashed the gradual process of social transformation. With the arrival of the Kabirpanthis there has been an emergence of a new way of thinking, a new methodology of empowering the community from within. Dasarath Manjhi has assumed a prominent role as a social reformer among the Musahars. He was an ordinary Musahar like thousands in Bihar but his symbolic act of razing a hillock to make way for people through the hills drew emotions among the lower castes and marginalised people. His name and fame over the decades has reached the farthest corner of Bihar and has now a large number of followers among the lower castes. According to him, *Kabir signifies Karmaveer meaning someone who performs his actions with courage and determination; one who is industrious and efficient. Real wealth is the desire of the soul and he muses that the hillock did not appear to him as tall as it is made out to him. Nobody is taller than the human being. For him 'hands' are the fundamental tools for the task of performing any work; all other things are appendages and contrivances. Since all are born with 'soul' and 'hands', one can conclude that nature on its part, has not made anyone poor*.[40] According to Dasarth Manjhi, the basic cause behind the destitution of the Musahars is their custom of rearing pigs, drinking local wine *tari* and their culture of worshipping spirit cults. All their earnings are spent on these activities. He sentimentally applied his emotions to these abdominal practices when he says, "*just publish in*

[39]Gupta, P. (?). "Performing Folk Arts of Bihar: A Preliminary Report of the Survey of Magadhan Area", unpublished paper, Dalit Documentation Centre, Deshkal Office, Bodh Gaya, File No.19. there are some other interesting unpublished writings on the culture of the Magadh area by the local intelligentsia. See *Haishya Par Khadi Jatiyo Ki Sabhyatya*, *Sanskriti Abom Kala*.(File No.13); *Upjatiyo Ki Antar-Sambandh-Bhuinya, Musahar, Rajwar, Rajbanshi*.(File No.19);Karu, (?). *Bihar Rajya Ke Saran Jile Mei Nat Jati*, (File No.58); Pathak, Ravindra.().*Magadh Ke Sthan Namo Par Bodh Dharm Ka Pravabh*. (File No.52); Pathak, Ravindra. (?). *Magahi Sanskriti*(File No.52).

[40]Quoted from Radhesyam Mangolpuri's account of Dasarath Manjhi in *Asserting Voices*.

newspapers that all those who keep pigs must free them within two years. In order to wake them up this itself will do the trick."[41] His anger and frustration with the way development intervention among the Musahar community has been shaping in recent years can be gauged from his critical comments: *I have been observing the efforts of organisations working for the development for the past twenty years but the fact is that not even one segment of Musahar society is developed.In the name of development of the Musahars some people are enjoying the loot. As a matter of fact nothing substantial is taking place in this regard*. For him *development of the Musahars can be possible only when their consciousness is raised or revolutionised. But the spirit of real awakening will be instilled only after the community itself sets out to awaken its members. As long as the Musahar community remains enmeshed in the cobwebs of superficial pretensions, it won't be able to develop an interest in education.*[42]

Over a period modernity has also caught the imaginations of the Musahars in their aspirations and hopes to become educated like other upper caste sections of populations in Bihar. Such aspirations and hopes are reflected in the everyday productions of newly constructed folksongs some of which go like this:-

With new bricks, I'll build a new a school
Where I will educate my husband with all my efforts
Cajole him I will, come what may!

Father asks me to open my heart
Why in my eyes there is no sleep
Ah, my son, my daughter got no education![43]

The reservation policy of the state in modern education has also produced a small section of Musahars who have received education fighting the evils of untouchability at every stage of their life. Asharfi Sada is an M.A. from the Darbhanga district of Bihar and presently has been quite active in raising consciousness for education among the Musahars in various capacities. His painful experience is captured in his writing *Striding on the Difficult Paths of Life.*

[41] Quoted from "Jaat Hi Jaat Ko Jagayega"- Talk by Dasarath Manjhi, *Proceedings of Two-day Seminar on Musahar: Development, Culture and Communication*, Deshkal Society, New Delhi,2000.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Musahar folksong collection, Deshkal Office, Delhi.

His struggle to educate himself is marred with humiliating experiences at every stage right from the school days to receive higher education at the university as he belongs to an untouchable caste. Sada has taken a vow to educate his caste brethren on modern lines. According to him, *there should be a separate quota for the Musahars. In the existing system of reservation, only those people who are already more developed than others draw all its benefits; Musahars end up with nothing. If there is a separate reservation for the Musahars, they will get its benefits as well*. His enthusiasm in modern education is reflected in comments- *our people are now getting organised, disparaging their strength or looking upon them is tantamount to showing them in a poorer light…the strength inherent in them should be brought out..people have become more interested in studies….all our youngsters are studying*.[44]

All these multiple voices of the community have evoked different kinds of interpretations touching Musahar ways of life involving their ideas of culture and notions of development. The emerging and transforming culture among the Musahar community in various contexts has given shape to these notions. *But in what context should we see the emerging power of culture among the Musahars? In what dynamic sense is it power and in what kind of power is it? What is it that awaits us in the coming years?* In our concluding section of the essay, we intend to tackle some of these vital questions and try to build up a perspective on the lines of culture and development by pulling strands of arguments discussed under different sections of the essay.

VI

The existence of multiple voices with varying textures of the Musahars points towards a vibrant, living, thriving, emerging and transforming community shaping themselves and influencing others in their way. Famous Nobel Laureate and economist Amartya Sen defines culture *as a set of "capabilities*". According to him, *culture is a good part of life and a factor in the constructive value of life and societies with distinct cultural experiences have shown capacities to adapt new demands and opportunities within the development process*.[45] In this context cultural practice has been a perennial reservoir of "resources" for the Musahars. Power derived from such perennial resources has helped to build up capacities to sustain the community from being a *kamia* under the feudal system to agricultural labour always keeping intact their distinct

[44] Quoted from Asarfi Sada's writing "Striding On Difficult Paths of Life" in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices*,2002.
[45] Sen, Amartya in Rao and Walton, eds, 2004.

identity. Arjun Appadurai treats "voice" as a cultural capacity – *because it is not just a matter of inculcating democratic norms, but of engaging in social, political and economic issues in terms of metaphor, rhetoric, organisation and public performance that work best in their cultural worlds..the cultural context in which different groups live, form the framework of what he calls the "capacity to aspire*".[46] As discussed in the previous section the Musahars launched the struggle for "lower wages" against the mill owners and clashed with the colonial powers during the Raj by regrouping themselves under the auspices of different organisations. In the post-independent periods also they have continuously struggled for securing "minimum wages and their entitlement to homestead land". Recently the emergence of a genre of Dalit performing art and aesthetics has fuelled the new struggle of Musahars organising themselves under the auspices of their Dalit identity. In their struggle for dignity which in a way has opened up radical space in the democratic structure of modern Bihar. In this sense culture has not only lent them voice but has enhanced their capacity to aspire through their decades of struggle to open up new democratic space—a common plank where exchanges between the lower castes and the upper castes can take place.

Development thinking emerging from the archaeology of knowledge construction around the Musahars from the colonial to the post-independent period denies taking cognisance of the "relative deprivation" of the Musahars. Through its constructed categories the Musahars only appear as 'silent, 'powerless', 'voiceless', 'poor' and always require waking them up from the stupor of bondage and servitude. It allows the homogenisation and reduction of the Musahar lifeworld into neat classification where the whole texture of discursive cultural practices evaporates into thin air. The stereotype talk of Musahar poverty much in debate denies the contrasting lifestyles of the Musahars under different historical circumstances.In his critique of Development Philosophy, Sach holds that *in societies that are not built on the compulsion to amass material wealth, economic activity is not geared to slick, zippy output..rather, economic activities like choosing an occupation, cultivating the land, or exchanging goods, are understood as ways of enacting that particular social drama in which the members of the community happen to see themselves as the actors.. that drama's story largely defines what belongs to whom, who produces what and how it is exchanged..the 'economy' is*

[46]Appadurai, Arjun, "The Capacity To Aspire: Culture and The Terms of Recognition" in Rao and Walton, eds, 2004.

closely bound up with liferent circumstances.[47] Historically, living under an acute shortage of resources and entitlement, the Musahars have been adjusted to frugality and lead a basic subsistence life for centuries drawing from the local environment without bothering about accumulation. According to Dasarath Manjhi, the Musahars are not poor since anyone born with a hand and soul are not poor. But the modernist measurement of Musahar poverty based on calories, incomes etc. reduces their lifeworld into animalistic descriptions. Their non-accumulation habit for the future is seen as the greatest obstacle towards their deprivation and poverty. Through the development lens they are seen as people living in a permanent situation of scarcity, since they always have less than they desire. Frugality has been internalised as a lifestyle by the Musahars using meagre resources which have helped to sustain themselves for longer periods under most adverse socio-economic conditions. It is a way of life maintained by a culture which recognises and cultivates a state of sufficiency; it only turns into demeaning 'poverty' when pressurised by an accumulating acquisitive society.

Recognising the cultural modes of Musahar life one is always startled by cautious questions: Are *we romanticising their culture?* Sarkar in the Indian context maintains that *too much harping on the cultural identity has its own dangers and who knows what is authentic about which culture?..isn't the caste system a part of Hinduism?... romanticising traditional/indigenous cultures also produces false image of reality*.[48] But in this regard a clear answer comes form Sen who holds that *there is no presumption that cultural processes are inherently "good" or inherently "bad" for economic and social development..by reproducing inequality and discrimination, they can be exploitative, exclusionary and conflictual resulting in "relational deprivation"*.[49] It is in this context that one can understand most of the writings on the Musahar community right from the colonial times and the views of activists working for decades for their upliftment. Portraits of the Musahars as an apathetic community, as an obstacle towards their own development living amidst in filth and barbaric practices. Following Dumont one can assume due to the long exposure to the exploitative caste system under the feudalism and the modern-nation state the Musahars have internalised the caste system which perpetuated their social structure. The Musahars do little to question the caste hierarchy.[50]Srinivas has also shown that collective mobility in the caste system is quite glacial in

[47]Wolfgang Sachs, *On the Archaeology of the Development Idea,* 1989.
[48]Sarkar, Saral, "Development Critique in the Cultural Trap", *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 22, 1995.
[49]Sen, Amartya in Rao and Walton, eds, 2004.
[50]Dumont, Homo Heiririchas

its pace[51]. But according to Dirks, caste is a product of modernity and more of a construct of colonialism rather than a product of ancient civilisational practices. It is through development practice started during the colonial period that reinforced the caste system. Power politics involved in the unholy nexus between development and caste, the big landlords in Bihar pitted the Musahars against the middle-level landowners. Under such circumstances the Musahars developed a sense of alienation where they found their fate sealed in the rigid caste system. The Musahars' "world of impossible" is related to the material aspects of culture like the impossibility of not owning a piece of land or a hut or not having enough money to perform their basic functionings needed for a respectable survival within their communitarian ethos. Power relations embedded in the caste system played an important role in sustaining the "culture of apathy" through the process of symbolic violence. In the cultural realm it was carried through constructing an exclusive culture defined by the upper castes' "Untouchable Culture" whereby the Musahars were denied basic means of survival such as- land, sources of drinking water, etc. Under the caste system non-recognition other than caste identity influenced the identity construction under the constraints of choice that followed the similar path of exclusivist castiest orientation.

It appears that allthough the mode of securing social unity represented by a modern nation-state like India had a great emancipatory potential and has much to be said under its socialist, liberal, democratic and secular precinct but it has remained culture-specific and entails considerable moral and physical violence to marginalised societies that refused to be parted from their cultural lifeworld. Today, the Musahar society stands at a historical crossroad. On one hand, it faces the physical, social and moral violence in the homogenising project of the nation-state and on the other, the pressures of the market economy tearing away the fabric of the cultural lifeworld under the influence of globalisation. Contemporary multicultural societies are historically unique and raise problems not faced, at least in their acute form, by their pre-modern counterparts. They need to find collectively acceptable and practicable ways of reconciling the demands of both unity and diversity. Globally, there has been a common understanding among development thinkers that cultural diversity is as important as bio-diversity. Pluralism pays attention to the accumulated treasure of all human experience, wisdom and conduct. Like diversity it also needs unity and cohesion to provide a focus for collective self-consciousness, to encourage a sense of common belonging and citizenship, and to foster a spirit

[51] Srinivas, M.N.

of shared national identity, without all of which its members lack mutual trust and goodwill and the willingness to make sacrifices and accept compromises required by the pursuit of the common good.[52] In the context of the Musahar community it is culture which has been behind both the "unity" and "diversity" of the community. Dasarath Manjhi's notion of development is based on pluralistic ethics which refuses to separate between "economic" and "moral" realms and has a universalistic appeal cutting across rigid caste hierarchies. On the other hand, it comes across as the evolution of a "gendered" dimension of development among the Musahars, since Musahar women have also been part of the huge labour category always exploited by the Brahmin landlords. Bhagwati Devi's emphasis on "dignity" is a point in this regard. Similarly, the liberal values of development are found in the likes of Babuchand and Asarfi Sada. For Babucahnd it is sheer entrepreneurship-based traditional knowledge and sense of market. For Asarfi Sada it is the emanicipatory appeal involved in modern education.

The discussion so far throughout the essay has been widely diverse but looking essentially at the positive development of arguments around the question of culture, development and identity. In the context of the Musahars one intends to make a few concluding remarks. Our discussion throughout the text confirms the fact that culture is fundamentally related to notions of development and identity when one looks at the practical and philosophical implications of the lived experience of the Musahars across varying historical circumstances in the state of Bihar. Engaging culture for a better understanding of the Musahar lifeworld doesn't necessarily mean using a cultural methodology. It does, however, mean engaging with the cultural factors that affect whether or not people can improve their situation and valuing creative cultural responses. It would be somewhat misleading to say that the Musahars have rejected the modern idea of development. Rather than rejecting development they have resisted the exploitative "mode of modern development" that refuses to recognise the cultural and social ethos of the society on which Musahar society has been sustained for centuries under the most adverse circumstances. Looking at the rich cultural heritage of the Musahars which bears all the treads of modern philosophy of development—secular, universal, liberal and gender equality one feels that the drive for inventing a new language to understand their culture is uncalled for. What is urgent at present is the immediate need for a critical understanding of the cultural meanings of different dimensions of the Musahar lifeworld in the context of modern Bihar in general and the middle-Gangetic Plain in particular. The collective

[52]Quoted Bhikhu Parikhs speech "A Commitment to Cultural Pluralism, UNESCO.

views of the different authors of the Report provide some answers to the understanding of the idea of culturally mediated development thinking on the Musahar community and some constructive conceptual thinking of the implications of such ideas at policy level taking into account the ground reality of rural Bihar. It is our firm belief that for developing and designing effective Public Action policies on the Musahar community, one must address the issues of culture, development and identity among them. We view this Report as a step towards this direction.

Chapter 1

Mobility, Marginality and Development: The Case of Bhuinyas and Musahars

Introduction

> "What are the reasons for us to desert the village where we were once made to settle by the *Zamindars*? What does the word prestige means to us? Will the society ever give us the right to live? Will the world allow us our own homesteads?"
>
> Bhagwati Devi [Former Musahar woman parliamentarian]

Large-scale movement of labourers for work has been a prominent socio-economic feature of post-colonial Bihar. It reflects the changes that post-colonial Bihar has been undergoing. This trend of labour migration from state has intensified over the period reflecting the changes that the state has experienced in the post-Independent India. Migration of labour is a prominent feature of the latest round of restructuring of the state in its transformation from feudal economy to a part of the capitalistic economy. The work-related migration has signalled a fundamental shift in transforming the agrarian economy. In the transition from a feudal economy to a capitalistic economy, Bihar's agrarian economy felt the increasing pull and push of the market. The *kamiauti* system, prominent land-labour relations in operation, backbone of the feudal economy, got weakened. Land-labour ties that tied the *kamias* to their *maliks* got dissolved into short-term wage labour contracts. Individualized form of irrigation system has now replaced the earlier system of feudal-owned tank irrigation.

Majority of the corvee labour in the Middle Gangetic plain of Bihar, who are known as *kamias*, belong the Musahars and Bhuinyas. Now a Scheduled Caste they are spread over mostly in the districts of Monghyr, Bhagalpur and Gaya. It is in the Magadh region of Bihar (mostly areas falling under the Gaya district) where the greatest concentration is found, that they came to be known as the Bhuinyas. Till the 1961 census, the Musahar and Bhuinya population was counted as one. It was in the 1961 census that they were counted separately for the first time. According to the 1981 census, Bihar had 13,91,000 Musahars and 8,50,469 Bhuinyas. Together they made up nearly 20 percent of the state's Dalit population.

Historically, even in the days of sufficient land availability, the Musahars and Bhuinyas of middle Gangetic plain had never enjoyed the minimum ownership of 'homestead land' unlike the other communities in the region. The quote opening the chapter, by the former Musahar woman representative in Parliament-*Bhagwati Devi* reflects at best the pain and pathos of a community that never had its own homestead land. Although, historically they have been allowed to settle on 'Gair Majarua Malik' land by their *maliks* the obligation of living on their masters' land bound them to continue a labour-relationship with the landowners.

Over the time, the State has introduced several developmental measures to mitigate the marginal status of the Bhuinyas and Musahars. The *Indira Awas Yojana* was a major state intervention to provide shelter to the marginalized Bhuinyas and Musahars. Although the post-colonial State prides itself in being an agent of modern progress in a land of feudal backwardness it stumbles over the cultural construction centred around mobility. There is a deep-sited cultural notion of Bhuinyas and Musahars as a free-will wonderer as well as unstable community devoid of the values of a permanent settled community in south Bihar. Development discourses often elucidate that since these two communities who0 do not conform to the value of sedentary civilization i.e. residing at one place they fail to qualify or draw benefits from developmental measures such as provision of shelter and land. The existing social theory of labour migration put forward by neo-classical economics mostly centres around the 'pull and push' theory i.e. gains to be won by movement from areas of relatively low productivity to areas of high productivity motivate migration. Looking at the cultural constructions of mobility in south Bihar one feels that the economic theory of migration is not of enough help in this regard.

Recent critique of the labour migration theory holds that labour migration in South Asia does not operate in neo-classical neatness. 'Push factors' which include circumstances such as overepopulation, unemployment, scarcity of land, low wages, natural calamity and 'pull factors' which attract cultural facilities for personal enrichment do not operate in neo-classical neatness in South Asia. People here often migrate to take up sweat labour jobs, escape violence, establish ethnic network and due to lack of confidence in the nations stability or even a historically

established seasonal migration has been typical nature of the peasantry in South Asia. All these factors defy the conceptual neatness of the push and pull theory of migration.[53]

Further, neo-classical research focusing on micro and macro economic processes overlooks the subjectivities of the migrant. It treats the migrants as disembodied actors responding rationally to economic forces or acting in response to the political economic structures organizing their mobility. The migrants' responses are not understood as tied to corporeal experience which is infused with social meaning. In contrast, mobility processes are not structured by discourse through a simple causal logic, but rather the politics of complex processes of ideological contestation and production. It could be useful to remember that the new modern conditions create their own versions of mobility and to which the musahars invent new adaptation strategies where the shared past may not be always a reference point, rather future aspirations become the rallying point of such initiatives which play an important part in it.[54]

Research on the nature and causes mobility among the Bhuinyas and Musahar seems to be limited by isolated and piecemeal nature of empirical studies. This situation throws up a challenge to investigate into the causal and historical linkages between mobility, migration and development Taking into consideration of the existing lacunae in research focusing on the mobility of Bhuinyas and Musahars the present study slowly peel off the multiple layers of mobility to unravel its interlinkages with marginality and development by placing Bhuinya and mobility in a historical plane and may be the contemporary world too . In doing so it tries to develop a staged connection between all the shades of mobility. This will require one to look into not only the economic factors but also the associative relationship with politics and culture at large.

Mobility to Landlessness: Discourses on History

Historical circumstances have played a greater role in the Bhuinya and Musahar mobility and conditioning of their marginal positions in society. However, any historical inquiry regarding the contours of mobility among the Musahars is related to the fundamental questions as to *who* the

[53]Samadar, Ranabir. 1999. *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration From Bangladesh to West Bengal*, New Delhi.
[54]Pratt, G.1997. "Form Registered Nurse To Registered Nanny: Discursive Geographies of Philipina Domestic Workers in Vancouver", *Economic Geography* 75(3),215-36.

Bhuinyas and Musahars are. The answer to this question, however, has never been easy in the absence of concrete historical evidences, and is outside the scope of this chapter. Rather than debating on their origin, this section of the chapter will focus on the historical circumstance that has influenced their mobility pattern and their subsequent position in the social structure.

From Hills to the Plains: Colonial Ethnological Imbroglio

Most of the colonial discourses on the origin of the Bhuinyas and Musahars is clouded with etymological explanations of the word 'Musahar' and 'Bhuinya'. These etymological explanations were often buttressed with ethnological fieldwork based on anthropometrical indices to sharpen their arguments. Nesfield used the word 'Mushera' to the native population that he observed inhabiting the eastern part of the Gangetic Plain near present Mirzapur.[55] He prefered the word *Mushera* based on an old folktale which signifies flesh-seeker or hunter, derived from the word *masu* meaning flesh and *hera* meaning seeker.[56] Their struggle for existence in the face of growth of towns and villages, forced them scattered all over. A few of them have even penetrated into Assam, where according to the Census of 1881 they numbered some 4,000 in the districts of northern India between Assam and Rohilakhand.[57] Based on the myths of 'Deosi' that was popular among the semi-Hinduized *Musheras* of the plains, Nesfield linked their origin to the forest-clad hills of Mirzapur and surrounding the contiguous ranges.[58] In doing so, he associated the Musahars with the *Kol* and *Cheru* tribe of Chotanagpur plateau. In the myths of *Deosi* one come across a mythical sacred place called 'Pipri' which every Musahar would like to see before he dies.

Based on the links between the Musahars and the Kolarian tribes of which the 'Santhals' of the Chotanagpur plateau are a part Waddell tried to link Santhal migration to ascertain the place of origin of the Musahars.[59] He argued that the semi-aboriginal Pipri-garh near Chunar is not the 'Pipri' of the Santhal tradition.[60] He proposes the location of Hardigarh in Baliya as the proposed

[55]Nesfield, J.C.1888. "The Musheras of Centra and Upper India", *Calcutta Review*, No. 172, pp.53-284.
[56]ibid, p.2.
[57] ibid.
[58] p.7
[59]Wadell, L.A.?."The Traditional Migrations of the Santhal Tribe", *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. xxii, pp.294.
[60]Waddell, L.A. 1895. "The Saontal Migration", *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. xxiv, March, pp, 81.

origin. Supporting Waddell, Campbell posited that the Kolarian tribes of which the Santhals are one, would seem to be splinters broken from a larger mass, who, at different periods, sought refuge in the hills of Chotanagpur.[61] According to him the 'Santhals' or rather the people whom they are portion of the Musahars, occupied the country on both sides of the Ganges, but more specifically in the north. Starting from the north-east they gradually worked their way up the valley of the Ganges, till one finds them in the neighborhood of Banaras with their headquarters near Mirzapur. Here, the main body, which had kept to the northern bank of the river, crossed it and heading southwards, came to the Vindhaya hills. This obstruction deflected them to the left, and they found themselves in the tableland of the Chutia Nagpur (Chotanagpur Plateau). One finds a whole range of relics and reminisces strewed in this route which is not the exclusive property of the Santhals but are claimed more or less by other Kolarian tribes as well.[62]

Risley uses an array of synonyms- *Bhuinya, Bhuinyan, Bhuinhar, Bhumiya, Mushar, Naik, Khandayat, Khandayat-Paik, Ghatwal, Ghatwar, Tikayat, Puran, Rajwar, Rai, Rai-Bhuinya, Ber-Bhuinya, and Sardar* while recording about them in his treatise *Tribes and Caste of Bengal*.[63] Unlike Nesfield who connects the Musahars of the north-western Province with the Kolarian tribes, Risley's hypothesis traces the Musahars of Bihar to the equally Dravidian Bhuiyas of Southern Chotanagpur.[64] The basis of the argument is same-the etymological explanation of the word 'Musahar'. He believes that the popular etymology 'rat-catcher' or 'rat-eater' is a true one, and that the word is an opprobrious epithet bestowed by the Hindus caste with reference to their fondness for eating field-rats.[65] Risley holds that spreading from their place of origin, i.e. Chotanagpur, Bhuinyas' social fortune seem to have been determined by the character of people with whom they came into contact. The stronger non-Aryan tribes like the Mundas, Hos and Santals cut like a wedge through the line of Bhuiyna advance towards the north. A small number successfully established itself in Hazaribagh beyond the range of Mundas, while those who travelled furthest in this direction fell under the domination of Hindus in Bihar, and were reduced to the servile status. Travelling southward from the assumed centre, their conditions

[61] Campbell, A.1894. "Traditional Migration of Santhal Tribes", *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. xxiii, April, pp. 103-4.
[62] ibid, p.104.
[63] Risley, H.H.1891. *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 Vols, Calcutta: Bengal, rpt.
[64] ibid, p.114.
[65] ibid, p.115.

appear to have been more favourable, and the tendency was for the *Bhuiyas* to rise rather than the decline in the social status.[66]

Indian ethnologist S.C. Roy links the origin of the Bhuinyas to the independent section of the old 'Desh Bhuiyas' in the tributary states of Orissa. To him the term Desh Bhuiya appears to be generic term for the more primitive sections of the Bhuiyas, of which the genuine 'Pauri Bhuiyas' of the hills is the most typical and perhaps the only representative.[67] Practicing swidden cultivation and shifting their settlements from one site to another site every, they did not developed land tenures such as 'ghatwali', nor did they break into stratified groups.[68] This explanation perhaps has some similarities between the present Bhuiyas of south Bihar and the more primitive section i.e. Hill or Pawri Bhuinyas of Orissa. The Bhuiynas of south Bihar show traces of their connection with other Mundari-speaking groups, including the Hill Bhuinyas of Orissa. For instance they have the traditions recalling analogues of what is known as *phul khusi* or 'seizure marriage' among the other-Mundari speaking people.[69]

The above accounts of colonial and Indian ethnological explanations are a sketchy picture of the Bhuinya and Musahar mobility. The colonial etymological and ethnological explanation straitjacket the Bhuinyas and Musahars who were at different stages of socio-economic formation into a unilinear evolutionary process. Though, brilliant in their ethnological explanations, these accounts keep a calculative silent on the historical circumstances under which the Bhuinyas and Musahars migrated from the Chotanagpur plateau. Though Risley and Roy draw their origin towards the south to the Chotanagpur plateau they seemed to have missed the vital point as to how the Bhuinyas who migrated the south there was transformed into kamias. This move on the part of the Bhuinyas is fundamentally related to their positioning in the social structure of south Bihar.

[66]Ibid, p.111.
[67]Roy, S.C. 1935a. "Report of Anthropological Work 1930-31: Hill Bhuinyas of Orissa", *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, vol. xviii, pp.51-78.
[68]Roy, S.C. 1935b. "Report of Anthropological Work in 1932-33: The Bhuinyas and Their Congeners", *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, vol xxi, part I, pp. 139-48.
[69]ibid.

From Rat-Eaters to Kamias: Voting With Feet

In his search for the historical circumstances under which the Bhuinyas and Musahars became kamias, Gyan Prakash notes that the making and unmaking south Bihar has played a great role in the transformation of the Bhuinyas and Musahars into kamias. The term 'south Bihar' did not exist prior to the 19th century, and the name 'Bihar' had no areal reference before 14th century. The area was then known as Magadh.[70] The early prominence of Magadh was due to its rulers who exercised control over metals especially iron found in the Rajghir hills in the south Gangetic plains in the Chota Nagpur plateau.[71] The presence of iron enabled the clearing of the forests and the subsequent farming of the fertile Gangetic land.

Agricultural colonization had been the prime basis upon which the construction and the reconstruction of south Bihar was carried out in subsequent periods. Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan Buddhist scholar who visited Bodh Gaya in AD 1234 found thick forests just a few miles south of Gaya town, which suggested that as late as 13th century agrarian settlements were sparse in the southern Bihar.[72] Prakash holds that firstly, Magadh, being the location of towns of imperial rulers of the northern half of the south Gangetic plain would have possessed the dense population need for intensive paddy cultivation. Secondly, the topography of the northern part of the south Gangetic plain, with its low watershed and gentle slopes, and its position as the nucleus of Magadhan civilization would have made it the region where irrigation works were more extensively developed. During the 17th century, the southern end of south Bihar witnessed a marked growth of in agricultural reclamation and intensification. Conquest, immigration, agricultural reclamation and intensification came to characterize the areas inhabited by the Bhuinyas, and dissolved the old contrast between northern and southern Bihar.

Under colonial rule, the landscapes of 19th century south Bihar underwent immense transformation. The southern Bihar came to be known with certain universal categories of

[70]Prakash, Gyan 1990. *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.58.
[71]ibid, cited in p.59.
[72]Ibid, cited in p.61.

classification- soil, terrain, agrarian practices.[73] This objectification of land went with hand-in-hand with the organization of work under European economic doctrines. The first 'Permanent Settlement' arrangement was initially initiated in 1789 for a period for ten years but declared permanent in 1793. By this measure land became the private property of the *zamindars* so long as they fixed the revenue in perpetuity. As agrarian relations were objectified in land, the *kamias* were subjected to a variety of practices that defined and documented them as persons who had lost their natural rights to freedom because of the innate power of money, grain, and land that the *kamias* received from their *maliks*. The objectification of agrarian relations with land started a series of land disputes centering on the homestead land and houses occupied by the *kamias* who claimed that the denial of ownership over such homesteads meant denial of being a *kamia* to the *maliks.*

The domination of the *maliks*, however, was resisted by the ducking and dodging of the *kamias*. Says Chandrade Das an old peasant of Ravidas caste of Karmoni village who was both a *kamia* and *malik* in letter half of his life:

> *During the existence kamiauti system there used to be a lot flights kamias off to far-flung villages of Gaya. To control the kamias flight goraits and baraits were recruited by the maliks to keep an eye on such movements*[74]

These acts were, however, not innocent movements. Scott in his study of Malayasian peasants states that resistance is written in the pages of everyday life. He holds that while the poor may view the constraints that they face as inevitable and internalize them, they may also have a strong sense that the status quo is unjust. Scott argues that it is important to distinguish what they view as just from what they view as possible. This sense of injustice, coupled with a recognition of the inevitability of fate, results in subtle, 'everyday' forms of resistance that serve to moderate the authority of dominant groups without completely overturning the system.[75]*This implies that mobility is enmeshed with power in the kamias small moves*. The kamias resisted the exercise of power of *maliks* through flights to far-flung villages.

[73]Ibid, p.29.
[74] Field Notes
[75] Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: New York University Press, p.46.

Landlessness to Mobility: Marginality Revisited

The expansion of capitalist-agrarian relations and continuing population pressure helped to dissolve the long-standing kamiauti ties into short wage labor contracts. Dilution of the *kamiauti* ties stripped of them whatever cultivable land Musahars and Bhuinyas enjoyed. As a landless community they were left to the vagaries of economic forces to be sucked into the whirlpool of circulation of commodities in the modern economy. This section briefly discusses the transformation *kamias* to landless agricultural labourers in a capitalist economy and its concomitant association with politics.

Collective Mobility: From Avoidance to Confrontation

Post-colonial Bihar presented altogether a different dynamic which again conditioned the nature of mobility vis-à-vis the marginality of the Bhuinyas and Musahars. In the second half of the 1960s Bihar confronted with a population growth in general as well as among the Bhuinyas and Musahars. Landlessness coupled with heightened caste tension Bihar witnessed violent clashes between the landed class and landless *kamias*. As a result Bhuinyas and Musahars have been pushed into fairly marginal ecological zones such as infertile uplands, pines and dried up ahars which now forms their prime site of settlement.

Groups and individuals in South Asia have often demonstrated their dissatisfactions with the social order through 'acts of avoidance', most dramatically by fleeing their plantation, villages, or cities en masse. But sometimes 'acts of avoidance' has been punctured by 'acts of confrontation' when the ongoing negotiations breaks down as a result of failure of the defensive and everyday retributive mechanisms developed by subordinate groups to contain the demands to the excess of dominant.[76] This has been true of post-Independent Bihar especially the present district of Gaya. Azad Bigha, Antu Bigha and Shanti Nagar, some 15 kms from the district headquarter of Gaya form three settlement sites situated on the barren hillocks which came into being as a result of the collective flight of *kamias* from the parent village Bandhua in the

[76]Adas, Michael. 1981. "From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Pre-Colonial and Colonial South-East Asia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxii, pp. 203.

mid-sixties due to violent clashes with upper caste landlords. Squatting beside me taking a break from his daily job of stone cutting Phulu Manjhi pointing towards the barren hills poignantly says:

> *hese hills have given us freedom. Freedom from the exploitation and sufferings at the hands of the upper caste maliks in our parental village of Bandhua. I was some 15 years old when we came here. My father was the kamiya of a Rajput malik …some of us had lands there also. We had to not only bear the verbal abuse but also physical torture sometimes..it was quite suffocating there. There was no space for us… sometimes our domestic animals used to enter the maliks fields which was a constant source of quarrel… enough is enough… once some kamiays had interlocution in the field with an upper caste maliks….all the kamias present in the field regrouped and beat him black and blue with lathis…my father who was instrumental in this announced a meeting of the Bhuinyas of Bandhua at night….looking at the grave consequences of the incident all of us decided to leave Bandhua and seek refuge in these reclusive foothills…my father Aklu Manjhi named our village Azad Bigha since it gave us freedom from the bondage that we had in our parental village Bandhua.*[77]

Like Azad Bigha, the neighbouring settlement site of Antu Bigha and Shanti Nagar share the same history of displacement of Bhuinyas from Bandhua. Raja Manjhi of Shanti Nagar ruefully remembering the days-

> *We had to brave 48 hours of incessant rains standing in the foothills when we came here after the dispute with upper caste maliks of Bandhua… employees of the forest and railway department lodged legal complaints against us… many a times our houses erected by the villagers were razed.. the upper caste maliks of Bandhua together with the government officials tried their best. Though we did not have money we raised money from all of us to fight the case in court and at last we won at last. But still we live our life in fear of eviction.*[78]

[77] Field Notes.
[78] ibid.

This exodus of the Bhuinyas to the marginal wastelands after violent confrontation with the upper caste landlords stripped them off whatever cultivable land they had enjoyed under the *kamiauti* system. The marginal land where most of them had settled down rules out any possibility of cultivation. This critical condition has again made them mobile, this time for work.

From Kamias to Landless Labourers: Work, Mobility and Marginality

Landlessness and the weak position of the land-poor Bhuinyas and Musahars vis-à-vis the rich upper caste landed class provided a strong source for momentum for migration for work. In the post-Independent period, Musahars and Bhuinyas have mostly become landless agricultural workers and a few of them work in offices and industry. According to 1981 census, out of the total population of Bihar 46.7% are workers. Among them 95.3 per cent are agricultural labourers and only 2.52 per cent are involved in cultivation and the remaining 2.14 per cent are in other services.

Rajesh Manjhi a 30 year old Bhuinya male of Barah village in Gaya district is busy in arranging for his next day journey to Bhadohi a place near Banaras to catch up with his seasonal employment as a worker in the carpet factory. Wearing worn out clothes one could read anxiety and pain in his face as he slowly responds "This time some 10-15 young boys are coming with me. Only the lower castes go outside to work mostly from the Bhuinyas from our *toli*." Rajesh has been working about twelve years in Bhadohi and in every trip groups of young boys joins him mostly from his own caste. It was with his elder brother with whom he went first time. He is back home during the harvesting time when he works as an agricultural worker in his village.

Rajesh Manjhi is not an exception; thousands like him now migrate in search of work. Mass migration among the Bhuinyas and Musahars for work to far-flung agriculturally rich state like Punjab and the urban centres of north has become a dominant mode of survival. The expansion of the informal sector outside the region has played a greater role in absorbing the labour surplus from areas like south Bihar. Deserted villages during lean agricultural season are a common scene that points out the scale of mass seasonal migration for work. Working in brick kilns (Einth Kholas) means migration of the whole family for 4-5 months. Beside seasonal

migration for work, day-to-day migration involving sweat labour like pulling of rickshaws, lifting weight in the neighbouring townships to supplement their daily wage is also common.[79]

Debt-bondage has been thriving on this new pattern of mobility and has been instrumental in trapping the Bhuinyas and Musahars into a vicious cycle. One finds an aptly described plot indicating the production and reproduction of marginality through debt-bondage involved in the migratory moves for work in Sinha's piece in entitled 'Travails of Migrant Labour':

> *Last month, Jiya Manjhi left his village, Madhubani, with two brothers and five of his fellow villagers. All of them leaving their family behind in distress, in the hope of finding employment. Jiya borrowed Rs. 200 from Ugrasen, a village trader to meet the travel expanses. Moti one of his companions, raised some money by selling his goat. They were on their way to Punjab- the land of hope. They had heard they could earn good wages there. Some people they knew in the neighbouring villages had managed to start paying their debts to the Mahajan. Rambaran, a labourer of Phenhara village had a hovel but now owns a bamboo-thatched house. With much dream Jiya Manjhi and his companions, eight men in all, hitch a ride on a lorry to the district town of Motihari from where they would board a Punjab-bound train.*[80]

Ever since the mass migration has become a common phenomenon, Bihar has witnessed the emergence of a new floating class- the 'labour contractor'. However, this new class has not necessarily been dominated by the upper caste. Even the lower caste has joined if it has been successfully accumulated wealth. The labour contractors arrange the labourer's employment, food, lodging and even medical expenses. This appears as a benign help which is reflected in Sitabia an old Bhuinin of Aganda Toli in the village of Karmoni when she says:

> *My husband (Prabhu Mondol) is most of the times away for work in contractual job like digging to lay telephone cables. In his absence it is the contractor from*

[79] ibid.
[80] Sinha, Umesh. 1982. "Travails of Migrant Labour", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 23rd, pp.1728.

Gaya town who lends money for buying medicine when my children and when I don't get wages for days together.[81]

Little does she know that all these expenses are deducted from her husband's wages. Those who get employment through a particular contractor have to work under his supervision. The contractor gets a commission from the farmers for arranging the labour, and the labourers too give the contractor a cut from their wages as payment for providing them employment.[82] Though a small number of marginal and small farmers of south Bihar posses some land, in most of the cases these have been the infertile wasteland donated during the Bhodan movement. These farmers with small landholding are fast sliding into the status of landless labourers since they cannot afford the necessities of cultivation with the increase in prices of agricultural inputs. Dramatic increase in the volume of migration has also been due to draught in the region causing new groups to slide into the category of landless labourers.

Migration for work to far away areas has not only exposed the male members of the Bhuinyas to the vagaries of exploitative market system but has also led to the increased feminization of workforces in the villages involving tremendous pain, which is like a running sore of constant separation, of increasing burden on women of new exploitative mechanisms. The Bhuinya who migrates becomes a new untouchable who is away from his traditional skill and is now in a place where cash income is the center of his activity. He is primarily involved in an activity that is highly competitive and integrated with the national and global markets. Not only is his social activity severely limited, even the dominant economic activity has not been able to take root in the social and cultural system. They have been victims of social and economic polarization where they cannot get integrated but also victims of dichotomy between economic and social activity.[83] .

Work, Wage and Marginality: Victims of Politics

The existing wage differential between the various districts in Bihar created a space for politics centering on the determinant of wages among the Bhuinya and Musahars. The Bhuinya and

[81] Field Notes.
[82] ibid.
[83] Sharma, Mukul. 2002. "The Untouchable Present: Everyday Life of the Musahars in North Bihar", in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices:Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains*, New Delhi: Deshkal Publication, p.28.

Musahars are traditionally not considered as agricultural labourers, since they carry only certain types of jobs like digging, cutting and levelling of land. Although they carry out the hardest forms of labour these are not acknowledged as forms of labour in the agricultural set up. Due this they receive the lowest wage among labourers.

One of the central points in the Naxal Movement that swapped most of the part of state of Bihar was the question of wages of agricultural labourers.[84] While the government repeatedly claimed that the machinery for payment of statutory minimum wages had been strengthened, labourers generally received less than the half of the minimum wages. If the labourers have asserted themselves, they became the victims of trigger-happy landlords. Around the early eighties, there had been a series of killings of labourers in Patna, Gaya, Aurangabad and other districts.[85] In an incident in the Gaini village in Aurangabad district a mob led by the landlords attacked a dalit *basti* killed at least seven people. The then Chief Minister attempted to justify the landlords' murderous attack by saying that it was in retaliation against an earlier attack by the agricultural labourers. An interesting fact in these acts was pitting of the middle-level peasantry against the landless agricultural labourers through caste politics by the big landlords.[86]

While the Naxal upsurge initially gained support of the landless agricultural labourers, especially in the districts of Gaya, Patna, Aurangabad, and old centres of Bholjpur belt districts like Bhojpur and Rohtas, their persistent indulgence in violent means and the state repression has weaned the support of the these section. There have been many incidents of forceful recruitment of agricultural labourers into Naxal wings. Terror and threat of the militant organizations have made them to shift their settlements sites again.

Popular cultural construction centering around mobility paint the Musahar and Bhuinyas as a 'free-will wonderer' or 'marooned community'. Development discourses often conflates these popular cultural constructions in depriving them of the fruits of welfare measures. This section

[84]EPW special correspondent. 1982. "Growing Agricultural Labourers' Movement", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 14, p.1307-8
[85]Sinha, Umesh. 1982. p.1728.
[86]EPW special correspondent. 1982.

looks at the exclusivist cultural construction around mobility and its connection with development discourses in producing further inequality.

Trope, Mobility and Marginality: The Other of Development

There are popular sayings among the landed class about the Bhuinyas and Musahars such as *Bhuinya Na to Man Mein Na to Van Mein* (the Bhuinya cannot be found neither in the forest nor in his thought), *Musahar Jaan Aur Kabutar Dhan* (the herd of Musahar labour are like the herd of pigeons are not expandable possessions as property). These popular sayings and edicts centering around the migratory behaviour of these communities paint them as subjects carrying out anthropological rituals in modern time. These sayings straitjacket the identity of Bhuinyas and especially the Musahars as a free-will wonderers. Popular cultural notion in the middle Gangetic plain points out that a Musahar never prefers to sleep under an open sky rather than a thatched roof. Nesfield in his first part of report on Musahars in Calcutta Review presents a story as how sleeping under a roof became a taboo among the community which goes by like this:

> *Desoi, the ancestors of Musheras, was one of the seven brothers. Hisr father Makara Darga Rai, king of Pipri, had had a large new thatch made to cover the house. All the brothers except Deosi, were present to assist at lifting the thatch. Owing to Deosi's absence, the thatch could not be raised but fell on them and was broken. When Deosi appeared and was reproached for his absence, he pleaded that he was engaged in hunting and seeking flesh, Mashera. His brothers were so angry that they expelled him saying 'Henceforth thou shalt be Mushera, and have no more communication with us'. Musheras thus banished, and condemned never to live under a thatch roof.*[87]

It is believed that the resent day Musahars are still carrying the burden on Deosi. Such naturalization of cultural beliefs homogenizes the identity of community into a 'savage rat-eater cum wonderer'. In contrast, our discussion in the earlier two sections provides enough support to the argument that historical circumstances have determined Musahars and Bhuinyas nature

[87]Nesfield, J.C.1888, pp.34.

of mobility. One wonders why there has been so much romanticization of Musahars and Bhuinyas exclusively as hunters and gatherers. Recent ethno-archaeological analysis of the Mesolithic settlement sites at the Belan valley suggests that Musahars were involved in hunting and gathering as well as agriculture, and they coexisted with different communities having different economic activities. They resumed hunting and gathering chiefly in the Ganga valley upon their migration since at that time the Ganga valley was thickly forested and rich in natural resources that required for a hunting and gathering as a way of life.[88]

Scott in his analysis of the South-East Asian history of interaction between the valley and the hill people states that it is perfectly clear that since at least the 14th century people have been slipping in and out of 'gypsiness' in huge numbers through intermarriage, sedentarization and through the state classification of people who are gypsies. He holds that categories of 'hill tribes' and 'valley peoples' are leaky vessels when one takes a long historical view since the reverse is true as well that people have been moving from the valleys to the hills. To make things more complicated there are intermediate statuses: people who have one foot, culturally and ecologically speaking in the hills and another foot in the valley. Thus, the very term 'hill tribes' and 'valley people' seem to loose much of their substance when examined closely for a longer period of time. Despite the constant exchange of population of across permeable membrane, there is an extraordinary, stable, durable civilization discourse about the hill and valley that treat each of these peoples as essentially different; one cultured the other barbaric, one refined the other primitive, one advanced and cosmopolitan the other backward and parochial. If we adopt a hill perspective, we get different pairs: one is free and autonomous and the other is bondage and subordinate; one is nominally as equal of others, the other is socially inferior; one is physically mobile and other is hammed in by official state institutions.[89]

The construction of valley as a civilizational project and hills as barbaric and illegible spaces points out why civilization has never climbed up the hills in historical discourses. A look at Scott's insightful analysis one feels that somewhere in the case of Bhuinyas and Musahars there has been much harping on the line in trying to construct their identity as a hunter and gatherer

[88]Ansari, Shahida(2004). "The Musahars: An Ethonoarchealogical Study", *The Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (April-June), pp.153-99.
[89]Scott, James. 2000. "Hill and the Valley People in South-east Asia..or.. Why the State is the Enemy of the People Who Move Around..or Why Civilization Can't Climb Hills?", Paper presented in the *Symposium: Development and Nation State*, St.Luis: WashingtonUniversity.

to depict their migratory behaviour as a free-will wonderer. Land is a superficial asset for a hunter-gatherer but for an agriculturalist, it is an intensive resource and for an industrialist it is chiefly a commodity. For greater period of Musahars life as a hunter and gatherer, they might have seen it as a superficial asset but under their long history of bondage and their subsequent association with sedentary agriculture must have produced at least some peasant values. Roy pointed out the Pawri Hill Bhuinyas as doing swiden agriculture whom he regarded as the original ancestors of Bhuinyas of south Bihar. Having said this I would try to point out how development measures have stumbled upon such static construction of their cultural identities.[90]

The Indira Awas Yojana, a government housing scheme that came as a development intervention among to provide shelter and housing the in the 90s for backward class communities mostly the landless agricultural labourers belonging to the category of scheduled caste. But the major question that arises here is do the Musahars possess the basic asset for constructing a house i.e. homestead land? A recent household survey by Planning Commission entitled 'Scheduled Communities: A social Devlopment profile of SC/ST's (Bihar, Jharkhand & W.B)' which was carried out across different castes in two districts of Bihar i.e. Patna and Saran on pattern of land ownership and asset clearly indicate a differentiation process at two levels : (a) between castes with land and agricultural assets (Chamar, Dusadh, Dhobi), and castes without these (Musahar and Chaupal); (b) and within castes: suggestive of the formation of a small elite group within the Scheduled Castes. The study holds that Musahar and Chaupal have neither land nor any agricultural assets.[91]

Leaving aside the landless Musahars and Bhuinyas that forms the largest chunk of people who received some form of community land under some petty land reforms especially in the district of Gaya still been able to build their houses. As one passes by the village karmoni located at the Gaya-Ranchi highway one finds the whole change in the landscape as one approaches the Bhuinya locality by the striking presence of dilapidate mud houses. In surrounding localities of other caste like the scheduled caste like Ravidas one across numerous pucca houses. Sitting

[90]Roy, S.C. 1935b.
[91]Planning Commission of India.2004.*Scheduled Communities: A Social Development Profile of SC/STs (Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal*), New Dehi.

outside her dilapidate house Jamuni Devi, a Bhuinin of Aganda Bhu *toli* in Karmoni village who a own a small plot of five *dicmil* of *ghewari* land she said:

> *This time because of draught there has been acute scarcity of hay. Because of this we have not been able to repair the roof of our house. I don't know what will happen to us in monsoon. Tthere is only house made that too given to a kamia of the sarpanch after serving him for long and greasing the hand of the contractor with. We all in our toli gharoed the B.D.O once but all our efforts were in vain. Where do we get the money to bribe?*[92]

In several occasion their mud-houses have been razed first in the pretext of building rooms under the scheme but as the funds weaned as time passed by they had never been constructed again making those people homeless.[93]

The whole scheme proved to be extremely counter productive. The notion of Musahars as a free-will wonderer has been so predominant among the development practitioners it slipped into easy excuses as '*these Musahar! They are not going to stay in one place even if you provide them with a house the very next day it will be deserted'.* However, culture is not a set of primordial phenomena permanently embedded within national or religious or other groups, but rather it is a set of contested attributes, constantly in flux, both shaping and being shaped by social and economic aspects of human interaction. To use Amartya Sen's language, culture is part of the set of capabilities that people have – the constraints, technologies, and framing devices that condition how decisions are made and coordinated across different actors. There is no presumption that these processes are inherently 'good', or inherently 'bad' for economic and social development. By reproducing inequality and discrimination, they can be exploitative, exclusionary and conflictual resulting in what Sen has called 'relational deprivation.[94] The case of Indira Awas Yojana clearly shows that wherever welfare measures conflate with the existing cultural and castist fault lines have generated greater group inequality and sense of deprivation.

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[92]Field Notes.
[93]Asarfi Sada.2002. "Striding On Difficult Paths of Life" in Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Kumar (eds.) *Asserting Voices:Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains*, New Delhi: Deshkal Publication.
[94]cited in Rao, Vijeyendra and Walton, Michael. . "Introduction" in *Culture and Public Action*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Conclusion:

An effort has been made in the study the phenomenon of mobility among the Bhuinyas and Musahars of middle Gangetic plain. It argues that mobility cannot be examined in isolation or through exclusive economic lens as the neo-classical approach tends to. Taking the case of Bhuinyas and Musahars we have seen that historically mobility among them culturally and socially constructed that bears the stamp of the middle Gangetic region. It has been determined by changing historical circumstances rather than being a uniform phenomenon across time and space. In our analysis of the phenomena of mobility we have tried to build up a staged connection between the recent phenomenon of mass labour migration, the flight of kamias under labour bondage, the post-Independent collective migration etc. We have emphasized that mobility among the Bhuinyas and Musahars needs to be examined through multiple vantage points –power, politics and culture to go beyond the empirical logic to unearth to highlight the fissures and faultline that it makes at edge of time and space.

Though, the present understanding of the phenomena debars from any concrete conclusion, nevertheless one can always draw few conclusions from the discussion under various sections. Firstly, historical circumstances have determined the nature and pattern of mobility of the Bhuinyas and Musahars as well as their marginalized position in the social structure of in south Bihar. We have seen that historical circumstances persisting in different period of time have conditioned Bhuinya and Musahar mobility and marginality. Secondly, their marginalized position in society has provided momentum for mobility in times where they find themselves further marginalized in the existing social structure. It implies that mobility is proceeds out of inequality and further establishes this inequality. Thirdly, existing power relations in the caste led society of south Bihar has influenced mobility pattern of the Bhuinyas and Musahars. At times they have used Mobility as an instrument of resisting power from above also. Fourthly, mobility has become a part and parcel of the given identity of the Bhuinyas and Musahars which is exclusively defined in cultural terms. We have seen that whenever development discourses

conflate with this narrow cultural construction of identity it has produced further deprivation among the Bhuinyas and Musahars.

Chapter 2

Culture, Development and the Cultural Capital of Farce

Notes on the Musahar Community in Bihar

Tell me about your most joyous moment so far.

-A Musahar is always happy, because he does not think too much. Whatever he thinks never happens, so what is the point [of thinking/worrying]?

Shri Chamaari Manjhi, 56 years

- Joy comes and goes, can't remember any. If I try to recall, only pain comes to mind.

Shri Mahender Manjhi, 32 years

Have you ever been surprised?

- I am yet to be pleasantly surprised.

Shri Raj Kumar Manjhi, 33 years

What does life mean for a Musahar and a non-Musahar?

- Lives are different. The Musahar lives differently and dies. The non-Musahar spends his life differently and dies.

Shri Mandan Manjhi, 65 years

What are your dreams?

- I dream of a home, a motor car… to see myself educated, with a decent job, a happy family, and not having to migrate from my village.

Shri Vijay Kumar, 22 years

Do you dream?

- A lot. Just the other day, I saw a beautiful girl coming out of the earth. Just when I was about to go inside the earth with her, someone threw a pebble at me. I woke up.

Shri Budhan Manjhi, 52 years

[Conversations with members of the Musahar community, Gaya]

In 1959, Oscar Lewis wrote a book called *Five Families: A Mexican Case Study in the Culture of Poverty*. The phrase spread like a *llamarada de petate'* — the flame of a straw mat'.[95]In the following decades, hardly any other single phrase received such attention in development studies. In the wake of the disenchantment with the Rostowian model of 'catching up with the West'[96] and the continuance of the Third World's economic dependence on the First World, 'the culture of poverty' in some ways marked the return of the colonial epistemology, as it were, where only the poor were to blame for their poverty. The apologists proffered laziness, insularity, unwillingness to take risk, and obsessive link with the past as explanatory keys to the lack of development at a desirable pace in the rest of the world. The phrase soon reached the pinnacle of notoriety, as the challenge from Third World thinkers like Edward Said, Aimié Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, inspired a whole generation of scholars in and from the Third World who persuasively brought out the 'cultural' façade of the First World in denying development to the Third World. Consequently there began a 'flight from culture' stemming at least partially from the white man's guilt.[97]

The 1990s witnessed the resurgence of the debate between culture and development, especially in the light of major institutions like the World Bank and the UNESCO paying a greater and far more sympathetic and positive attention to culture than what had been the case in the late 1960s and after. Having inherited the colonial mindset, almost as a habit, as it were, the national governments and minor development agencies, too, by and large had continued the syndrome of 'cultural deficit in development'. This was also the decade when pluralism or multi-culturalism came to the forefront of social science enquiry *and* political acumen. Heightened globalisation today has produced a situation where 'intellectual challenge on culture arises from the unprecedented cultural interaction… brought about by the transmission of images and texts in the blink of an eye.[98] All this has helped tremendously in settling the score in favour of 'social identities' against 'individuals as self-centred islands'.

We can frame the preceding argument in yet another way. Unlike 'developed/underdeveloped/developing' nations, there has never been a concept like 'developed/ underdeveloped/developing' communities either in general public discourse or in

[95] Lourdes Arizpe, 'The Intellectual History of Culture and Development Institutions', in Rao and Walton (eds.) *Culture and Public Action,* Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, pp.168-9. The essay presents a competent survey of literature on the debate about development and culture.
[96] W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto,* 1st edt. 1960, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
[97] Ron Dore, 'Culture Revisited', *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin,* 1976, 8:3.
[98] Arizpe (2004), pp181-182

development studies. And there are reasons for it. Apart from the obvious privileging of nation as the indicator in the hitherto development discourse, there is a cultural irritant here. In the former case, the nation is taken as an (arbitrary) amalgamation of individuals who are atomised, neutral gender, devoid of any class *and* caste locations. The latter, on the other hand, demands recasting the development discourse in cultural terms, where those who constitute the community are never just numbers, a multitude of atomised souls.

The debate about relationship between culture and development has acquired a new lease of life especially since the year 2000.[99] Traditionally, it has been a relationship of complaints. Economists, as a matter of course, have shown scant respect for culture in their discourses that have dominated development thoughts and advocacies. To them, culture is a repository of tradition, custom, habit, heritage, etc., and thus is primarily a matter of the past-ness or, the time that once was, while development courts future, concerns with goals, hopes, plans, and tenable measure of achievements. In this scheme of things, culture is often held as an impediment in the path of development: 'the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person of the future. Thus from the start, culture is opposed to development, as tradition is opposed to newness, and habit to calculation.'[100] This perception gets further strengthened as for most anthropologists, who primarily have been the advocates of culture, future stays outside their scholarly engagements. In the absence of anthropology of future, economics marches as the only legitimate science of the future. And, yet, it is primarily due to the lack of adequate deliverance on the part of economics that the debate about the relationship between culture and development has resurfaced today more strongly than ever before. Rao and Walton open the Preface of their work on the subject with the following sentiments: 'Some may find it incongruous that two economists who work for the World Bank are editing a book about culture. It reflects an increasing recognition of the centrality of cultural process to the reproduction of inequality and human ill-being among development policy makers and economists.'[101]

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[99] Two works, though quite different in exposition and emphasis, that can take the credit of re-energising the debate are: Harrison and Huntington (eds.), *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, New York: Basic Books, 2000;J.D. Wolfensohn, *Culture Counts: Financing, Resources and the Economics of Culture in Sustainable Development,* Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2000. The background of the renewed debate lies in the crumbling of 'sustainable development' as a viable model of progress and well-being in a large number of Asian, African and South American countries.

[100] Appadurai, 'The Capacity to Acquire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition', in Rao and Walton (eds.), Culture and Public Action, p.60. Much of the argument in this paragraph is based on this essay.

[101] Rao and Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action*, p.vii

The failure to deliver, to alleviate poverty of several kinds, can be distributed perhaps in equal measures to all the governments, the non-governmental organisations, and the policymakers and advocates. The recognition of the problem, that culture has not adequately received its due, is a welcome sign. It is precisely at this juncture, however, that the debate about culture, what is it, how exactly does it matter, when does it not, becomes more important than ever before. As Amartya Sen warns us in his distinguished essay 'How Does Culture Matter', a formulaic or oversimplified employment of culture may not yield the correct understanding about the relationship between culture and development.[102]

In the same volume, Arjun Appadurai seeks to 'recover, highlight, and foreground the place of the future in our understanding of culture'. As per his exposition, culture lends us 'the capacity to aspire'. No longer culture is reduced to being a thing of and from the past. It becomes a tool with which the future can be carved and chiselled. Mary Douglas pushes the argument further with a bold and well-argued declaration: 'Traditional Culture — Let's Hear No More About It'. She remarks:

> The idea of culture as a form of collective thinking is particularly awkward in economics, where thinking is essentially an individual function: rational behavior is axiomatically self-interested…. They [economists] were surprised that their intended beneficiaries met their benign offers of economic development with indifference; they met poor who did not want new opportunities, they resisted change. It was mystifying to see poor people not bothering to labour for wages once they had earned enough to pay their tax.[103]

This makes culture and the questions around it pivotal: What is culture? Can there be a distinct culture of Musahars, specific to the community? Can we differentiate it from what is referred to as dalit culture? Will it serve any analytical purpose? Has it been an impediment in their development? Is it changing? How do the changes impact the development of the community? How does one differentiate it from the larger cultural world, say, of the caste Hindu, in which

[102]In Rao and Walton (2004). Sen explains: 'there seems to be many supporters of the belief–held explicitly or by implication–that the fates of countries are effectively *sealed* by the nature of their respective cultures. This would be not only a heroic oversimplification, but it would also entail some assignment of hopelessness to countries that are seen as having the "wrong" kind of culture. This is not just politically and ethically repulsive, but more immediately, it is, I would argue, also epistemic nonsense' (p.38).

[103]In Rao and Walton (2004), pp.86-7. This holds true for the poor and the deprived in all parts of the world, including those who are yet to be included in the mainstream even for taxation purposes, if nothing else. The Musahars are a case in point, who are often held as epitome of non-possession, contentment, and thus not given to the culture of saving.

the Musahar is enmeshed? What will be the sources to study a community that has probably no written document older than a few decades?

In relation to development and culture, it is in order to underline two somewhat related points before we proceed. Even though there has been an increase in the sensitive treatment of culture in respect to drawing development maps for underdeveloped communities, more often than not, development itself is regarded as having no culture of its own; it is considered culture-neutral, a path of growth with no other non-developmental values whatsoever. As can be imagined, this has a direct bearing on the pronouncements of which culture is more or less amenable to development.

By and large, the debate about development and culture has failed to read the 'denial of development' also as a part of culture. If a community can be less equipped to appreciate a certain path of development due to its culture, it is worth examining if development is denied to some because of the dominant cultural norms and values. We shall illustrate this point fully in the last section of the essay. For now, let's turn to the Musahars.

II

The Known and the Unknown Musahar

What is your greatest desire?

- If I get 3 kilo gram of grain in wages, I will be very happy.

How long will you continue to be a *kamia* (bonded labourer)?

*- When I turn very old only then will I retire, no? Even in old age, the daughter-******* Rajput will not let me be'.*

Why don't you get out of the *Kamia system* (bondage)?

- Like an animal, I am tied up right now. It's like a jail. How will I get out of it? He would say, repay the loan. Now, this is duniyadaari*; how will I get out without paying?*

How much money do you owe him?

- At the time of my marriage, he had helped me with a calf worth Rs. 60, two goat- kids worth Rs. 15 each, a sari worth Rs. 35 and Rs. 75 in cash — total of Rs. 200. I have been in bondage ever since for those Rs. 200.

Nanku Manjhi, 49 years

Bachpan mein baba kailan gawanawa
Sainya kahe rope chala dhanawa
Rope hum geli jamindar ke badhariya
Jamindar papi nirkhai badaniya

[While young, father got me married
My husband says, let's go to plant paddy….
To plant paddy I go to the zamindar's field
Zamindar, the sinner, ogles at me]

- A folksong of Musahar women.

Musahars today are like dalit among dalits. Numbering nearly 1.1 million in Bihar, they share their origin with the Kol tribe of Chhotanagpur. They began to migrate to the paddy-growing plains of Bihar around the 12th century and have been the single largest source of agricultural labour in the region ever since. Of late they have started migrating to Punjab during the harvest season. A good number of them break stones in nearby quarries. Some work as daily wage labourers in the 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, which is around 25 per cent of the total population. The literacy rate among them is 1.1 per cent. Socially considered 'untouchables' today, Musahars entered the Hindu caste fold around 300 years ago. Even now the majority of Musahars live in makeshift huts or one-room mud-houses on lands they do not own.

To begin with, it appears that the community does not have a name of its own. Like many other non-Brahmin castes, the name is given, attached or rather imposed on it. Literally, 'Musahar' means 'one who eats rats'. Though there have been other opinions about how it originally began and what it actually meant, in the 'popular' worldview, 'the rat eater' is the notion that stays. That is because a good number of Musahars do eat rats, as do many other non-Brahmin castes. Post-harvest, Musahars seem to compete with the rats for the leftover/dropped grains in the field, such is the level of poverty among the community. Having done it for centuries, the community has honed its skill in catching rats like no other caste. But eating rats is by no means confined to them. What is important, however, is the stigma attached to the community due to this practise. In day-to-day discourses, often the untouchability

assigned to them is portrayed as if it is due to the practise of catching rats. In a different scenario, untouchability could be played out as a result of Musahars rearing pigs, rather than the other way round.

It is an irony that Musahars, also known as Bhuiyan, etymologically 'of the earth', have negligible landholding among them. The yearning for a homestead land is probably the strongest among all of them across the region. From being a hunter in the jungle who wandered at will, to becoming an unfree labour, from being a worshipper of nature to becoming an untouchable in the Hindu caste system, a Musahar appears to have undergone a complete ontological metamorphosis in the last seven centuries. Their inclusion into the caste fold appears to be a result of the constant need for a secured labour force in the paddy growing fields of the caste Hindus. They were included as untouchables; they got into the Hindu caste system by being kept outside the four varnas. To tighten the noose, as it were, Musahars were made bonded labourers in the southern parts of Bihar's paddy-growing regions after the massive expansion of agriculture in the 17th century, which required intensive labour but for a relatively shorter period of time during a harvest year, compared to north Bihar.[104] From mountains and hills to the plains of paddy fields, the fate of a Bhuiyan also appears to have a clear slope. Closer they came to the rice bowl, deeper they got into indignation and misery. Those settled in Bhagalpur and Monghyr regions worked as *ghatwals* and *tikaits,* collecting transit fees at the mouth of a valley or a pass under the local lords in17th and 18th centuries and enjoyed rich privileges. Into the plains, they were settled as untouchables and coerced into labour bondage.

Invariably unnoticed, the order of things is of great significance here. Were the Musahars made bonded labour first and then included into the caste fold as untouchables or the other way round? Historical enquiries, including Gyan Prakash's are not very clear on this point. It seems more logical that they were brought into the caste fold as untouchables first and made bonded labourers later, as in this way the system of domination gets doubly secured. Cultural-religious super-ordination legitimates and solidifies the system of bonded labour with minimum resistance or tends to make resistance a case of epistemic violence. At first glance, the point may appear unnecessarily laboured, but it begins to unravel its significance as we delve deeper into the reasons for the tenacity of the unfree labour system. Without pondering over this issue,

[104] Gyan Prakash's work *Bonded Histories: Geneologies of Labour Servitude in Colonial* India, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, remains the best reference on the subject till date.

the processes of domination becoming cultural common sense will not be grasped. Over a period of time, the intensity of bondage has changed, but it has certainly not disappeared, the laws and claims of the State notwithstanding.

A Musahar inherits and lives in a world that appears to have posed serious challenges to agencies of development and hope. From abject poverty to near zero literacy, from regular consumption of liquor to baffling complacency if they had enough for the day, from being amazingly benign to extremely unpredictable and short-tempered, from being docile, due to generations of bondage, to providing the backbone of the militant movements of the Ultra Left in the region, from child marriage to having 'many' children, from yearning for a home to possessing the nature of a wanderer, a Musahar is said to inhabit a world of contradictions and extremes. One must make a sense of this world in order to consider changing it. The world has to change for it is too inhuman for the Musahars. How do we do it?

Spending time with the Musahars, observing their quotidian routine and practices, one notices that they instantly live in all the three folds of time: past, present, and future. Perhaps we all live the same way in some measures but it is so strikingly clear in the case of the Musahars. Their present status of being *kamiya* could be the result of their forefathers being *kamiya,* thanks to some petty loans taken from the owner of the land they tilled.

Ek sau rupaiyaa karja delko
Hajar par leke nisaan
Anpadh jaan ke sab loot lelko
Mangani mein gelo jaan
[A hundred rupees loan he gave
After making the paper for a thousand
Because illiterate I was, he robbed all I had
In vain, the life was wasted]

— A Musahar folksong

They begin to carry the baggage of bondage right from birth. The children of a *kamiya* are initiated into bondage very early through *gorakhaai* (grazing and managing cattle) for the *malik* (the lord). Servitude thus becomes the first lesson of their lives. Any progress must mean the defiance of the *malik-kamiya* relations, which over a period of time turns into a cultural fact. For the Musahars, the future appears to hold not much meaning, certainly not much hope and joy. They are forced to live for the present. Here and now is all what they seem to have got.

After securing the next meal, if they can have a glass of liquor, their day is made. Then they can remember their legends, recite their ballads and sing and swing to the lilting tune of *jhoomars*. Like peasant women across cultures, a Musahar knows how to sing in pain. Typically, a Musahar does not have possessions with which he cannot move overnight. A few utensils, goats and pigs, clothes on their body, they have been forced to master the art of being bohemian. It has historically come handy in running away from the clutches of one *malik* to another. *'Musahar jan, kabootar dhan'* (counting on Musahar as secured labour and pigeons as property is foolish, both can take a flight!), after all has been a popular saying.[105]

But is non-possession an essential part of Musahar culture? In general, the overall peasant world has been prone to some kind of asceticism where things material have historically held much less value than what is the case among the landed and the propertied. And yet we have history dotted with peasant uprisings and rebellions against rent hikes and other hardships. It certainly requires an investigation whether this indeed is an automatic cultural choice of the have-nots or is it made into a virtue by those who have acquired and are worried about keeping their possessions intact? Looking at the current generation of Musahars, non-possession certainly does not appear to be a cherished value.

III

Taking Culture Seriously: The World in the Words of the Musahars

The people driving the development engines of society today are unaware of or insensitive to the historical-cultural aspects that shape the lives of Musahars. Often they come across as hopeless modernists, riling at the refusal of Musahars to change. They require recasting their meanings, modes and methods of change and development. Take the example of language and education. To identify a Musahar one just has to hear him/her speak, be it Magahi, Bhojpuri or Maithili. It has a very distinct intonation, preserved for centuries and handed down to the next generation almost like religion or culture. What is, and, what has been, the reason for maintaining a linguistic island, as it were? Why have the Black Americans continued to speak English in a different way than the non-Black population of the USA? Is it a refusal to complete

[105] Spare a thought for the originator of the saying. The upper class and caste location of the saying renders a political meaning to the Musahars' plight. Migration, or should one say forced dislocation, from the immediate site of exploitation as a political language is yet to be explored satisfactorily, especially in the case of Bihar. See a brief discussion on it in Arun Kumar, *Rethinking the Language of Politics: Kisans in Colonial Bihar,* Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2001.

assimilation in the mainstream? Is it an effort at colouring survival with one's own life experiences, with one's own hues? Defence mechanism in incessant adversity is an art. Who can tell that the linguistic device they adopt is not a cultural stratagem? Retaining a distinct tone could well be their way of rejecting the Brahmanic world that rejects them a birth, life and death of dignity. The realisation that they are born in debt and bondage, live in it and die in it is increasingly disconcerting to a Musahar. Even the most 'recalcitrant' and out-spoken of them, think of repaying the loan to get out of the *kamiya* system.[106]

As regards education, it is widely believed that the Musahars do not value it. But is it really true? Let's refer to some of their songs on the subject:

Nathiya bech bech piya ke padhawali

Maitikwa mein ho gelay phel

Soch mat kariha ji piya

[Sold the nose-ring to educate my hubby

He failed the matriculation exams

Oh dear husband, don't take it to heart.]

Or,

Naya eentwa paraibay, naya iskooliya uthaibay

Uje piya ke padhaibay, hirda khol ke

Sundar boliya bol ke na

[With new bricks, I'll build a new school

Where I will educate my hubby with all my efforts

Cajole him I will, come what may.]

Or,

Babuji poochhalan dil ke ra batiya

Hai hamar ankhiya mein neend nahin he

Nahin padhal beta hamar betiya

[Father asks me to open my heart

Why in my eyes there is no sleep

Ah, my son, my daughter, got no education.]

— Musahar folksongs

[106] All Musahars that we interviewed, consider it their duty to repay the loan, no matter at what exorbitant rate the moneylender has been calculating the interest, not withstanding even the illegality of the bondage labour system. Like the conversation with Nanku Manjhi, cited above, it is only just; after all, it is *duniyadari*.

There are scores of folksongs today about the importance of education, articulating the desire of a Musahar to go to school. They know its importance for their future, also because they now know that the lack of it was the reason why they became bonded labourers. The question that the second song raises should be the concern of the agents of development and change. Why is the woman talking about new bricks/structure, new school? Does it not ask us to think about the existing schools? There are now numerous autobiographies available on the subject. The everyday indignation inflicted on Dalit students in such schools, both by fellow caste Hindu students and teachers discourages them to continue education and demoralises them for ever.[107] Cleaning of the school, especially the toilets; running errands for the teachers, who are called 'masters', not without reasons; sitting apart from 'the rest' of the students; having to drink water from a separate pitcher; not allowed to say prayers from the stage, or to distribute *prasad*/offerings during the Saraswati Pooja; being subjected to harsher punishments in comparison to caste Hindu pupils for similar mistake are some of the commonplace experiences of dalit students. Quotidian humiliation of dalit students in general and Musahars in particular results in their intensive demoralisation. Today a dalit does not 'drop out' from school; s/he is 'dropped out'.

There is yet another element to consider here. That a hand-to-mouth community or family finds it hard to send a ward to school that could be used either as a help in daily chores or could add to the family income is a commonplace observation now. The significant point is that the dominant upper caste mentality ensures through its daily discrimination that a dalit remains a dalit no matter how educated s/he gets. The repercussion of this demoralising attitude is yet to be fully admitted and corrected. If Musahar sends his children to school, he does so despite these obstacles. Somewhere in their resolve to educate the young generation is a plain calculation that it indeed pays. But the conclusion of a developmentalist is invariably the other way round, that a Musahar does not value education.

How do we then know the Musahar and make a comprehensive sense of their being? How can we find them out of the heap of cultural stereotypes under which they are condemned to live? They do not open up to a stranger easily, have no written treatises, which could be studied or deconstructed; they have no history, in that sense. Their everyday life is a curious blend of past, present and future. They work as *kamiyas* and hope their children do not become

[107] Interview with Umesh Manjhi.

one. They propitiate their deity with the sacrifice of a fowl and dream of riding a motorbike. Several Musahar youth today identify the motorbike as a symbol of high status. Time has certainly changed since the days when a watch, a radio or a bicycle used to acquire that position. In any case, since the time the market began to dominate social life and commodities became symbols of status, dignity, prosperity and power, the lowered castes and classes have made a consistent effort to acquire them. Before this point in time, symbols associated with dignity, status and power could not have been shared, let alone bought. One was simply born with or without status, dignity, and power. In this sense, Musahar culture is not different from dalit culture as a whole. Both are coerced to live a life of denials.

To understand the cultural world Musahars inherit and which they are continuously changing, a typical questionnaire, say, to conduct a baseline survey, a routine way to go about 'introducing development measures', will most likely encounter baffling hieroglyphics. As researchers, we are afraid of raising the most basic questions in relation to 'the most pitiable Other', for we presume their incapability to answer them. We, the righteous students of Aristotle, Marx, Derrida and Foucault, keep the 'abstract' and 'philosophical' questions for ourselves. So, we seldom talk to Musahars about their dream, joy and sorrow. Instead, we query the lesser mortals, the descendents of Sabri, Tulsi Bir and Deena Bhadri, how many pigs do you have?

The drive to work in a non-agricultural set-up, to migrate to far away cities, to acquire education, the dream to ride a motorbike, are all signs of a changing culture as well. None of these could be directly attributed to what Musahars 'traditionally' inherited. This means that to fix the Musahar with a stereotypical image, which is indeed coloured by caste and class biases, will not help us know their perceptions of change and development. For instance, if Musahars inherit obedience and docility due to years of bondage, and consider it their duty to repay the loan, at times taken by their forefathers, today they also appear adamant in not allowing their next generation to get into bondage. A number of Musahars of Shri Rampur, Shanti Bigha, and Azad Bigha of Gaya districts express this view clearly and emphatically. In a couple of instances, they even fought with the *maliks* who were insistent on their children continuing the servitude. All those who continue as *kamiyas* may also not be doing this out of internalised servitude. Sampatti Manjhi explains 'How will I retire from this bondage? I will have to repay all that I have taken; there may be a need for litigation or even physical fight. Only if I am prepared for all that

will I retire, no? Even then there is no guarantee, as my future is not secure.'[108] This indicates the thinking and calculation that go in announcing the discontinuance of *kamiya*. It is understandable also because the cultural world in which Musahars live does not easily allow them the luxury of a miscalculated step. Getting out of the *kamiya* system is not only about repayment of the loan taken; it is also about rejecting, defying and rupturing a whole set of social relations which are woven around the system of bondage and untouchability. They must be sure in their minds to withstand the animosity that would follow the announcement of ending the bondage. As Ranjit Guha writes critiquing the alleged spontaneity or 'absent-mindedness' of peasants, a subaltern's insurgency or open defiance, or a rebellion, is very much a question of life and death for they know the consequences in case they fail. There can be nothing spontaneous about their uprising.[109]

The idea of development has to develop further and it can happen only with a critical cultural eye. Culture, as a structure of meanings, invites us to the basis of a range of issues, including their complex interrelationships and contradictions out of which a life acquires simplicity and beauty. In the case of Musahar, we can look at their myths and legends and folksongs, and their appropriations by them at different historical junctures.[110] We can do so with the following caveat that 'heroic simplifications' might lead us to 'epistemic nonsense'.

Most, if not all caste myths are located *in* the 'Larger tradition', *within* the Brahmanic worldview. They are symbolic of aspirations of its subscriber for a place of dignity and equality within the Hindu caste cosmology. Put differently, myths of the 'Little tradition' always are in dialogue and negotiation with the dominant, not just in response to or in denial of the dominant. The dialogue is not necessarily a marker of capitulation, ideological, intellectual or cultural. In fact, the dialogue becomes a site where power/ social relations are negotiated. Hence, it can potentially be a call for confrontation, ideological, intellectual and cultural, for it seeks reordering and restructuring.

Often, the historicity of a myth, or rather the lack of it, is made a reason to reject its significance. It is employed even more forcefully against legends, which is a totally misplaced practice. The cultural, and political, value of a myth or a legend does not rest in its capacity to come true to historical enquiries but in its ritualised reproduction and assigned meaning in the

[108] Field Notes.
[109] Ranjit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, p.9.
[110] A fuller discussion on the subject is undertaken in Chapter 4.

social arena of contest and negotiation. Myths are about historiologies and not history.[111] What Hocart writes in the context of stories pertaining to caste origins, also holds for myths and legends: 'Whether the story related a true incident or not does not concern us. We are not here trying to establish incidents but customs. Fiction is good evidence of custom, because it tells us how people think things ought to happen.[112] The judicious deployment of myths and legends provides lowered castes a stratagem, a subterfuge, to empowerment. In them is located the political economy of desire.

Looking at the Musahar myths, the first thing that becomes clear is that they all are indicative of Musahars' accepting their insertion into the Hindu caste fold. There is no myth about Musahars rejecting the caste system altogether and emphasising their independent autonomous 'tribal' identity, for instance. It could very well be strategic, as there seems to be no immediate escape from the caste tentacles. This has a crucial bearing on the cultural cosmos of the Musahar as well as their everyday fight against the caste system. In their myths, they project themselves being at par with the dominant Brahmans and Kshatriyas. The rejection of the caste system appears to come through in likening themselves with those who declared them untouchables. In any case, there is no historical evidence available at this stage to suggest that there was any inevitability either about their successful insertion into the caste fold or the acceptance of it.

Folksongs are possibly the most reliable unwritten chronicles of lives and experiences of those who do not document their histories. For the unprivileged and the subjugated, folksongs are like a special social grammar, which allows them to speak the obvious *and* the unspeakable at the same time. It represents the social matrix through the eyes of its practitioners. Folklorists and cultural anthropologists for centuries have treated folksongs as archives of human emotions. Historians and sociologists of late have begun to investigate folksongs for unearthing a political economy of desire.

Musahar folksongs must be studied in a similar manner. They are ritualised reproduction of sufferings *and* their acumen of survival. If there is utter despair in them there is also yearning for change. By reproducing, representing, and ritualising hardships and sorrow, people also seek to normalise pain. What John Berger says about stories is so apt for Musahar folksongs: they constitute 'daily history allowing the whole village to define itself, to become a

[111] See a distinguished work on the subject by Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London, 1961
[112] A. M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study*, London: Methuen and Co, 1950, p.50

living portrait of itself: a communal portrait, in that everybody is portrayed and everybody portrays… [I]t is constructed… out of words, spoken and remembered…. It is a continuous portrait; work on it never stops'.[113]

That Musahars sing songs about their life, past, present and future, is in itself a strong statement that the pain is surmountable, that they might not have been victorious in historical-social arena, but they are far from vanquished, that life is still to be celebrated. In songs where they ridicule and challenge the dominant, where they resist repression, one can witness their complete worldview and read a script of change and reordering. Performances of folksongs make them a living tradition also in the sense that the changing time and culture too are acknowledged and incorporated in them, as is evident from many Musahar songs about education or revolution, thanks to the impact of the Naxalite movements since the early 1970s.[114] For a community that can still count its members with a college degree on fingertips, delving deep into its oral resources is a necessity in order to know what the community thinks and desires and how the community has thought and what it has desired historically.

Folksongs are especially significant for the women of the community. Women historically, across cultures, have sung in pain. The full import of this phenomenon is still to be unravelled. The world of their suffering has been darker, the light of hope dimmer, for they had to bear the added burden of patriarchy. Most women songs often blur the distinction between everyday work and socio-religious rituals. For instance, there are songs which are sung both during replanting paddy-seedlings and a marriage. Musahar women singing *jhoomar* while doing agricultural labour or going through the ceremonies of a wedding, the intermingling of work and ritual, may not just be an accident in form and style of singing. That would be missing the point. As is fairly well recognised today, most work songs tend to alleviate the drudgery of work. Many Musahar women songs carry the tale of their sexual exploitation:

Bun laawe geli hum jamindar ke aganwa

Eke hathe jamindar papi taula hai majooriya

Dosar haathe toai aapan manwa

Saiyan kahe rope chala dhanawa

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[113] John Berger, *A Seventh Man: The Story of a Migrant Worker,* London: Penguin, 1975, p.9

[114] It is possible to find new folksongs articulating change, while older, status quoists, and thus contradictory songs, too surviving side by side. This may appear discouraging to a researcher but we should remember that at a given point of time in the arena of socio-cultural change breaks or departures may not be clean or total.

[To fetch my wages, I go to the zamindar's courtyard
Zamindar, the sinner, weighs the wages with one hand
And fondles himself with the other
My husband says, let's go to plant paddy….]

This, of course, should not lead us to believe that women of the community do not face or endorse patriarchal norms prevalent within the community. The sexual violence against her does not happen only outside, in the field of the zamindar or in his courtyard; the home is also far from being safe. Songs depicting sexual 'advancement' by *devar* (the younger brother of husband) and *jeth* (the elder brother of husband) abound.

Some of the songs mirror remarkable sensitivity and awareness of gender justice, an acknowledgment of changing times. Just to take a few examples, consider the following:

Jehi kokhe beta janme wohi kokhe betiya, dooranga neetiya
Kahe kaila more babuji, dooranga neetiya.
Beta je janamal to sohar badhaiya
Kahe maatam manawala hamaar beriya?
Beta ke padhe khatir dhan-daulatiya
Kahe chulhawa phukawala hamaar beriya!
[The same womb bore the son and the daughter
Why did you then discriminate, oh father
When the son was born you sang, you rejoiced
Why did you mourn when I was born?
To educate the son you had all the wealth
But in my fate came the chores and hearth.]
Or
Chhatawa lagawle baba janu milalan se kate dukhwa kahiaeen ho
Ek mutthi jagahiya baba janu detan ta bipati ganwaaii leti ho
[How much of my sorrow, I narrate to you, my father
A square inch of land from you and I would have endured it all.]

Some of the songs on education cited earlier underline the overall power of patriarchy. The woman wants her husband to have education for which she is willing to go that extra length, but

she does not talk about her own education. There are some very new songs in which women talk about their education, but the mark of *saaksharta abhiyan* (literacy mission) is too obvious to miss. They also look rather laboured.

Khelat rahli koodat rahli ropat rahli dhan
Anpadh hoke bakri charaili, suna ho Didi
Hamro ke sakshar banaibu ki na?
[I played, I enjoyed, I planted paddy
I grazed goats, because illiterate I was
Listen, o *Didi* (the female teacher)
Won't you make me literate too?]

Or

Muniya bhi padhatai, Chuniya bhi padhatai
Sange sange jaitai iskooliya ho rama
Naihara bhi taartai, sasura bhi taartai
Taari detai kul parivarwa ho rama
[Muniya will study, so will Chuniya
Together they will go to school
This way she will benefit her natal home and of her in-laws too
She will benefit all.]

This is a rather poorly conceived song, used by the State-run Literacy Mission Campaign, as the girl's education is supposed to be good for the families she is connected to, but tells us nothing of what *her* gains will be. The self of the woman is yet to be in the centre of such discourse. This reminds me of an anecdote from the field. To spread education among the dalits of the region, the *saaksharta abhiyan* decided to use dalit culture, specifically, the form of their *jhoomar* songs in its campaign. Consequently, it also roped in a few dalits who to sing literacy songs in *jhoomar* form and run the campaign. It continued for a number of years. What the overall impact was of this campaign is difficult to say, but one thing was startling. None of the singers doing the job of running the campaign sent even one member of their family to school. It was just another job

for them. Development and culture are indeed related, but how exactly can culture facilitate development? There are no simple answers.

IV

The Cultural Capital of Farce: The Story of Shri Rampur

The kamiya system continues forever. It is the fourth generation of this village that has been 'written into it'. We remain in its firm grip. Isn't it the fourth generation of Dahinwa? Faguni Manjhi was a kamiya, so was his son Jeevan Manjhi, and his son Amrika Manjhi, now, it is Dahinwa who is working as a kamiya.

- Shri Chamari Manjhi, Village: Shri Rampur, Block: Maanpur, Gaya

Shri Rampur is a new village, settled exclusively by Musahars in the 1950s. Twenty-odd households, all *kamiyas*, had moved from the nearby Amra, a Rajput-dominated village, and settled on common lands, known as *gairmajarua.* The Rajputs of Amra continue to have large landholdings. They have historically relied on the Musahars for agricultural labour. Today, the number of households living in Shri Rampur has reached to 80. Musahars running away from the village of their *maliks*' and starting a new hamlet of their own appears to be a common phenomenon in Gaya district. In the vicinity of Shri Rampur itself, there are villages like Azad Bigha and Shanti Bigha. The naming of their hamlets (*bighas* or *tolas*) is loaded with politico-cultural meanings. A Hamlet of Freedom, a Hamlet of Peace, a hamlet named after the lord Ram, a figure known for his sense of duty and justice, are strong statements suggesting the state of affairs in the previous settings and the kind of future Musahars want for themselves. Shri Rampur is unique, however, for the following reason.

Most of the 20 odd families that settled Shri Rampur were *kamiyas* of Shri Krishna Singh, popularly known as Siri Babu. Now, there were many *maliks* who had bonded labourers working for them even after Independence; several of them were in politics too. What makes this case unique and indeed appalling is that Siri Babu also happened to be the first chief minister of Bihar. Siri Babu was from Monghyr district, but he had acquired substantial landholding in the areas in and around Amra. His son, Shiv Shankar Singh, used to 'look after' the lands in Amra and elsewhere.[115] He too later became a member of the Legislative Assembly after the death of

[115] To 'look after' lands (*zameen ki dekhbhal karna*) is a very common expression. A tiller does not look after the land he tills, it seems. A sharecropper does not look after the land he rents, it appears. One who rents

his father.[116] Siri Babu, arguably the most powerful Congress-person than anyone else in his time, was also the premier of Bihar in the first Congress ministry in 1937. Known for his oratory skills, mobilisational capabilities, political acumen and sensitivity to the tilling and toiling masses right from the early days of his political career, as the first chief minister of the state, Siri Babu left a lot to be desired. As far as the *kamiyas* are concerned, he remains first and foremost a Bhumihar and a *malik*.[117]

The coming of the Independence and the formation of a free and democratic Indian nation-state symbolised hope for change. During the freedom movements, there was a strong upsurge of the downtrodden, peasants and the lower castes, which saw not much sense in prioritising the political (freedom first, everything else later) and campaigned to club political freedom from the British to the social, economic and cultural emancipation from the upper castes and landed classes. The struggles of dalits, led by Ambedkar, and of peasants, primarily under the Kisan Sabha, symbolised defiance to the Congress hegemony and its vision of the 'nation-to-be'. The realisation of *Swaraj* (self-rule) was articulated by many as a colossal opportunity to correct social ills, among others. It must have been an earth shattering realisation for the poor and dalits to see the continuation of earlier evils, drudgery and subordination. The development discourse today, especially as regards to the untouchables and the landless, must engage the question and the processes of nation formation in India. The question of the nature of the nation was far from resolved. In various efforts, the process continues till date and in this sense the nation is still in making. In the following pages we shall see how despite a change in the language of discourse, (*maliks* becoming *mantris*), not much has changed for the suffering millions, a *kamiya* remains a *kamiya.*

> *Shiv Shankar Babu Bandhua station par utarta tha. Wahan se usko char kamiya log palki mein utha ke lata tha. Uske liye taad ke badka-badka patta se pankha banawal jata tha.Din-raat humlog hawa karte the. Char ghudsawar hamesa taiyar rahta tha uske paas. Usko machchhar ekdam nahin lagna tha.Jab wo aata tha to do paisa char paisa sab ko lutata tha.Budha log ko aath aana bhi deta tha. Sabko taadi pilwakar jhoomar parwata tha raja ki tarah.*[Shiv Shankar Babu

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out, a *malik,* is the one who looks after the land. It basically means one who benefits the most from a farm that he 'owns' but does not work on it.

[116] Villagers also remember his other son 'Swaraj Babu' who opened Mica factories and remained a businessman all his life.

[117] In Shri Rampur, out of the six Musahars (above 50 years of age) we talked to, only one was aware that Siri Babu was the chief minister, indeed, the first chief minister of Bihar. For the rest, he was their *malik* who seldom showed up.

used to get off at Bandhua railway station.[118] From there he used to be carried in a palanquin by four *kamiyas*. Huge palm leaves used to be cut to fan him. Day and night we used to fan him. He used to have four of his guys on horses always ready for him. We had to see that mosquitoes didn't bite him. When he was here, he used to give two paisa-four paisa to all of us. The elderly among us sometimes got even eight annas. After giving us toddy to drink, like a king, he would ask us to sing *jhoomar* for him.]

Again, this passage could have been gone as a description of a feudal lord, a big zamindar who behaved like a king in his zamindari. The trouble is that it is the description of post-Independent India and the man in question is none other than the son of the chief minister of Bihar, before he himself became a 'people's representative' in the Assembly. The paraphernalia of a king, the continued practice of bonded labour system, the generosity of distributing small coins among the subject population must not have helped the image of a free and democratic India in the eyes of the untouchable bonded workers. Perhaps, the wind of great change, the winning of *Swaraj* had not even reached to the *kamiyas* of the region. After all, the majority remembers Siri Babu as its *malik* and not as the chief minister of a state of Independent India.

Through legislation zamindari was abolished in Bihar soon after Independence, in fact it was the first state to do so. Untouchability was declared criminal. Some steps were taken to settle *gairmajarua* lands with the landless dalits. A tenant working a piece of land for 12 consecutive years was entitled to own that piece of land. The pace might have been slow but there were sure signs of development. Or so the landless were told. The realm of law making appears to have its own autonomous space. Unimplemented, a progressive law achieves two things at once. It seeks to capture, nullify, and monopolise the discourse of change, and, second, it carries on with the benefit of non-progressive or regressive previous state of affairs, i.e. before passing the law. Introducing radical changes in the realm of law is recognition of the forces pressing for those changes. Their non-implementation in the actual social realm is to create a façade, a state of disillusion. Post-Independent Indian nation appears to be a classic account of this phenomenon. Redistribution of land was the most pressing need of the hour for a sustainable development of rural India. There were strong political and economic arguments

[118] Bandhua means bonded. To have it as a name of a place, a railway station and also a village, may not be incidental. Perhaps, it indicates the intensity and rampant nature of bonded labour system in the region.

in its favour. The people in power realised that. But they were also cultural beings and *that* could not be legislated out.

Perhaps as an acknowledgment of this non-performance or due to the fear of violent protests in case of continued non-performance, Vinoba Bhave started Bhoodan Andolan, where zamindars were requested to 'donate' land for redistribution among the landless. This was a measure to take the issue of change from the legal-legislative realm to the realm of feeling and compassion for the fellow being.

Siri Babu also donated over 60 acres (around 81 *bighas*) of land in an around Amra village. He himself might failed in the realm of law, but that was no deterrent in claiming a piece of political mileage that accrued from 'donating' land generously to the Bhoodan Yagya, as it was so loftily called. To be known as a messiah of the poor, after all, pays rich dividends in the electoral arena. Who was going to ask him why the laws were not implemented despite him being the supreme authority in the state, and, instead, the need for the shift from law to gift and charity. We cannot say that it makes no difference as long as the poor and the deprived got land. A charity, unlike law, helps one retain the cultural space of being a *mai-baap,* the benevolent guardian. In such a scheme of things, change or development is not allowed to become a question of right. It remains at the mercy, *daya-bhav,* of the dominant.

That the effort of Bhoodan too failed is a well-known story now. The reason once again was the same for which it was initiated. Redistribution of land required legal settlement, change in entitlement, tedious paper work. Those in the position to execute these duties were overwhelmingly upper caste people who knew the significance of owning land only too well. They realised that ownership of no matter how small a piece of land would empower the landless in an unprecedented way. As a result, the majority of land 'donated' for redistribution remains undistributed. Of the 21.98 acres of land acquired through this great donation drive, only 7.28 lakh (36.53 per cent) acres have been redistributed and the remaining 13.95 lakh acres (63.47 per cent) are still pending, thanks to numerous litigations.[119] This too may be a generous figure of redistribution, as many after reaping the dividends of 'donating to Bhoodan Yagya' took their land back, at times in the form of buy-back for a negligible price, mostly without any. The poor and the deprived returned the land (a) because they did not have the wherewithal to fight arduous court battles; (b) the cultural capital of the donor was too heavy. *'Ab okre jamine tha aa u deke le liya ta usme humlog ka kar sakte hain?'* [It was his land after all and he decided

[119] 'Join the *Padyatra* for Land Rights', a 2001 pamphlet of Ekta Parishad Bihar, Patna.

to take it back; now what can we do?']. This is a common refrain everywhere. As we can see, the discourse of rights is missing from this expression, which is indeed the victory of the charity paradigm.

What about the land donated by Siri Babu? He also did what others were doing: reclaimed the land and sold every inch of it to the Rajputs of Amra by 1963. The Musahars of Shri Rampur, who came from Amra, cannot forget this till date. What hurts them the most is, of course, not why the donated land was not settled with them (they were the *kamiyas* of Siri Babu) and sold, but that the land was not even offered to them for purchase, as a few of them could have bought some. There is a story repeated by all in Shri Rampur without any variation whatsoever. The story starts from the point when the first news of the donated land to be sold spread in the vicinity. Apparently, Shiv Shankar Singh, the son of Siri Babu, wanted the *raiyyats* (the cultivators, which included *kamiyas* too) to buy the land and pay in easy instalments (the benevolent *malik* that he was). The Rajputs of Amra had their eyes set on the land. They spread a whisper campaign amongst the *kamiyas*, now living in Shri Rampur, advising them not to buy it since it was a Bhoodan land. 'The land would be settled to all of you for free, don't pay any money for it' told the Rajputs of Amra, the villagers of Shri Rampur recall vividly. 'Some of us were even taken to Gaya Bhoodan office to enquire about the land by the Rajputs of Amra'. The same Rajputs informed Shiv Shankar Singh that the Musahars were getting 'political', that they visited Bhoodan office to find out about the redistribution of the donated land. This understandably irritated Shiv Shankar Singh and he decided to sell the land to the Rajputs of Amra. 'We were tricked, first by a Bhumihar, and then by Rajputs', says Mahesi Manjhi.

The story raises a series of questions related to development and culture in post-Independent India. Socio-political observers of the 1950s and 1960s are aware of the fact that Siri Babu was also famous for being the leader of Bhumihars in Bihar (as opposed to Anugraha Babu who was considered the leader of Rajputs or K.B. Sahay who was known as the leader of Kaysthas). In fact, the tenure of Siri Babu is often refereed to as 'Bhumihar Raj'. None other than Jay Prakash Narayan accused Siri Babu of casteism and nepotism and 'degrading the politics of the state'[120] The state, being the highest development agency, led by people who held extended zamindari in a true absentee landlord style, kept bondage labourers, indulged in the farce of

[120] In a series of exchanges between Siri Babu and Jay Prakash Narayan, the murky role of caste-based politics and patronage came out in the open in the early 1950s itself. Their letters were serialised by the daily *Searchlight* in 1959 and recently brought out in a collection by N.M.P. Srivastava, *1957JP and Shri Babu: Allegations and Counter Allegations,* Patna: NMPS, 2003.

donating land to Bhoodan and then selling the same land to the upper-caste rich peasants (who then became the new *maliks* and continue *kamiya* system till date) instead of distributing them to the untouchable landless bonded labourers who had served them for years does not sound like an encouraging script for change. It is indeed anybody's guess what kind of hope such state would have invoked among the deprived. As far as the Musahar community is concerned, coming down the hills, the induction into the caste and *kamiya* system, along with backbreaking labour and indignity, was all what stayed in their memory. The nation, *Swaraj*, brought hardly any respite for them:

Keta dukh sahiau ge maiya Bharath ge nagariya

Ann bina chhachhanau paranwa

[How much misery can I endure in this Bharat land?

The body craves for a morsel of grain.]

As Deoki Manjhi shares in a public meeting, before 1990 they had never cast their vote, 'Earlier we had no votes. No leader of any political party ever came to Musahar *toli* (hamlet). They all would return from the Rajput toli of Amra. At the time of the poll Musahars were not allowed to go to the polling booth. Rajputs would say, 'Go, your vote has been cast.' Of course, we need to read this in conjunction with the preceding paragraphs. A Musahar was not considered, and thus not allowed, to be a political individual. Siri Babu and Shiv Shankar Babu might have sold off all the land and left the region, but the *kamiya* system, untouchability, deprivation, and humiliation did not leave the Musahars. The reason lies in the robust cultural continuity. A section of the people continued to be seen through a cultural prism that had a fixed and very specific meaning of development for different people. It brings us to the final point of our argument.

Denial of development is also culture, indeed an essential part of caste-ridden Hindu society. As scholars have looked at the role of culture in facilitating development, one should also try and comprehend the denial of it to certain people and community in a given space and time. The denial is rooted in what development means to people, or, more specifically, who needs to develop and why, for development also alters power relations. When the cultural world of those put in the place of carrying out development is governed by caste ideology, which in turn rests of the premise on inequality, no genuine development is going to come about. Those who deny the fruits of state patronage or development to dalits not always think

that they are doing anything wrong. This is how things are supposed to be, a certain sense of culture informs them.

'There was a school in Amra, but our children were barred by the Rajputs of the village from attending it. Teachers themselves would beat up and chase Musahar kids away from the school', says Chamari Manjhi. 'After years of efforts, a transformer was set up in Amra. Poles were dug in till our village, Shri Rampur. We were set to get electricity. But the Rajputs of Amra uprooted the poles and dismantled the transformer that would have distributed power to us', informs Vijay Kumar. Why would they deny education and power to a village that still has about 20 Musahars working as *kamiyas* of the Rajputs of Amra is not rocket science. As Elie Wiesel notes in his address to a World Bank conference: 'What development and culture have in common is a sense of urgency when it comes to morality. Both need the ethical dimension for them to be fulfilled.'[121] Those at the helm of affairs in Bihar have squarely failed on this account. The nation-state has failed its marginalised millions.

'What will change in Shri Rampur in 20 years from now?' The question is greeted by a complete silence in a meeting of around 25 people. After some time, a man in his 30s says there will be at least 20 matriculates. 'But, what good will it do?' quips another. There are three matriculates in Shri Rampur now; two of them work in the nearby stone quarry as daily workers, the third one is waiting for a 'decent job opportunity'. Mahender Manjhi, who got dropped out in class eight, explains, 'Just education won't do; we need land and capital to progress *(khali sikchhaa se kaam nahin chalega, sath mein kheti aur poonji bhi chahiye)*.' Then someone who had just received his driver's licence, wanted to know if there is any provision for bank loan to a landless for he wants to buy an autorickshaw. 'I think, we should contest elections...there are a couple of MLAs and one MP from our caste now, many more should get direct political power,' adds another youth who has started teaching in the 'Korea School', also known as 'Free School'.[122]

The denial of development as a cultural attribute of the nation state that we have formed continues to fail its marginalised millions. The routine with which development schemes are run aground and the brazenness with which the concerned officials get away with it is astounding. Instances from the state of Bihar would suffice. The rural development minister of

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[121] 'Sustaining Culture and Creative Expression in Development', Proceedings of the Conference on Culture in Sustainable Development, 28-29 September 1998, Washington D.C.
[122] Sujata Academy, actually a 'pre-school' run on the funds from an organisation from South Korea.

the Centre has stopped the release of the first instalment (2005-06) of Bihar's share of the Indira Awas Yojana and Sampoorn Gramin Rozgar Yojana. The reason— last year's account under the Indira Awas Yojana has not been submitted, utilisation certificate for last year's expenditure has not been furnished *and* proposals for this year's work (2005-06) has not reached the Centre. Not less than 24 districts have faltered on one count or another; 7 districts submitted proposals with errors and 17 districts did not bother to send the proposal itself. The picture is equally dismal for the Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana. Twenty one districts have submitted proposals with errors. It would be interesting to note the nature of 'errors' in the proposals. According to a newspaper report, there are 'mistakes' in simple addition and subtraction that even a school student would be ashamed of.[123] If one recalled the total sum involved, the scale of 'negligence' would become visible: Rs. 1,400 crores were granted last year to the state under the Indira Awas Yojana while the amount under Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana was Rs. 4,400 crores. All the proposals are submitted with the signatures of development commissioners. Both the schemes are designed to serve the rural poor and unemployed; the first one is exclusively for dalits. What other conclusions can be drawn from this story? The commissioners, the concerned ministers at the state level, the members of Panchayat and Zila Parishad who provide the initial input to proposals that are finally sent to the Centre—none can ensure even that addition and subtraction are correct? Call it simple oversight or indifference to development, the net result is that development is denied; the process of empowering dalits and rural youth and unemployed is ruptured with unfailing regularity. We might not know what the right prescriptions are for development, but one thing looks certain. Those who deny development lock, stock, and barrel to dalits are not going to thrive on their cultural capital of farce forever.

[123] '*Bihar ke Dharre se Kendra Khafa*', *Hindustan* (Hindi), 3 June 2005, Patna. The figures quoted in this paragraph are taken from this report.

Chapter 3

Myth, Culture and Democracy

A challenge before Indian democracy today is to bring into its political and electoral discourse the marginalised communities living on the fringes of society, and providing them self-confidence and self-respect. The State-led Indian democracy, both knowingly and unknowingly, is making attempts to bring these communities into the electoral process. As a by-product, through its electoral discourses, the State is also playing a catalytic role in bringing awareness among these communities. In addition, these communities themselves are moulding their socio-cultural behaviour for attaining self-respect by using their myths and heroes, and through them, are giving a new meaning to the Indian democratic discourse. On the one hand, through the medium of electoral discourse, the marginalised communities are trying to grab a share in the power structure; on the other hand, by creating their own identities based on these cultural heroes, they are struggling to attain self-respect by enhancing their caste pride. Although the political parties who are creating these discourses consider them only as passive subjects, gradually these communities are emerging as active participants, increasing their role in the democratic struggle through their own cultural resources.

In recent times, culture is being increasingly used by many ethnic societies to intensify public action for alleviating poverty and reducing inequality (Rao and Walton, 2004: 4). Examples abound from across the world on how culture is being harnessed for positive social and economic transformation through their influence on the aspirations of the people, the coordination of collective action for building self-confidence, empowering the members of the community, and ultimately, in the socio-economic development of the community as a whole. Here, following Bourdieu (1990: 53), culture can be thought of as a set of durable principles, beliefs, taboos, rules, representations, rituals, and symbols that provides individuals with a sense of group identity and a consequent feeling of security and belonging. These are cultural, social and symbolic resources, or capital that can be drawn on by individuals and groups in order to maintain and enhance their position in the social order. Bourdieu distinguishes between social capital and cultural capital and the different influences the two have on inequality. Social capital emphasises on the social networks available to people to access and mobilise resources. It ends inequality, because the elites are able to access the networks more easily than the poor. Social capital is bequeathed to the future generations and when it becomes conceptualised, it

mingles with cultural capital and the durable principles guiding life practices and becomes institutionalised as cultural capital. This can then be accessed by others within the group and used as a form of symbolic violence, where dominant groups have the capacity to 'impose the means of comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised taken-for-granted forms' (Swartz, 2000: 89).

The poor have less influential social networks that greatly restrict their chances for upward social mobility. But now many marginalised communities are trying to transform their rich cultural capital into political and developmental capital for the betterment of the people of their community. This paper studies how the highly marginalised, untouchable Musahar community of north India is converting its cultural capital into an integral constituent of its identity discourse for participating in the democratic processes of the country, rather than preserving its culture as a sacred entity of the members of the community. The Musahars are reinterpreting the Brahminical symbols and myths to glorify their own social location in the Hindu caste hierarchy and also to subvert the dominance of the upper castes. The myths are being retold to enable their empowerment, their acquisition of social equality and for the development of their community. However, with the growing competition for votes, these myths and symbols are increasingly being used by political parties to woo the Musahars, blurring the line dividing culture and politics.

Musahars are a Scheduled Caste concentrated in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. According to the 1981 Census, there were 13,91,000 Musahars in Bihar, while in UP their number was 1,26,018. In Bihar, they are widely distributed in the districts of Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Hazaribagh, Santhal Pargana, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnea and Gaya. In UP they are found in the central and eastern parts of the state. Etymologically the caste derives its name from the word '*Musahar',* meaning flesh seeker or hunter (*masu* meaning flesh, *hera* meaning seeker). However, other interpret Musahar to mean rat-eaters (*musa* meaning rat). (Sharma, 2002: 20). There are other names too by which the tribe is known. In the districts of Oudh they are known by the name *Banmanush*. Other less common names are Bansatta, Siori, Deosiya (derived from the great ancestor Deosi), Banraj or king of the forest, and Bhuiyan (Nesfield, 1888: 3).

Today the Musahars are a backward and marginalised community whose members work as landless agricultural labourers. Very few are cultivators or work in industries and offices. According to the 1981 Census, 46.7 per cent of the Musahars belong to the labour class, out of

which 59.24 per cent were men and 33.73 per cent women. This labour class was further divided into those who worked on the land as labour (95.30 per cent) and those who were part of the farming community (2.52 per cent). The remaining 2.14 per cent belonged to other occupations (Sharma, 2002: 20)

The methodology followed in this study was to collect legends, ballads, folklores, oral narratives and popular memory using the semi-participatory method. The region covered was the Gangetic Plain of Bihar and adjoining regions of UP where the Musahars are concentrated. This included the district of Sultanpur in central UP, Mirzapur in eastern U P, some villages in Gaya and Aurangabad districts of central Bihar and some from the Darbhanga district of Mithila region of north Bihar. The cultural resources of the community were recorded in the form of the popular myths, rituals, festivals, fairs, and narratives about contemporary socio-political mobilisation. The texts of the ballads were collected from community singers and senior members who have rich memories of about community cultural resources. The myths in the collective psyche of the community were documented by semi-structured interviews of community members of different age groups.

Marginalities, Myths and Culture

There are three popular legends about the origin of the Musahars and the caste heroes with whom these legends are associated. The first legend traces the origin of Musahars to the Kol tribe of Cheru and to Deosi. The myth of Deosi is popular in the oral tradition of Musahars in the central and eastern U P and was recorded in Sultanpur and Mirzapur districts.[124] The story goes:

> At the fort of Pipri near the Ganges lived a great Cheru warrior and king named Makara Durga Rai. He was regarded as the chief by the princes of the neighbouring hill-forts and was paid revenue by the peasantry living on the banks of the Ganga. Some, 20 miles away on the northern bank of the Ganga there was another great warrior called Lorik who lived in a fort named Gaura. He was the chief of the Ahirs, or cowherds and owned herds of cattle. These two warriors were great friends, although it was not in keeping with the natural animosity between the two tribes of Cheru and Ahir, since one reared and worshipped cows while the other hunted and ate them. The link between the

[124]Field Notes.

two warriors was a pair of orphan twins Sanwar and Subchan, one of whom was reared by the mother of Durga Rai and other by the mother of Lorik.

But the friendship ended after a series of events leading to the death of the heads of both the houses. Lorik, who was very adventurous, left home soon after his marriage, to a place called Hardi, taking with him a woman whose husband was still alive. He left Sanwar to look after his herds of cattle. The mother of the woman with whom Lorik had eloped waited for 12 years but there was no news of Lorik. She then went to Makara and requested him to avenge this insult. She persuaded him to kill Sanwar and his wife to avenge the capture of her own daughter.

After some initial hesitation, since the act would incur the wrath of a brave warrior like Lorik, Makara agreed. Taking his bravest son Deosi with him, Makara and his army descended on Boha, where Sanwar was living, and attacked the palace. Sanwar, however, was not in the palace at the time of the attack. His watchmen were caught unaware and the keepers of the cows were defenceless. But when the cows were being driven towards Pipri, the cowherds attacked and repulsed Makara's army. Makara then made sacrifices to propitiate his goddess and made a second attack on Pipri, this time successfully bulling Sanwar and gaining control over the fort of Gaura.

When news reached Lorik, he devised a cunning strategy to avenge this insult. He sent a man, professing to be a deserter from the Lorik camp, to Pipri. The man offered to disclose the secrets of Lorik's plan and movement if he was admitted into the Cheru tribe. Winning the confidence of the Cheru tribesmen, he drugged the wine which he was sharing with them. At the dead of the night, when everyone was asleep, he slayed Makara, four of his sons who were present in the palace and all the inhabitants of the land. He then ploughed every house with donkeys to signify that they should remain deserted. Of the three remaining sons, two were staying with relatives while Deosi was out hunting.

When Deosi heard the news, he went to each of his two brothers. His brothers were angry at Deosi for failing to protect their father and told him that henceforth he should be called *'Musahar'*, the flesh-seeker or hunter, because of his love for hunting, and that he should live in the forest of Suhera. Deosi and

his wife moved to the forest and became the founders of the Musahars, also sometimes called Deosiya. Till the end of his life Deosi continued his attack on Ahirs and entreated his descendants to do the same. The traditional enmity between the Ahirs and Deosis continues even today. A proverb still current among the tribe is *'Jab tak jiwe Deosiya, Ahir na chaje gai'*.

To continue with the story, the first thing that Deosi did on entering the forest was to devise an instrument called *gahdala*, which has since become the insignia of the tribe. One day, Deosi accidentally met Lorik and killed him thus renewing the feud. Neither of Lorik's sons was permitted by their mother to go out and face Deosi. Deosi then marched towards Boha where Lorik's cattle were stalled. He was about to capture the cows as his father Makara had done before him, but Sanwar's son Sanwarjit prayed to his Sati mother on the mound where she had burnt herself alive after her husband's death. The prayer was heard and Deosi was slain by an arrow from Sanwarjit's bow.

This legend throws light on how the Musahars are a breakaway group of the Cheru tribe with a leader of their own. The fort at Pipri, which has since been rebuilt, stands at the foot of the Mirzapur ranges. Close to it, from the east flows the river Barhi, which meets the river Satesgarh that flows from the west. From the point of confluence the two rivers flow northward in a single stream called Jargo and join the Ganga. At the confluence of the two rivers is an image, carved out of a natural monolith, of the goddess Behiya to whom Makara sacrificed five and then seven boys, and who was the guardian goddess of Pipri. According to the Musahar legend, she was originally the guardian goddess of Sanwar, but when Makara, the Cheru, won her over to his side by the sacrifice of 12 boys, and when Sanwar had been slain, goddess Behiya left Gaura, the stronghold of the Ahirs, and took up residence in Pipri under the patronage of the Cherus. The legend further relates that when Pipri was captured by Lorik and ploughed up by donkeys, Behiya fled the fort to escape the indignity and posted herself midstream at the confluence of the two rivers, where she still stands. The natives living about Pipri now call her by the name of Nikundi.

Pipri is now uninhabited; it has been so ever since it was ploughed by Lorik, the Ahir. No Ahir or other Hindu will live in it, but to the Musahars it is a sacred place. Every Musahar would like to see Pipri before he dies and would like to have his corpse thrown into the rivers surrounding the fort. The tribe secretly meets here at midnight. The Musahars' attempts to live

there have been thwarted by the Ahirs of the neighbourhood who come together to expel them and thus keep the tradition alive. This story of the Cheru legend is current only among the people whom it concerns and has never been tampered with by the Brahmins.

Another popular myth is that of Savari, related to the Hindu mythological epic *Ramayana*. The Musahars believe that Savari is their only ancestor and that they have descended from her. According to the story in the *Ramayana*, Savari, a low caste girl, waited patiently for many years for Lord Rama to visit her cottage. When Rama reached the cottage with Laxman and Sita, she offered him half-eaten wild berries, which he accepted, although she was of a low caste.[125]

Another legend of Savari, imported with considerable embellishments into the *Shiva Puran*, was collected during the colonial period by an English anthropologist (Nesfield, 1888: 15).

Arjun, one of the five heroes of the Mahabharata, had retired temporarily into the forest to meditate on the 108 names of Shiva. In order to test his devotion, Shiva caused a wild boar to run in front of him. But Arjun, despite his passion for hunting wild game, didn't fall to the temptation and completed his meditation before seizing his bow and arrow. The boar led him on through the bushes till he reached a hermit's hut, where Shiva and Parvati had already seated themselves in bodily form, in the guise of a Savar and Savari (a man and woman of the tribe so named). Shiva held a *gahdala* in his hand and Parvati supported a basket on her head.

Arjun and Savar both started pursuing the boar. When the animal had been killed, a dispute arose as to who had the right to claim it. It was agreed that the matter should be decided next day by a wrestling match, a common mode of settling disputes. Arjun wrestled with Shiva till sundown, when he pleaded that he had to complete evening prayer. Mid-way through the meditation, Arjun realised that it was not an ordinary Savar with whom he was wrestling but the divine himself. Returning to the hermit's hut, he threw himself at the feet of Shiva received his blessing and returned to his four brothers.

At the hermitage where these incidents took place, was a young girl of unknown parentage who used to wait on the hermit and prepare his food. When the maiden returned from her bath, she found Shiva and Parvati in the guise of a Savar and Savari. As soon as the lord's eyes fell on her she became pregnant and gave birth to pair of twins, one male and one female. The hermit, judging from the harsh features and dark complexion of the babies, accused her of unchastity and banished her from the hermitage. From the two children sprang the

[125] Ramraj Manjhi, age 38, village Manjhauli, block Wazirganj, district Gaya.

Musahar tribe, the men of whom are still noted for using the *gahdala*, and the women for carrying baskets.

Among the Musahars of the present day, the female ancestor Savari is much less remembered than the male Deosi, or the eponymous Banamanush. Yet Savari is not wholly forgotten. In marriage ceremonies in some places, a *dhoti* or a piece of cloth is put aside in her honour, and sweetmeats offered to her. Sometimes she is identified with Banaspati or Bansatti, the guardian goddess of the tribe, and believed to be the supreme power in the universe. Musahars will sometimes say that they are the descendants of the Savari tribe, but the tribe itself has descended from the great goddess mother, Bansatti.

Myth popular among the Musahars of north Bihar is that of Dina Bhadri.[126]The myth is based on the ballad of Dina Bhadri. The ballad is a common folk performance in the region. Although less popular among the younger generation, whenever it is performed everyone gathers in silence to listen to it. This ballad tells about many wars as many as 52 said a performer. It narrates the story of Dina and Bhadri, two brave warriors who came to the world to protect the poor labourers from the exploitation of rich landlords. Bhadri and his younger brother Dina were born in Jogiya Nagar (presently a small village in Ladaniya block of north-east part of Madhubani district in Bihar). Both the brothers were *Bir* (brave men) and in their short life they fought many wars and finally sacrificed their lives for the sake of the community. They are revered by the community members and today are referred to as Dada and Baba, to signify that the Musahars consider them their ancestors.

From the very beginning the two brothers had to foght for their life, so much so that by the age of 12 they had become great warriors. They were not labourers but hunters who hunted in the forest of Raj Belka and fought for the rights of bonded labourers working for the feudal landlords. Their first major struggle was against Dhamiya Kanaksingh, the landlord of Ruchauli kingdom. Their second major struggle was against Kangaliya Dusadh, a contractor who forced 900 Musahars to work as labourers. In another case, Goddess Bageshwari appeared in the dreams of Dina and Bhadri and told them that a lot of *julm andhakar* (injustice) was going on at Lari Larwar, where a pond was being dug with the help of Musahars who have always been skilled in the art of digging. Two men, Hansraj and Bansraj were trying to decimate the Musahars by burying them since they wanted to do the digging themselves and earn the money that would have gone to the Musahars. Bageshwari told Dina and Bhadri to go to Lari Larwar in

[126]Field Notes.

the guise of peasants and free the oppressed labourers. The two dutifully rescued the labourers by killing Hansraj and Bansraj.

The battlefields where Dina Bhadri fought are in the region called Tiruhat or Mithilanchal in north Bihar. The last battle, in which Dina and Bhadri lost their lives, was in a place called Katiya Khap, now in the Satpadi district of Nepal. At this place stands a temple of Dina Bhadri. The story goes that when Dina and Bhadri lost their lives, there supporters ran away from Katiya Khap fearing the landlord for whom Dhamiya Kanaksingh worked. The last rites of Dina and Bhadri were performed by some cattle herders (gwalas or yadavs).

Myths, Dissent and Developmental Discourse

The legends, ballads and popular narratives detailed above were collected from folk singers and members of the Musahar community who can be said to articulate the aspirations and desires of the community as a whole. Their narratives can thus be said to represent the collective psyche of all the Musahars.The legends are not common among all the Musahars but are localised in particular regions.In the region adjoining Sultanpur in central UP, and Pipri and Mirzapur in east UP, the myth of Deosi is popular while in Gaya and Magadh regions of central Bihar the myth of Savari is popular. Among the Musahars of Darbhanga and Mithila in north Bihar the myth of Dina Bhadri is popularly narrated and sung, and the brothers are worshipped. The narratives of these three myths and the caste heroes associated with them have now become effective mobilisational instruments for the members of the community. If read between the lines, the myths reflect the aspirations of the Musahars to attain equality in society, and the narration of these stories helps them to become empowered and self-confident. It also helps them to grab a share in the development discourse of the nation. The potential of these myths for mobilising the community as a vote bank has also been recognised by different political parties, who are using the fairs and festivals organised by the community members in honour of the caste heroes, as platforms for disseminating their electoral message.

For the weak, powerless and vulnerable Musahars of today who are forced to lead a hand-to-mouth existence, the telling of the Deosi myth is means of raising their self-esteem. Through the myth of Deosi the Musahars try to emphasise firstly, that they too were once an economically and socially powerful community who ruled over a large kingdom. Secondly, they were highly knowledgeable about the resources found in forests, and adept at converting these resources into various products for them to subsist on. Thirdly, they were skilled in the use of a

special weapon called *gahdala* that they themselves had created and only they knew how to use. Lastly, they were a brave warring community who fought the Yadavs courageously using weapons and instruments made from forest resources. They also try to reiterate that they are at par with the Yadavs—now a powerful middle caste—and not an untouchable community as is perceived by the upper castes.

Through this legend Musahars highlight the fact that the Yadavs and the Musahars were friends who later became rivals. In the story Deosi is projected as a man who spent his life attacking the cows of the Yadavs after they had dispossessed the Musahars of their land and property. Thus, the myth of Deosi is an effective one for granting self-confidence and self-respect to the Musahar community, helping to remind them that they once enjoyed a decent standing on the social ladder.

The myth of Savari which is popular in central Bihar is a minor subplot in the *Ramayana*, but the Musahars are using it to glorify their caste, raise themselves in the social hierarchy and develop self-confidence. As a part of this desire, celebrations are organised in Savari's honour, memorials raised and temples dedicated. The first temple was constructed in village Shankarbigha in the Magadh region, atop a small mound. Another temple was installed in Gharaiya; the temple at Sitamarhi has two women priests called Kaushalya Devi and Radho Devi, who belong to the Kabir Panthi sect. These temples are visited regularly by the Musahars who pray there with a great deal of religiosity. Although the Musahars are meat eaters, on the day of the worship they eat vegetarian food. This is a conscious effort reiterate that like the upper castes perform Durga Puja, the Musahars perform Savari Puja.

Organising fairs is another way by which Musahars of central Bihar commemorate the memory of Savari. In these fairs, statues showing her feeding wild berries to Lord Rama and Laxman are installed. In many places, the statue is also taken around the village so that the other castes understand that Musahar (also called Bhuiya in that region) is a touchable caste from whose hands Lord Rama ate berries, and that they also have *rishis* and *munis.* That the myth also had the potential of being used as a vehicle of development was authenticated in 1988 when an organisation called Gram Nirman Kendra was formed in the region of Gaya by some members of the community who felt that while all other castes had progressed, the Musahars had been left behind in the march towards development. They used the myth as a platform to consolidate community members. As a part of this objective, they started organising a fair near the temple. The first fair, held in Kowamath in Wajirganj block was attended by some

6,000 people of the community. In 1989, fairs were held in the villages of Garaia, Bhindas and Bagadha, which were attended by approximately 3,000 people each.[127] An analysis of the myth of Dina Bhadri shows that the two brothers struggled on behalf of the poor Musahars—who were being forced to work as bonded labourers—to protect their rights and empower them. The Musahars claim that just as Rama and Laxman came to the earth to vanquish evil, Dina and Bhadri were incarnated in Jogia Jajar when its people were suffering. The brothers even had the courage to challenge divine forces like Indra and Bageshwari Devi, who were supporting the feudal lords and their gatemen. The reference to the gatemen is important since they were the first barriers Dina and Bhadri had to break when they wanted to meet the feudal lords.

The legend of Dina Bhadri is effective for the mobilisation of the marginalised Musahar community because of its strong anti feudal, anti bondage and pro-peasant rights characteristics. When Musahars remember this myth they also remember the exploitation that they had undergone in the past in the hands of the feudal landlords.

The legend of Dina Bhadri is kept alive in various ways in the memory of the Musahars. Outside every Musahari *tol* and sometimes even in front of a Musahari house one can see a square mud platform, about 3 to 5 feet wide, with two bamboo sticks about 30 feet long inserted into it. Called the *Dina Bhadri Asthan,* the two sticks symbolise the two great warriors.[128] Temples have also been built in their honour in Musahar villages. It is interesting to note that the first temple was built by the Yadavs in Katiya Khap, presently in the Satpadi district of Nepal. This was the site where Dina and Bhadri lost their lives fighting against the ruling landlord. Since all the Musahars supporting the brothers fled the battlefield on their death, the last rites were performed by some cattle herders who then erected a temple in their honour. Every year in the month of Asadh (August-September), a fair is held here and the ballad of Dina Bhadri is sung for five nights. The songs are in Maithili but the stories are narrated in a mixture of Hindi and Maithili. Three forms are used in the ballad. The first is the Marauti which is used for singing the songs narrating the life and wars of Dina Bhadri. The second is the Jagar, which is the narration of their life in the form of a story or *gatha*. The third is the Jhoomar, which is used at regular intervals to change the mood. Marauti and Jagar have the same content, but there is a difference in their form and style. Jhoomar, on the other hand, is sung to a fast beat and tells the stories of gods and goddesses, rivers, mountains and other natural entities. These have

[127] Ramraj Manjhi.
[128] Field Notes.

names like Jhoomar of Kamla, Jhoomar of Kosi. Alongside, theatres to depict the story of Dina Bhadri, especially highlighting their valour and heroism, are also performed to reinforce their memory among the Musahar community.

The myth of Dina Bhadri is thus not merely a source of entertainment for the Musahars. Rather, it is a reflection of their culture. By linking it to their festivals, rituals, ballads and other forms of folklore and folk culture, this myth is kept alive. This recurrence gradually converts the myth into a collective memory of the community. Additionally, the reference to real places where the incidents supposedly took place helps the marginalised communities give concrete form to these memories by erecting memorials, statues, temples and organising festivals and fairs at those sites. The telling and retelling of the myth of Dina Bhadri, who are considered to be the incarnations of Rama and Laxman, and the myth of Savari, who is a minor character in the *Ramayana*, lead the community to acquire social confidence. This forms a constitutive element of their identity formation in the contemporary social scenario of north Indian society. In the changing contexts the form and content of these myths also gradually gets constructed and reconstructed in a way that suits the collective aspirations of the community. It is often presumed that little traditions aspire to merge with the great traditions. But we often forget that there is another process in which marginalised communities use the symbols of the 'great traditions' against their social locations, values and norms defined by the 'great traditions' themselves. For example, by imagining Dina Bhadri to be the incarnations of Rama and Laxman, the marginalised Musahars could prove that their community too can produce brave men who fight for the liberation of the oppressed people, just as Rama and Laxman did by killing Ravana. On the other hand, through the myth of Savari who fed half-eaten berries to Rama and Laxman in spite of being an untouchable, the Musahars try to liberate their community members from the stigma of untouchability and grant them social respect.

Thus, the telling and retelling of these myths allows the Musahars to emancipate themselves from their marginalised position by glorifying the marginal space they have been pushed into by the upper castes. An example of this can be seen in their act of taking out a procession of the statue of Savari, to prove to the upper castes that Lord Rama himself declared the Musahars as social equals by eating half-eaten berries from the hands of a person labelled an untouchable by the upper castes. The building of *chauras* (small mounds) dedicated to Dina Bhadri is also an outcome of this desire. It is commonly believed that the role of cultural capital is to provide a means to maintain the high position of those at the upper end, whereas for those

at the lower end it can limit aspirations, create discrimination, and block mobility. The Musahars, however, are using their cultural resources to subvert the Brahminical culture in their struggle for equality and emancipation. Through these acts they are also trying to prove that their present condition is due to the conspiracy of the upper castes, as they were once socially equal to the Brahmins. And even rulers. Rather than narrating these myths as mere stories, the Musahars are creating as socio-cultural and political discourses guided by contemporary socio, cultural and political situation. This goes a long way in helping the community to acquire self-confidence. This confidence further helps in building their identity, giving them the feeling of equality with other castes, gaining social respect, and empowering them to compete for a share in the development projects launched by the State.

The youth of the community, who are keener than the older generation to carve a future for themselves and for their community, are even more aware of the legends, myths and caste heroes and their potential as tools for development, upward mobility and acquiring social confidence. They are involved in exploring the cultural resources of the community and recreating them in keeping with the contemporary needs. The texts of the myths and legends about the caste heroes of the Musahar community presented here were collected from the younger generation. This does not imply that the older generation is not involved in this process. They usually play the role of mentors and guides to provide direction to the youth and to fill the gaps in the knowledge base of the youth about the cultural resources of the community.

Democratic Pressures, Social Acceptance and Politics

With the increasing pressure of the democratic process, there is an urge among the smaller communities to become a part of this process. Alongside, the political parties too feel a strong compulsion to include these smaller communities into their political discourse and use them as vote banks. If we analyse the form and content of the electoral discourse of different political parties just before elections, we will find that they are filled with references to the myths, legends and symbols of the target communities. The entire electoral discourse is worded in such a manner that it fits into the political agenda of the concerned party even while evoking the hopes and desires of the community concerned. The rise in the level of awareness among the people belonging to smaller communities and their identity assertion has made it a compulsion for different political parties to address them directly using their own myths and legends as reference points. Earlier, when the awareness among the small communities was less, an all

encompassing meta language of electoral discourse promising fulfillment of basic needs would be used to address all these communities. But identity assertion and self-respect among the smaller communities has led to the evolution of a language of electoral discourse that addresses each community individually using its own myths, legends, icons and symbols to satisfy, mobilise and include it in the electoral fold.

The fairs and festivals organised by the community members to celebrate the memory of their caste heroes are important focal points for political parties who use these occasions as platforms for political mobilisation of the community. This process was visible in the case of the Musahars in 2003, before the parliamentary elections. The Savari *mela* organised by the Musahars were used by political parties to mobilise Musahars politically. It is interesting to note that the parties do not organise the fairs but only participate in them and help them financially by providing facilities like generators. During their election speeches, the political leaders try to bring these people into their electoral fold by invoking the memory of Savari. Several such instances can be found in the Musahar-dominated regions of Bihar where the myth of Savari is popular. One meeting was organised in village Punama, Wazirganj, where Ramji Majhi, an MP from the Musahar community started the construction of a tableau of Savari. This meeting was attended by 15,000 people. Some members of the BJP also attended the fair. A meeting of the Savari Parivaar Manch was also held at this time. Another fair of the Musahar community in village Nardiganj in block Navada that was attended by 3,000 people, was financially supported by the RJD. Jeetan Manjhi, an RJD MLA participated enthusiastically in the fair. In village Sarbadipur, Paraian block, a meeting organised by the Lok Shakti Shikshan Kendra was attended by MP Ramji Manjhi and some BJP members. The Belaganj Savari mela attended by 10,000 people, saw members of the BJP and the RJD. Both the parties tried to influence the proceedings in their own way. Another fair was organised in Gosaipesra, in Barachetti block by the Dalit Chetna Trust and other social activists, which was attended by 2,000 Musahars.[129]

In political rallies and election meetings organised by political parties in Musahar colonies, the language of electoral discourse is filled with references to caste heroes like Deosi, Savari and Dina Bhadri, and exhortations to follow the path set by them. The election speech delivered during one such rally organised by the BSP in a village the Sultanpur district of UP where the myth of Deosi is popular, exemplifies this strategy. The people attending the meeting were highly marginalised Musahars. There were no mikes, no flags or banners, no handbills or

[129] Ramraj Manjhi.

posters or pamphlets. The people sat on the ground in an open field. In front of them on a jute sack sat a local BSP activist wearing a shirt and a tie, addressing his audience in the following words,

> Musahar brothers and sisters. At one time you were the king of the jungles. You had built many forts outside the jungles. But the wily Yadavs who were a part of the Brahminical system, conspired to snatch away your kingdom. The leader of the Yadavs, Lorik, killed your king, who had his kingdom near Mirzapur, by a wicked conspiracy. They could not confront your bravery directly, so they attacked you from behind and forced you to flee into the jungles. There your lineage expanded through your ancestor Deosi, and you continued to fight against the Yadavs. Even in the jungle you managed to capture their cattle and establish a kingdom there. So, brothers and sisters, in these elections you have to continue your fight against the Yadavs by defeating their leader and their party, the Samajwadi Party, and ensure the win of Mayawati, who will once again restore your lost glory and respect, and see to it that will get back your rightful place in society.

In UP, the BSP, a party supported largely by the Dalits, and the Samajwadi Party supported by the Yadavs, are at loggerheads. The myth of Deosi is used by the BSP to widen the divide between the two parties and mobilise the Musahars in its favour. The contestation between the Yadavs and Musahars at the grassroot that begins from the narrative of Deosi is thus being converted by the party to gain political mileage. On the other hand, in north Bihar where the myth of Dina Bhadri is popular, the RJD, a party also led by the Yadavs, is using the myth to mobilise the Musahars in their favour. The leaders try to convince them that Dina and Bhadri are the heroes of a Dalit community and since the party allies with the Dalits in the democratic arena, it too respect these heroes.[130] The folk belief also is that the Yadavs and Musahars have been friends ever since the last rites of Dina Bhadri were performed by the Yadavs. The first temple to be built in his honour was also by the Yadavs. They actively participate in the annual fairs held at this site in large numbers. Thus, the memory around the narrative of this myth is being reconstructed as reality by the political parties concerned for mobilising the Musahars electorally.

[130]Field Notes.

Conclusion

With the widening of the democratic base of the country, more and more marginalised communities living on the fringes of society are entering the democratic process. This is being accelerated by the State which is making attempts to bring these communities into the electoral process and providing them self-confidence and self-respect. Through its electoral discourses, the State is also playing a catalytic role in raising awareness among these communities. In addition, the communities themselves are moulding their social and cultural behaviour for attaining self-respect by using the symbolic assertion of the narratives of their myths and heroes, and through them, are giving a new meaning to the Indian democratic discourse. On the one hand, they are absorbed in trying to grab a share in the power structure, while on the other, by creating their own identities based on these cultural heroes they are attempting to gain self-respect by enhancing their caste pride. Thus, gradually the communities are emerging as active participants in the democratic struggle through their own cultural resources, rather than being passive subjects, as perceived by the State.

Culture is increasingly being used by many ethnic societies as a tool to intensify public action for alleviating poverty, reducing inequality, and for bringing about positive social and economic transformation through its influence on the aspirations of the people, the coordination of collective action for building up self-confidence, empowering the members of the community, and ultimately, in the socioeconomic development of the community as a whole. This can be observed in the case of the highly marginalised untouchable Musahar community living in the Gangetic belt of north India. The Musahars are creating and transforming their cultural capital into political and developmental capital for community betterment. The cultural capital is being converted into an integral constituent of their identity discourse for participating in the democratic process of the country. The Brahminical symbols and myths are being reinterpreted to glorify their own social location in the Hindu caste hierarchy and simultaneously to subvert the dominance of the upper castes. The myths of Deosi, Savari and Dina Bhadri, popular among Musahars living in Bihar and UP, are being retold for creating social discourse for their empowerment, acquiring social equality and for the development of the community. These cultural resources are being disseminated among the common people mostly in the form of building temples, practising rituals, celebrating festivals and fairs, and making icons and statues of the caste heroes. However, with the growing competition for votes in the electoral arena, these symbols are being increasingly appropriated

by political parties to woo the Musahars electorally and the commemorations and celebrations are being used as platforms to disseminate political speeches. Gradually, a language of mobilisation is being evolved by parties like the BJP, BSP and RJD, which is filled with references to these myths, legends and caste heroes. While overtly glorifying their caste pride underlyingly, the caste symbols are being interpreted and moulded to suit their own political agenda. Thus, the memories around the narratives of these myths are being reconstructed as reality by the political parties concerned for mobilising the Musahars electorally.

Chapter 4

Dirt, Untouchability and Livelihood

The Musahar is identified with the "pig" in the central Gaugetic valley (specially south Bihar) and this identification is life amongst both Dalit and the non-Dalits. Amongst these communities this identification is so deeply ingrained that the "pig" becomes an important factor in the social, cultural, religious and economic distance that has arisen between communities. In other words, we may say that the Musahar who has evolved as the "other" community in the mindset of these communities, owes its stigma to the tradition of pig-rearing. Because of this otherness, it has been forced to remain an untouchable community. If we look straight at this phenomena, then it may average as a perception amongst Dalits about Musahars. But as soon as some fundamental questions confront us, then it becomes clearly evident that this commonsense perception has never been made to pass through questions. We have never tried to examine the extent of the pig's intervention in the changing social, political, economic and cultural relations amongst non-Dalit communities, though the pig is a strong symbol of untouchability amongst Mushars.

In what way does this polluted animal interfere in the life of non-Dalit communities? One question that is attached to this question is that what differences emerge in socio-cultural relations between the Musahars and non-Dalit communities, because of this intervention. The most surprising thing is that we have never raised the question as to what was the compulsion of south Bihar's Musahars in rearing this polluted animal? How should we view this question, keeping its relationship with the Musahar lifestyle infact? During recent times, a trend has evolved amongst the Musahars which is itself raising the voice of dissent—emphasising that the basic reason of the Musahars' backwardness lies in pig-rearing. Within the Musahar society, this voice is raised as a self-criticism, and its echo reaches the public space.

We should view this silence in the field of knowledge and the reason that emerges in our mind is that although we have been inspired by Louis Dumont to understand "purity" as an aspect of cattle-breeding.[131] The aspect of pollution in the Schedule Castes discourse has been

[131] Dumont, Louis. 1970. *Homo Hierarchicus* cited in Maren Bellwinkel- Schempp.1998. "The Khatiks of Kanpur and the Bristle Trade: Towards An Anthropology of Man and Beast", *Sociological Bulletin*, 47 (2) September,1998.

either discussed under the emulative strategies or ignored in its idiosyncratic nature.[132] According to Mary Douglas, taboos concerning purity of matter, animals and human beings are meant to ward off highly charged and dangerous contacts. The danger attributed to pollution dominates the modes of perception, and the ordering and classification of things, beasts and men. The fear of danger itself has a transformative quality as it empowers the culturally defined realm of pollution. 'Within the ritual frame, the abomination is then handled as a source of tremendous power'; on the other hand, dirt as a culturally unstructured matter functions as a residual category and can act as a 'symbol of creative formlessness'.[133]

I

Babu Chand Majhi of Bodh Gaya Prakhand of Gaya district has given a commercial angle to the business of cattle-breeding and has empowered the sociological stand that the Musahars can intervene in the socio-cultural life of non-Musahars and caste Hindus.

Four years ago, Babu Chand Majhi had started his commercial trek from two pigs. But he understood quite early that in order to give it an arranged form, it is necessary that he should receive modern training in pig-rearing. Somebody told him that this training is given in Patna and it costs around Rs 1200. At that time, he was not in a position to pay the training charges. At this juncture, his being a matriculate proved useful, and instead of taking the training, he got the book *How to Rear Pigs*. For the first time, Babu Chand Majhi came into contact with modern knowledge regarding pig farming and he also became acutely aware that for business, land and capital are essential.

He told me that his family owned only three katltas of land, apart from the house. It is essential to elucidate here that this land was not ancestral but belonged to Bodh Gaya Mahant. In the year 1978, there was a long struggle against Bodh Gaya Mahanth, by agricultural labourers of the Musahar caste.[134] As a result of that struggle, the piece of land went to Baburam Manjhi's family. Two katltas of land out of the three katltas were taken by Baburam

[132]Maren Bellwinkel- Schempp.1998. "The Khatiks of Kanpur and the Bristle Trade: Towards An Anthropology of Man and Beast", *Sociological Bulletin*, 47 (2) September,1998.
[133] Douglas, Mary 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* cited in Maren Bellwinkel- Schempp.1998. "The Khatiks of Kanpur and the Bristle Trade: Towards An Anthropology of Man and Beast", *Sociological Bulletin*, 47 (2) September,1998.

[134] In 1980s, the *Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini* launched a peaceful movement to free ten thousand acre of land from Bodh Gaya Math. Musahar men and women was the social base of this movement. As a result of this movement, lands were distributed among landless agricultural labourers of the Musahar community. For details see Prabhat, *Jamin Kiski Jote Uski: Bodh Gaya Bhumi Andolan*, Kisan Vikas Trust, Patna, 1999.

Manjhi for pig-rearing. Now he was faced with the problem of capital. His father was against taking government loans, since he was afraid that taking government loans might land him in a vicious circle and the police could auction the land any time. But one of Baburam Manjhi's teachers encouraged him saying that the recently opened Branch of Bank of India in the village did not present obstacles to the loanee, if he was below the "poverty line". With his encouragement, Baburam tried to take a loan from the Bank but was unsuccessful. He was greatly distressed, when an officer of the Bank rejected his application on the ground that the Manjhis have no business acumen and they take loans only for the purpose of subsides. The experience of his father and also his own, convinced Baburam Manjhi that for the poor, taking government loans is a difficult and humiliating business.

All this was happening and in the meanwhile, Baburam was informed that "Sarva Seva Sangh", an organisation of Gaya was giving loans to poor young men, who wanted to launch their business with little capital. He contacted them. They made him explain his activities and future plans and gave him a loan an condition that whatever money he would take he would have to return 20 per cent during the coming year. In this, the best thing was that the loan was without interest. He took Rs. 40,000 /- from them and till date, Rs. 40,000/- was returned. They also explained that whatever loan was returned, twice the account would again be given as loan to him. He won their confidence and now it has become his permanent occupation. He was confident that in future, whenever he was starved of capital, Sarva Seva Sangh would come to his assistance. After three years of intense travel, he was now in possession of forty thousand pigs and he was confident that his business would expand.[135]

Babu Chand Manjhi's business is directly connected with the local market. But he doesn't sell the pigs directly in the market. In the meanwhile several middlemen have come up between him and the market. The middlemen buy pigs from the breeders and carry on their activities of sale and purchase in the market. The most interesting thing is that during recent years the sale and purchase activities in the market have risen considerably. If we take a look at these markets, we will understand how the pig, which was once considered untouchable has come out of the Musahar social milleu and has made a place for itself in the local public space, and now it is influencing the non-Mushar and Savarua lifestyle, (for detail see Appendix) though it is another matter that their sale and purchase is carried on at a separate space in the market. At these markets, where the village males and females carry on their activities, a separate place

[135]Field Notes.

is earmarked for pig selling and purchasing. It is also necessary to mention that mutton and chicken are sold in the market itself, but this is not the case with pork. Among these markets, there is one market at Sharma in Sherghati prakhand. At this Sharma market, Umesh Ravidas has been selling pork for the last 16 years. He recalls that thirty years ago, selling and purchasing of pork started in this market and this was the first local market of Gaya District where selling and purchasing of pigs started. Now, this market has thirty shops where both pig and pork are purchased and sold. There is another factor that the demand for pigs is never sufficiently met. The chief reason for this is that the number of pork-eaters is continuously increasing.[136] Today's pork costs Rs. 60/- a kg, whereas mutton costs around Rs. 80/- a kg. Another interesting fact is that in this market, foreign pork is sold too, though occasionally, but its cost never goes beyond Rs. 40/- a kg.

It we study the statement of Dhanwanti Devi of the Bhuiyar caste, then it becomes evident that the pork is fried in the market itself. How did she get involved with this market? It is an interesting story. According to her, it was members of her family who set up the forest oven for frying pork in this market. She also informs us that 30 years hence, people from castes such as Yadavas and Koeris, used to come to her house with wine and pork was cooked for them in the house itself. It is evident that the customers were not in a position to carry the pork to their own houses. Several times, the pork fried for the customer would remain uneaten. When such a situation arose, the customer used to distribute the unconsumed pork in the neighbourhood. Her father arrived at the conclusion that this business could no longer be carried on at home. Because of this pressure, the job of frying pork and selling it was started in the local market adjacent to their residence. Slowly, the members of sellers increased. Today, the situation is such that she carries on this job, not only in this market, but in several other markets too.[137]Similarly, the contractors who are involved in this work, have access to several markets at the same time. At this point, it is necessary to understand that there are two types of pig sellers, firstly the contractors who purchase from pig breeders in the villages and secondly, those who breed pigs at their homes and sell them directly in the market in the fried form.

No less interesting is the change that has come about in the social features of the business. It is a different matter that people still believe strongly that pigs are identified with the Musahar caste, but the entry into this business of Chamars and Bhumiyars from amongst the

[136]Field Notes.
[137]Field Notes.

Dalit community and people from Savarua castes too are taking place very rapidly. The contractors, who are in this business, pay advances to the Bhuiyan community for pig rearing and when the pig is grown enough to be sold, they take them as part of loan repayment. This too is notable that in several villages of Gaya district, Savarva caste-men, and women too, give loans to Musahar women for pig-rearing and as security for the repayment keep the pigs in mortgage. In this deal, there is one condition that the pigs born out of the mother pig who is on mortgage, would be half-owned by the loaner. The non-Musahar caste people are becoming sharers in the trading of pigs in an indirect way, and this sharing is becoming vital and is increasing with each passing day.

This sharing is not limited to pig-rearing and pig's sale and purchase alone, but is being reflected in the food habits too. An interesting sight may be visible in the local markets where the Savarva caste men purchase and eat pork. It is also corroborated by Rajesh Choudhary, who has been eating pork for the last seven years. When he was asked why he ate at a corner of the village fair, he confessed that he lacked the self-confidence necessary to eat pork in view of his family or persons from his society. He said that he was the first in the family to eat pork. "Pork is considered untouchable in our family and caste," he said. But he was advised by the doctor to eat pork as it contained a heavy percentage of protein. When he was convinced that it was beneficial from the scientific and health viewpoint, he started eating it.[138] Ramchandra Manjhi sells pork in the same Sharma market and his experiences are no less interesting. A Brahmin of his village used to come to his shop and eat pork regularly. It so happened that individuals from several castes were assembled at a place one day. A person known to the Brahmin said, "I touch your feet, Baba". The Brahmin said, "Go away, go away", being nervous. When the person met the Brahmin next time at the shop of Ramchandra Manjhi he expressed his anger. The Brahmin said, "I was afraid that you would disclose my secret. The day my secret was divulged, my castemen would turn me out of my caste, and I would be identified as a Bhuiyan."[139] Actually, the fear of getting identified as a pork-eater is rife not only in Rajesh Choudhary or the Brahmin but amongst all the non-Dalit communities, whose young men have taken to pork-eating. It is clearly evident in the Sheikhbara market, where motorcycles stand in 500 metre diameter in the part, where pork is sold. These are the people who eat roasted pork and prefer to eat it in the

[138]Field Notes.
[139]Field Notes.

Bhuiyan households. Pig-untouchabiltiy is so widespread that even the youth from Dalit castes are conscious that it must not be known that they are eating pork.[140]

If we talk about Ramchandra Manjhi, then the situation has changed so much during the recent decades that 70 to 80 per cent of people eating pork are from non-Dalit communities. He argues in a straight fashion that pork, which casts Rs. 60/- a kg is not within the reach of the Musahars. Till now, the daily wages of the Musahars are not more than Rs. 30/-. Because of the attraction for pork among non-Dalit youth, its price too has increased considerably. In future, it may increase further. He even visualises a time when pork and mutton would cost the same.

Pigs are attached to the Musahar's identity, in a so-called way. But directly or indirectly, both pig-rearing and pig-eating have become current amongst the youth of non-Dalit communities. This prove that the "despised" animal has entered their lives. This entry is not unilinear but there are clashes amongst its various aspects at several layers. There are several dimensions of these clashes, and one of these dimensions is connected to the functional aspect of caste. The Hindu social system has predetermined the following — (i) What to eat (ii) How to eat (iii) When to eat (iv) Amongst whom to eat, etc. through a code of conduct and the method of determining these is regarded as the functional aspect of the caste. We must take note of the fact that this functional aspect is determined by power-negotiations between various castes and groups. A rational basis for this determination is provided by the Brahminical ideology and this ideology seeks to maintain the status quo. This is interesting that amongst several societies of the world, food habits are determined by culture and ecology to a great extent, but within the same society or religion no tag of inferiority or superiority is tagged to vegetarian/non-vegetarian dishes. In other words, no other society of the world is exemplified by a food-hierarchy.

It is evident that pork-eating is tearing down the "food order" prevalent for centuries, and this makes a straight hit at the Brahminical order. If we study this "hit", only then shall we be able to understand the deepening fear and contradictions growing within the changing tendencies of the non Dalit communities. Sushil Kumar Mishra says that even onion and garlic were forbidden in his family and that if his religious clients came to know, then his priest's profession would be in danger. However till now in whatever way, the non-vegetarian materials have gained entry in our foods. This is another matter that he still regards meat eating as an

[140]Field Notes.

evil.[141] In continuation of this, we can pay attention to Chandrika Singh's thinking that now meat is cooked in his house itself, whereas previously whoever had to eat meat, had no option but to eat outside the house. At that time, the elders of the house protested. The women of the household still eat meat sparsely, and at some places, they do not even touch garlic or onion. About non-vegetarian food, his feeling is that since it is "Kalyug", people give priority to taste and focus on "Tomasi" food. He feels that the Harijans are now drifting away from meat eating and the Savarnas are taking up cudgels on its behalf. This age is like that, he feels. According to him, mutton occupies the highest place amongst all non-vegetarian foods. Then comes chicken. When mutton is not available, people opt for chicken. Though he is a non-vegetarian, he still feels that pork is meant for Harijans. This is another matter that non-Harijans are now vying with each other to eat pork. He cities the local market, where big cars are visible. As far as pig-rearing is concerned, he has nothing against it. If he gets an opportunity, he may himself start a firm, employing one or two people from the Manjhi community and the firm would be properly looked after.[142]

Ashok Singh's views are no different. He says that up to his grandfather, there was no trace of meat eating in the family, but it started since the times of his father. Initially, even eggs were prohibited. His neighbours still get the mutton prepared outside their houses, preferably at their friends' houses and eat it there. He even admits that the highest place amongst all the animal meat is occupied by mutton followed by chicken. As far as pork is concerned, it is for the consumption of lowly people. He regretted that people are mad about pork and its prices have reached Rs. 50/- a kg. Till now, it is only the Musahar, who eat the pork openly. The rest consume it secretly. We avoid eating or sharing food with a person, if it is known that he consumers pork secretly.[143] Ram Dhani Yadav admits too, that pork-eating is in vogue and he feels hateful towards this. He is sad that pigs are being consumed by the people of his caste too. He feels that pork is for consumption of the Bhuiyan and since the pig is a lowly animal and the Musahars are a lowly community, it befits only them to eat pork. Anuj Kumar Yadav is most placidly convinced that pork is made for Harijans. This is a different matter that nowadays, even the Harijan can hardly afford it. Gentlemen are eating it so much that its prices are sky-rocketing.[144]

[141]Field Notes.
[142]Field Notes.
[143]Field Notes.
[144]Field Notes.

The attitude of persons of different castes to pork eating, reveals two similarities. Firstly, that it is only one generation from hence, that meat eating became prevalent in their families. Secondly, pork is an object of hatred for them. If we study these attitudes deeply, that meat was always a thing which remained outside their boundaries, but the changes in times and thinking created a situation whereby the meat became a part of their kitchen. In this context, it should also be remembered that the entry of mutton or chicken in the household is a complex process, which always circumvented the opposition of family elders. Their attitude to pork always reflected a hatred and that hatred was for Musahars too. This atmosphere of hatred is presently concurrent too and that is why, those of non-Dalit communities too, who eat pork are objects of hatred, just as at one time the chicken eating was an object of hatred, because chicken too was considered a polluted animal. In this context, it is interesting that in the local market, the persons from non-Dalit communities may be seen eating and consuming pork, but still they don't admit eating it in public. A strange silence encompasses everything as far as pork eating is concerned. There is such a silence, within which everything is happening, but it is draped with a curtain. If we try to understand this silence from a psychological point of view, then we may reach a definite conclusion that this fear is pregnant with another fear, the fear of non-Dalits that they would be identified with Musahars, if exposed. Identification with Musahars means coming down on the social ladder. This would result in the loss of the place they occupy in the social hierarchy by dint of their heredity. That is why they are still not prepared to eat pork openly.

Amongst the savarna castes of Gaya district, there is another concept, which revolves round the "foreign pigs", as it is called colloquially. They fear that the foreign pig is not untouchable, but it is rather nutritious. By the term "foreign pigs", they usually understand those pigs, which are imported from abroad. They understand perfectly that in several parts of the country, big firms have been set up, which breed foreign pigs through artificial insemination, and this trend is continuously on the increase. This pork is available in Gaya town, albeit in selected places, especially in Chinese restaurants. The section of the populace, which goes to these restaurants, is not only the financially rich section of the town but also culturally upcoming, and they consider pork-eating, a cultural test symbol.

The non-Dalit communities may be having a dual attitude vis-à-vis pork eating, but they never hesitate to invest money in the pork-rearing business. They do not want to dissociate themselves from the financial benefit, which arises out of this business. This is a different matter

that they want to be assured that the burden of sin may not be attributed to the Musahars and the financial returns from this business may continuously reach them.

The self contradictory attitude of the non-Dalit communities towards the profession of pig-rearing points towards the compartmentalisation, which is inherent in the caste system. It has compartmentalised the business and profession too. This dualistic relation between business and the profession has not only weakened factors such as modernism and the market, but some professions and businesses have come out in the open which are difficult to define in terms of "caste". Parallel to this, has also emerged a trend in the Indian society. On several layers, resourceful people have professionalised their livelihood, which was previously deeply identified with a particular caste, in the traditional social structure. Among these, there are several livelihoods, which were previously identified with the castes of untouchables. In Kanpur, in the trade of "Bristols", other castes joined the Khatik community, even Savarnas.[145] This has been studied well by a German anthropologist. The leather trade can be seen too in a similar way, where no caste in particular predominates. The scavenging system can be cited as an example, which has given place to the sanitation system. Trades have lost their traditional identity most rapidly and professional people have taken them over. Here a question arises, which has socio-economic dimensions as to how far these socio-economic changes have affected the untouchable castes involved and whether they have been affected in a positive or negative way. These have still not been studied. However, on the basis of these changes, we may infer that pig-rearing in the countryside is still identified with the Musahars but the growing interest of non-Dalits in this business indicate that the business itself is going in the professional way. We may also say that this changing attitude of non-Dalits to a business that is considered untouchable and is run by untouchables, is interfering directly in the lifestyle and activities of non-Dalits.

In this context, it is also necessary to take into account, the changing professions of the Dalit castes. It has been noted in several areas that when the Dalit communities attain a better financial position owing to their old profession, then they veer towards their old profession with surprising speed. Amongst the Musahar community, there is a small number of persons, who have attained a better financial status, but they encourage the new generation to adopt other professions. So, we can conclude that there is no need to see a profession in a form

[145]Schempp-Maren Bellwinkel, 'The Khatiks of Kanpur and the Bristle Trade: Towards an Anthropology of Man and Beast', *Sociological Bulletin*, 47 (2) September, 1998.

essentialised to a caste. This gives impetus to the caste system, and the formulation that every profession should invariably be tied with a caste. It is most certainly some historical situation, that forces or compels a particular caste to adopt a certain profession. It is relevant that we should save ourselves from the attitude that the Musahar are pig rearers and they can be pig rearers only in future too. We should always view the Musahar's pig rearing in the following way. This is a situation and they want to pursue this profession with new techniques. But if tomorrow, they decide to pursue some other profession then their desire should not be negated on the ground that they can perform in the field of pig-rearing only. To adopt such an attitude would be helping the Brahminical order directly, which believes in division of work according to caste.

The interference of polluted food stuff in the life of Non-Dalit communities may look symbolical, butthis change is actually the expression of changing social relations, which are embodied in the statement of Karu Manjhi. He says that 10-15 years from hence, the people of savarna castes used to say without hesitation, "Keep your distance, aye pig-eaters !". When our men used to go to do labour work in their households, they used to say "Would you give him food in the utensil, which is meant for us ?" Now they give our men the food in the same utensils, which are meant for them. How do they do this now? Do we not eat pork, still ? Now they think inwardly—"We also eat pig now".[146] In the same chain, there is the statement of Rameshwar Manjhi, which we should try to understand. "The previous generation still now refuse to respect us, but young men put them to silence, saying – you go inside and let him (the Musahar) sit. Presently, this is the trend. It seems that the young generation is with us. This young generation tells us, "Bring the pork to us and we shall send a part to you." If now, they do not give us proper respect, then we will not carry the pork to their houses. They will have to go and buy it from the market. Umesh Kumar, a young man from the Musahar community says: "Ten to fifteen years ago, they used to say "Keep off, Bhuiyan". But now they tell our women, "Amite, when you cook pork, give us two pieces from your share." Previously they did not touch the water used by us and now they are prepared to eat from our share. It they say this, then we cannot refuse. We have to give them two pieces at least.[147]

The changing relationships of power have been reflected in many ways between the Musahars and non-Dalit communities. If this is seen only in food relationships, social

[146]Field Notes.
[147]Field Notes.

relationship in daily lives and cultural relationships, then too it is clearly evident as to how the Musahar communities growing strength has interfered in these areas. In these areas, there was the convention that they used to be invited to functions held in the Savarna households, but they used to be given only the leftovers to eat. Now this cannot be imagined. At some places it was observed that they were seated in the same row as the Savarnas and consuming food. Yes, presently this difference is still there, that they are not invited to those functions, where rice is cooked. Rice is highly important in functions of these areas, and it is seen in the context of interrelations between Kul, Gotra, etc. What is meant is that they may not be invited to functions where family people and close relations are involved but to those functions, where people from other communities are invited/or participate. Another aspect of the power equations of this changing social relationship is that Savarnas as have come closer to those members of the Musahar community who have attained social mobility in the upward direction. An example in this content is a Bhamiyan leader of Gaya district who has been an M.L.A. for several terms. A marriage ceremony held in his household is worth mentioning here. Last year, several Savarna leaders of the locality participated in his daughter's marriage ceremony. All were leaders of influence. They not only participated in the marriage ceremony as invitees, but were managing and supervising the marriage rituals as well. At this function, people from all the communities ate their food together. The active persons of the Savarna community made the bride's father wear a yellow dhoti as a ritual. This is another matter that the bride's father remained conscious all the while that nothing should happen, which might annoy the Savarnas.

This interference of the Musahar community in the lives of non-Musahar communities is actually an extension of the interference which has become visible owing to the disappearance of the ban on polluted foodstuff. There is power derived from the fear of pollution of matter, beast and man, and this power is contained by the caste system. The pollution part of the caste system is until now seen only in it's suppressive, exploitative and unjust aspects. The Musahars share the power derived from the abomination of dirt, pollution and death which the savarna castes had down to them. The pig as the realm of pollution and dirt is the creative and nutritious element for the Musahars which they have used to their advantage as pig-breeders, and pork-butchers. This notion is shared by most of the Musahars in the villages and outside, for whom the pig is of high symbolic and ritual value.

II

Pig-rearing is irreparably linked to the crisis that arises in the life, livelihood and day-to-day living of the Mushar. This profession remains to be a companion in his crisis. An example of this is found in the statement of Bhola Manjhi settled in Bhola Bigha. "My child could survive because of the pig".[148] This sharp realisation of his is linked to an experience in his life which is heart-rending. He was in need of money for his wife's operation which had to undergo a caesarean operation in the local hospital and he did not had any money at hand. He sold his pigs in the local market which gave him the required amount in this whole crisis.

Pig has a multi-dimensional usefulness in the life of a Musahar. This is exemplified in an essay written on 'pig', by a student of the fifth class, who is himself a Musahar.

"From its hair, brush and coat brushes are made. The pork is an item of food. From its fat, we get frying oil, with which we fry edibles. The oil is massaged on the body. This oil is consumed too in winter to keep the body warm. Pork is a useful food. A child with pneumonia is made to drink the oil and it is massaged on his body too. The stool of pig is useful for cultivation. The pig is useful even after its death. The pork is eaten and by selling pork, money is earned." The concept of the usefulness of pig-rearing which is evident in this essay by a thirteen-year-old school-boy, finds a symbolic echo in the statement of Jetn Manjhi: "It is more valuable than gold," he says. "It earns money in both the conditions, whether living or dead. There is no question of any loss. Gold fetches less money, if old. If its rate falls, that would create difficulty. But the pig would remain as it is."[149]

The traditional mode of pig-rearing is not cost-intensive. As we listen to Jetu Manjhi's dialogue, which is replete with experiences, it becomes evident. He says, "There is no trouble in rearing pigs. I keep a rupee or two just to give it the used rice-broth and fodder. It would show profits in a year or two. If it is a one year old, it would fetch Rs. 2000/-. As far as the space for pig-rearing is concerned, a small hutment is built up near our own hutment, which is called "Suarbakhor".[150] A fact provided by Rabindra Sinha, an officer of the Animal Husbandry Deptt also throws light on the usefulness of pig-rearing. According to him, the pig is such an animal which produces ten to fifteen children at a time. Not only that. A female pig becomes fertile and

[148]Field Notes.
[149]Field Notes.
[150]Field Notes.

capable of child-bearing at the age of 5 years. In the normal life cycle period of 15 years, a pig produces 45 to 50 pig children.[151]

Pig, goat, cow and oxes are reared basically in the central Gangetic valley. The ox-rearing is related to farming activities. But the goat, cow and pig-rearing are related to financial activities and used as foodstuff as well. Cow-breeding is useful because "ghee" can be entracted from the milk, as an extra benefit. In every village of the Musahar community, one or two families are found, who have taken to cow-breeding. But their experience as cow-breeders show that co-breeding is a difficult task in their socio-economic circumstances. According to Ramjee Manhi, "There is a great amount of hard work involved in cow-breeding. The cows have to be fed on time, have to be given drinking water on time, they have to be grazed and kept clean. As food, they have to be given fodder of paddy and wheat. They have also to be given mustard and chaff. We have to buy for paddy-chaffs for them from the market. After so much hard work and effort, we get only one calf in ten years. It is natural that a cow remains a cow as long as it gives milk. In our caste, there is no tradition of handing over barren cows to the butcher. So, a barren cow becomes a burden on us. It has to be kept and nursed even after it stops giving milk."[152]

These are certain fundamental situations, which makes us understand as to why pig-rearing happens to be a compulsion for the Musahar. A statistics of the Animal Husbandry Department depicts the popularity of the profession amongst the Musahars of South Bihar. Talking of statistics, Gaya has one lakh twenty one thousand and eighty in the villages and one thousand eight hundred thirty four number of pigs.[153] According to the provisional animal census there are some 16 types of animals reared in the Gaya district. This reflects to the fact that animal rearing practices are an essential and important material basis of peasant economy. In fact, one will hardly come across any household in the Gaya district which does not rare animals. Animals are reared not only for to used in cultivation but also as entitlement which comes into use for any undue crisis in the household. Most of the middle and big peasants have numerous animals like cows, buffaloes etc. From this point one can gauge that how 'cow' became a holy animal among the peasant society. Saying one need have to go further to establish the importance of pig in Musahar life. In the absence of any entitlement among them pig became the sole entitlement and material basis of sustenance in the long run. On the other

[151]Field Notes.
[152]Field Notes.
[153]Dept. of Animal Husbandry, 2004, *Animal Census*, Gaya, Bihar.

hand, we want to argue that poverty is one of defining marks of the status of being untouchable, we have to recognise that this is a mark of other whole communities too.[154]

III

One aspect of the social-cultural change in the Musahar community is related to the issue of leaving pig-rearing. For years Dashrath Manjhi, one of the prominent spokesperson of this reformist movement, is attempting to convince the Musahar community in this regard. In this chain, we also have to take cognisance of the statement of Munni Das, who is a Kabir Panthi from the Musahar community. He says, "Pig gives ten to twelve child pigs and cow gives one calf. Right? But during Deepavali, we clean the cow, while cleaning our homes, and we decorate the cow too. We light a lamp at the place, where the cow is kept. But even after producing thirteen to fourteen pig children, the pigsty is not plastered with cow-drug, not to mention of lighting a lamp ?"[155]

Muni Das actually expresses the Kabir-panthi thought trend amongst Musahars. This thought trend actually puts emphasis upon vegetarian food habits as the means of getting rid of untouchability by the Musahars. Those Kabir-panthi sages who campaign in favour of vegetarian food habits, also campaign in favour of some other issues of a fundamental nature, such as, freedom from rituals, advice for adopting simplicity at marriage functions, burying the dead instead of creating, etc. According to Dr. Rabindar Pathak, a professor of Pali languages a silent revolution is taking place in the Musahar mindset, which does not need government grants, nor bloody upheavals.[156]

The influence of Kabir-panthis on Musahars may be negligible little, but their keeping the pig at the centre amply shows that amongst Musahars, the pig is not only a polluted animal but it is a powerful medium for polluting the Musahar lifestyle as well. Ratia Devi emphasises that the pig is not only identified with Musahars but with the Paswan community too. She puts her emphasis backed by the Musahar folklore. Tulsi beer, the legendary strongman hero of Musahar folklore, had married Reshmi, the daughter of Rahu beer of Paswan community, a long time ago. Reshmi was in charge of pig grazing in her father's kingdom.[157] The myth is concurrent

[154] Mendelsohn, Oliver and Vicziany, Marika, 1998, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, CambridgeUniversity Press, Cambridge.
[155]Field Notes.
[156]Field Notes.
[157]Field Notes.

in the following form, 'At the sound of the drum, Tulsi Bir awoke after a sleep lasting for twelve years. When he saw the stacks of jeera and ajwain, he demanded to know how Reshami had got them. When he heard the whole story, he was incensed, and vowed to teach Rahu Bir a lesson. He immediately set out for Rahu Bir's kingdom at Ammagarh, where he found Rahu Bir's daughter, Kusum, tending the family's 360 pigs by the pond. When he asked her whose pigs she was looking after, she became furious and threatened to call her fierce brothers and father to teach him a lesson. Having thus been insulted, Tulsi Bir changed himself, with God's assistance, into an old hunchback, then into a leper, and later into a child, in order to tease, provoke, and trick Kusum. Finally Tulsi Bir asks the gods to cause a storm.'[158]

We can read in detail about this myth in *Dusadh Samaj—Ek Sameeksha*, 'In this region, Dusadhs opted to rear pigs for saving the religion. Incidentally, low caste people began to relate themselves with Dusadhs and out of ignorance other Hindu castes also treated them in the same manner. One of the important reasons why the Dusadhs opted for pig-rearing is that they knew that as per the Kuran Sharif, the religious text of Yavans, pigs are non-religious and degraded animal. Hence, out of religiosity, yavans hate even to get touched by pigs. As a result, Dusadhs thought it wise to keep pigs at doors to save themselves from Yavans. It is believed that whenever Yavans attacked Dusadhs they started throwing meat, blood or bones of pigs on their bodies. Yavans used to flee immediately to avoid getting touched by it. Thus, Dusadhs opted for pig-rearing to save their lives and dignity. They suggested young girls to wear *taabiz* made of bones of pigs to save their 'superior to heaven' chastity.'[159]

This is also interesting that pigs have remained on the margin in Hindu religion, tradition, history and streams. The pig is called *suar* in Hindi. The term's etymological root goes back to the Indo-European *schwein* in German and swine in English. There is no linguistic differentiation between the wild and the domesticated species, although the Sanskrit term *varaha* for wild boar is used in a number of Indian languages (also for one of the incarnate forms of Lord Vishnu). The wild boar is called *jungali suar* (the forest pig). Yet, there is no historical evidence concerning the Indian pig. The ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt domesticated the pig in the 4th-5th millennium BC, but in Mohenjo Daro and Harappa (2300-1700BC), centres of the Indus Valley civilization, any remnant of the domesticated pig is

[158]Prakash, Gyan, 1990, *Bonded History: Genealogy of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, CambridgeUniversity Press, Cambridge, p. 56.
[159]Devi, Yashoda, *Dusadh Samaj: Ek Samiksha*, Kanak Press, Kadam Kuan, Patna, pp. 31-3.

conspicuous by its absence.[160] The vedic Aryans were nomads and when they migrated to India about 1250 BC, they had horses, cattle, goats and sheep (but no pigs) and the male animals were used for sacrifice and their meat was eaten.[161]

For the Hindu, the cow is not only considered to be a clean animal but is superelevated to a sacred animal. Her five products—milk, butter, fat, urine and dung—are mixed and eaten in cow worship. Cows and priests are said to have been created at the same time. Traditionally, the Scheduled Castes were not allowed to breed cows as the cow was regarded as the abode of numerous gods, and her worship and care for her led to salvation. The cow is also considered to be the mother of India and a mother is not to be killed. For the Muslims, on the other hand, the cow is a clean animal and as such is preferred for ritual slaughter and consumption.

Hinduism has made an implicit equation between Scheduled Castes and pigs. As the pig is an omnivor and eats garbage, faeces, carrion and dirt, it is considered an unclean animal even by those castes who traditionally undertook the ritually polluting tasks. According to Koranic law, the pig is considered an unclean animal and the Muslims all over the world are not allowed to eat pork. Marvin Harris holds that ecological reasons underlie the food taboo. The pig became an 'abomination' in the Middle Eastern countries because it directly was rivalling human foodstuff.[162]

This general juxtaposition of Brahmin and cow against untouchable and pig has no scriptural foundation in Hinduism. In the epic and puranic scriptures of Hinduism, there is no mention of the pig. Only the wild boar is referred to as the cherished prey of aristocratic hunts. The wild boar of the jungle is praised for its strength, power and ferocity. Categorically, the wild boar is beyond culture; his savageness is attributed to the woods where he resides. Wild boar is said to have been eaten by the Buddha also and, nowadays, it is eaten even by the savarna castes. In the old scriptures of Hinduism, the opposite of the holy cow is the despised dog and not the pig.[163] In Hindu mythology the wild boar is the third incarnation of Lord Vishnu as mentioned above. When a demon caste the earth into the depth of the cosmic ocean (a heap of filth, according to another version), Vishnu assumed the form of an enormous boar, killed the

[160]Kosambi, D. Damodar, 1956, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.
[161]O' Flaherty, Wendy D. 1980, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas.
[162]Harris, Marvin, 1985, *The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig: Riddles of Food and Culture*, Touchstone, New York.
[163]Malinar Angelika, 1997, 'Wechselseitige Abhengigkeiten und die Hierarchie der Krper: Zum Verheltnis zwischen Tieren und Menschen in hinduistischen Traditionen nach der episch-puranischen Literatur', in Paul Munch and R. Walz (eds.), *Tiere und Menschen Zur Geschichte eines prekeren Verheltnisses*, Gutersloh.

demon and retrieved the earth with his tusk. 'This mystic scenario probably developed through a primitive non-Aryan cult of the sacred pig'.[164]

IV

Apparently, these are the things which are usually said about the pig, but the understanding that we reach after going into depth, gives birth to an entirely new context. The basic thing is that such reformers make a fundamental mistake. At the root of the untouchability plunging the community, they disarm the essential silliness of pig, but there is a very strong ideological undercurrent flowing within the community. This ideological under current is centuries old and happens to be the part of a dominant ideology. The dominant ideology is so strong, that it becomes part and parcel of the thought process of those against whom it is working. The subordinate community consumes the dominant ideology, but in this ideological struggle, this too is inherent that the subordinate community keeps resisting the dominant ideology. During this resistance certain aspects of the dominant ideology comes to the fore, which shows to what extent it happens to be the inherent part of the mental, cultural and social exploitation of the subordinate community. Dasrathji assesses what is it that the Brahmin users from the Musahar during religious rituals and he himself answers: "Ten thousand rupees". This answer amply demonstrates that the subordinate community may accept subordination but the process of resistance keeps continuing on in a parallel way, alongside. This resistance becomes evident when Dasrathji and the Kabir Panthis give advice on one side and on the other side they oppose expensive rituals which are gifts from the hypocritical school of Brahmanism.

[164]Eliade Mircea, 1987, *Encyclopedia of Religion,* Vol. 11, Macmillan and Company, New York.

Chapter 5

Discourses of Emancipation: Voices from the Margin

Introduction

There is substance in the saying that 'discourse has power', even 'discourse is power', although many people do not endorse it. Without going into the intricacies of Foucauldian theory of discourse and power, it is not very difficult to accept the proposition that the prevailing dominant discourse shapes our perception of the society, its people and also its problems. Acknowledging the power of discourse, this article attempts to find an alternative discourse about the Musahar community with an aim to highlight their strengths and potentials. The theoretical position that has been drawn upon to build the argument is that knowledge is not a discovery of some buried treasure of wisdom, not an impartial action to engage with the social world. Instead, knowledge has been viewed as a deliberate action to bring about change in a predetermined direction. Our engagement with the Musahar community, our interaction with the people who are concerned with the plight of this community and the discussions that emerged in various workshops and seminars have led us to realise that unless a different image of the community is portrayed, it will not be possible to do any significant work for their emancipation.

Emerging Voices from the Margin

Razing Hillocks, Razing Slumber

Gehlor bores the outlook of any remote village of south Bihar—empty mud-houses of the landless agricultural labourers in search of work, dried up ahars of the earlier tank irrigation system, ruins of school buildings, everyday abuses and empathies of the maliks. But people here however poor, illiterate, unemployed, exploited living in utter destitution in a caste-led feudal society of south Bihar have one thing in common- Hope. Their hope neither lies in the promises of the maliks nor in the Babus of the sarakari offices in their blocks but is personified in Dasarath Manjhi. Geholor far from the city of Gaya situated near the block headquarter of Wazirganj has become a synonymous name as the birth place of their social genius Dasarath Manjhi not only in Gaya but to the farthest corner of Bihar. Born around 1934 at Gehlor in the Atari block of Gaya

district,Dasarath Manjhi, now an octogenarian ceases to be the living pulses of the community right from his days of razing the hillock nearby Gehlor way back in the 1960s to the turbulent years of armed struggle of the mid-70s and till the post-90s much hue and cry about liberalisation and globalisation both at the state and national level.

Dasarathji's task of razing hillocks began with only a borer and hammer. These were the implements that Dasarathji carried in his hands when he set out to realise his goal of razing the hillock to make way for the people across the mountain. At the outset, people thought he had gone mad. Every day, after disposing of his routine domestic chores, he used to spend two hours cutting into the mountain. For years together the sounds of hammer and borer became familiar to the ears of the people in Gehlor. He had been single-handedly able to draw popular support even while blowing his hammer and borer in utter solitude. Afterwards, he also started getting sporadic cooperation and assistance from some labourers nearby. He himself says, "People started contributing voluntarily to the donor's box that I had installed. Even the pedestrians and passersby did the same thing. Some of us were invited to their homes for giving grains for my cause".[165] Once the route was made across the mountain, the distance between Gehlor and Wajirganj reduced to only 13 kilometres earlier which it was 80 kiolmetres. Thus there has been a saving of 67 kilometres. In 1960, when the first step was taken in the direction of constructing this road, there was no other way through the mountain to get to the other side. Now the situation has changed completely as there is a tarred road. On the Jethian road itself is located Chanandeeh, which is four kilometers from Gehlor. The distance between Gehlor and Amaithi is also the same. Dasarathji says, "Once this eight kilometre long stretch reaches the point of completion, the Fatua-Fatehpur Road and Barachatti Road (G.T. Road) will be connected to each other".[166]

Dasarathji knows well the importance of his work. He says, "I have done something which no one had done before. Satyug-Treta—Davpar-Kaliyug—all have gone by one after the other only to fade away behind the curtain of history. Rich people, mighty people, learned people, poor people – were all born and left this world; but nobody paid any attention to constructing a road. In this area there are landlords, owning as many as twelve bighas of land. They used to ride elephants. They thought they were superior to us. But when they had come from the mountain they used to take cognisance of their actual state. They had to descend from

[165] Cited in Radheysyam Mangalpuri(2002), Dasarath Manjhi: From Manjhi to Das, Asserting Voices, pp. 123-33.
[166] Ibid.

the back of their elephants to let it pass through Haathi Ghat while they themselves had to take the other side of the mountain where they were able to sit on the elephant again. Those were the days of bonded (begari). Had the affluent gentry wished they could have a route cut through the mountain within the short span of one month or two months by employing thousands of people for this task. His remark about them is pretty clear, "they had wealth, but not soul; so the mountain remained as it was, without a scratch on it. In fact if you have to cut down the mountain, you will have to be six feet taller than the mountain. If you have to measure the depth of the sea, you have to be somewhat deeper than the sea itself. Real wealth is the desire of the soul".[167] According to him, "Those landlords and rich people thought that the Musahars would not be able to do anything worthy. Like *Savari* was left all alone by the Brahmans and in the same way they are being left alone to their own fate. But they could gauge the power within the people." He metaphorically adds that the Musahars are like diamonds but smeared in filth. The more one strikes and rubs them the more they shine. He continues: "The mountain did not appear taller than me, as tall as it is made out to be. Nobody is taller than a human being". Dasarathji assumes that hands are the fundamental tool for the task of performing any work; all other things are appendages and contrivances. Since each of us possesses 'soul' and 'hand', we should conclude that nature, on its part, has not made anyone poor". He maintains, "Soul and the hand- these two constitute the warp and woof of the world. If someone develops the skill of using the two properly, nothing will be impossible for him".[168]

Dasarathji is the strongest critique of the habits of the Musahar community – of rearing pigs, worshipping spirit cults, drinking *tari* (country liquor) and considers these as a wasteful pretension which is a major reason behind the underdevelopment of the whole community. He says, "Had stone been the abode of God, the latter would have made the sculptor the first target of his anger for turning him up and down and troubling him again and again"! He says as long as the Musahar community remains enmeshed in the cobweb of superficial pretensions; it won't be able to develop an interest in education. The first thing to be done is to get rid of the pig." He sentimentally puts his emotions on these abdominal practices when he says, "Just publish in newspapers that all those who keep pigs must free them within two years. In order to wake them up this itself will do the trick". His anger and frustration with the way development intervention among the Musahar community has been shaping in recent years can be gauged

[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.

from his critical comments-"What are these government-sponsored *Log Jagarans*, *Lok Samitis*doing?[169] All these are puppets. I have been observing the efforts of organisations working for the development for the past twenty years but the fact is that not even one segment of Musahar society is developed. In the name of development of Musahars some people are enjoying the loot. As a matter of fact nothing substantial is taking place in this regard." He observes, "Although others are aware of the vices that the Musahar community suffers from they will never try to empower them to rise above those disadvantages that the community suffers from." For him, "It is only the Musahars themselves who can instil the spirit of real awakening to all its members. As long as the Musahar community remains enmeshed in the cobweb of superficial pretensions, it won't be able to develop an interest in education". His conviction and determination in awakeining the Musahars is reflected when he says, "Give us power. What is the big deal in awakening the Musahars? When the mountain is no more why would the society not be awakened?" Dasarathji is also not disillusioned — "Earn, eat and die everybody is trapped in this cycle. But it does not me. I work for millions of people, not just for my caste brethren. I strive and take pains to construct a bridge. I have no intentions of doing anything for petty gains and publicity. I want to do something permanent. And I am sure that the road that has been constructed has been constructed through the mountain will stand for ages". [170]

Crashing Stones, Crashing Servitude

Raising the issue of entitlement of Musahars to homestead land Bhagawati Devi once asked vociferously "What are the reasons for us to desert the village where we were once made to settle by the zamindar? What does the word prestige mean to us? Will the society ever give us the right to live? Alternatively, will it allow us- Adivasis, Harijans, Musahars- to own separate homesteads?" Today Bhagwati Devi may not be with the Musahars of Bihar but her words still resound in their ears and inspires them to fight against the exploitation of the caste-led feudal society of Bihar. Born into utter destitution and taken to the hardship of a daily wage stone cutter at a tender age like any other Musahars working in numerous stone quarries scattered in the district of Gaya she raised herself to the level of representing the Musahar community in the country's parliament in the mid-1960s. Her political career nurtured under the famous

[169] "Jaat Hi Jaat Ko Jagayega"- Talk by Dasarath Manjhi(2000), Proceedings of Two-day seminar on Musahar: Development, Culture and Communication, Deshkal Society, New Delhi.
[170] Ibid.

ideologue and socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia, she came to be the foremost leader raising voices for the marginal and exploited masses of Bihar.

Bhagwati Devi's speeches delivered on different occasions had been one of the strongest and firm voices emerging from the Musahar community. She points out the crucial contribution of the Musahar community in their various capacities through their sheer labour and hardship they make a valuable contribution to the nation building process. With regard to the Musahar women's contribution in paddy cultivation, she explains that it is only the members of the Musahar community who are capable of sowing seeds of paddy fields, keeping a watch on their growth, harvesting them, pilling or beating them in order to separate the rice from the husk and eventually bringing them to our homes. Musahars alone can do these things."[171] Going further, she is at pains to explain that people of the Musahar community lay bricks, they construct roads, houses and bridges. She adds that despite their invaluable contributions they are deprived of the right to live, "Our sons are well-built, merry and agile. Nevertheless, those for whom them they worked tirelessly and raised crops did them to death. We work restlessly for them without a moment of respite because there happens to be a wedding of some master's daughter the next day. However, look at what we get in return: they drag us out of our homes and torch them to drive us out. At times we are declared Naxalites. Those who do not have a knife, stick or anything else to kill even snakes are branded as Naxalites. The police trap us to save their own necks." Even to perform the last rights of the upper castes the *dom* is in demand since it is believed that unless the funeral pyre is touched by him the person cannot get salvation. For the birth of the baby the service of the female from the *chamar* caste is in demand. The *chamarin* does all the cleaning, bathing and washing and other chores after a child is born. The *dhobi* is in demand for washing the clothes of the upper caste people.

According to Bhagwati Devi, the whole society is in the vicious grips of the caste system which has intensified the discrimination and exploitation of the Musahars to monstrous proportions under the feudal system. She is convinced that the social order has remained as it was earlier. Rather it has become even worse than it used to be in the days under feudalism. While earlier people like the Musahars were forced to wear a bell or broomstick around their necks, they are now being killed with bombs. Earlier a road or path used to get polluted if touched by Harijans, whereas now the entire village and human bodies are considered as polluted. She insouciantly observes that even earlier discrimination was less if one

[171] Bhagwati Devi(2002) "Our Whole Existence is Burning" , *Asserting Voices*, pp. 60-65

acknowledges the discrimination of the modern welfare state when she says, "If a feudal lord beat us, he also allowed us to settle. Now, however, we are not entitled to even a piece of land. However, it seems we have no right to vote freely. We are deprived of the most fundamental right to live. What does freedom signify then?"[172] She wonders in disillusion if any one would come foreward for their sake when she throws up a barrage of questions, "Would Rama and Krishna take avatar to take on injustice and exploitation? Is there any Kabir in this world who would oppose the caste-based discrimination? Will the likes of Jayaprakash Narayan, Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar come back to emancipate the Musahars? Will Baba Phule come back again? Will the High Court give us the justice?"[173]

Bhagwati Devi strongly argues that the upper caste people misunderstand the volatile situation in Bihar created by centuries of exploitation and discrimination. Addressing the upper-caste people of Bihar she questions, "Is there any other alternative left for us? Once we take arms it will wreak havoc on them. How would you save your prestige? When it comes to save your honour and dignity we work so hard but when it comes to save our honour, you just mock at us and jeer us. You will never allow us to hold our heads high". Further pointing towards them, she pleads for the end of discrimination against the Musahars with a cautionary note, "I say this discrimination, this injustice and indignity must be stopped. If you don't discard this there will be fire all around us. It might be possible that this fire, this social cauldron would engulf everything in its wake. You drive us out of our homes; you never treat us as human beings. Then what do you expect to happen except that you will have to bear the brunt the most. If you keep adding to the fire, this is what is going to happen."

Getting Humiliated, Getting Educated

From the dusty village school to the campus of T.M. College of the district headquarter of the Dharbhanga District in Bihar, Asarfi Sada has trudged on the difficult paths of life in his pursuance of education. Asarfi hails from a village called Khairiyana tucked far away from the hustle and bustle of the town life of Darbhanga and his father eked out his livelihood working on the agricultural fields owned by landlords of the Rajput caste. Though very poor, he was very keen to have his children educated. Asarfi was enrolled in the neighbouring primary school of his village by his father. But belonging to a lower caste life had never been so easy at school. He

[172]Ibid.
[173] Ibid.

says recalling his school days, "Under the social system prevailing in the village those (Musahars) like us who were isolated from the system cannot state assertively that they are determined to pursue their studies. Once they (Musahars) start wearing good clothes they are said to be trying to be at par with the upper caste people."[174] Once in school, Asarfi started experiencing discrimination and humiliation at the hands of the school authority because of being born into a lower caste. There was a separate sitting arrangement for the lower caste students at school. Since he felt alienated at school he often tried to flee from school. Eventually his father enrolled him into a Harijan residential school in Madhubani. But caste loomed large in his education career and in the new school he felt like a new *pariah* among the lower caste students. Often he did not get proper food as others used to snatch it from him. Tired of this persistent problem, Asarfi's father took away him from the residential school and he passed his matriculation examination in 1982 studying at home. He again struggled for his secondary education for getting residential accommodation at the Harijan Hostel in Madhubani which were occupied by progressive sections of the Scheduled Caste students and he had to fight for his space in it though there was provision for giving first preference to Dom, Musahar students in the hostel.

Asarfi's college education began from the Madhubani College. He ruefully remembers one of the incidents that took place in his second year in the college: "To know the results of the practical exam, I had to shell out money to the people concerned. I asked a professor about my result and he indicated that I had failed. But I could not believe myself and asked him to check the result sheet properly. When he learnt about my caste, he seemed to have more problems. I insisted on taking a second look because I firmly believed that I could not fail. And that was the reality. I was among the successful ones and I applied for my admission in the second year of the college"[175]. Asarfi was threatened with expelling him from the college once he strongly argued with his Principal that laws had been misused for troubling the impoverished. A letter was issued in Asarfi's name to take urgent steps for his expulsion from the college as well and his stipend was stopped. But much to their discomfort Asarfi, successfully completed his graduation and after passing his B.A. degree, he joined the T.M. College for a Master's degree.

Asarfi has faith in the transformative power of modern education and he had taken a vow that he would obtain higher education to see what was happening in the world around him. His interests in social activism saw him joining the National Literacy Mission where he got ample

[174] Asharfi Sada.(2002) "Striding on the Difficult Paths of Life", *Asserting Voices*, pp. 92-99.
[175] Ibid.

opportunities to go over to different places and meet different people from the various corners of Bihar. It gave him strength which he did not receive from his formal education. Working with the *Gyan Vigyan Samiti* he got the same kind of strength where he got the opportunity to observe and experience the situation more closely. Asarfi believes that his own society in seminars and discussions had been depicted in a poorer light rather in a denigrated manner. According to him there should be a separate quota for the Musahars. In the existing system of reservation, only those people who are already more developed than others draw all its benefits; Musahars end up getting nothing. If there is a separate reservation for the Musahars, they will get its benefits as well. His enthusiasm in modern education is reflected in comments such as "There are sixty households of the Musahar community in our village. I am an M.A. and my brother is a B.A. among them. And there are many others who have done an I.A. or B.A…People have become more interested in studies. All our youngsters are studying".[176]

His education made him take cognisance of the bureaucratic anomalies and strategies. He once intervened and questioned the officials who were involved in implementing the shceme of Indira Awas Yojana under which provision is made to build houses for the Musahars. These officials were razing and demolisihing the houses of the Musahars on the pretext of building newer ones. Other communities in his village could raise their half-cemented rooms since they could bribe the officials. But the Musahars having no money were left in a peculiar position of losing their older houses in the process. Asarfi pointed out the major defaults in the plans of the officials. There were no provisions of space for keeping animals which all Musahars rear. Besides the uniform pattern of houses made it difficult to identify their own houses and could raise a major conflict. He holds that BDOs, engineers and many others have misappropriated the funds under the scheme who worked in connivance with the upper castes and affluent people in his village. When he started intervening in their plans they asked about his qualifications. Asarfi replied to the officials that he was qualified enough to understand what was best for his own community and take no heed of their critical remarks. As far as education is concerned, popular awareness has enhanced considerably. But according to Asarfi, officials in the administrative structure who are involved in literacy campaigns don't want to conduct programmes related to education properly. They create obstacles rather than solving their problems.

Musahars earn their livelihoods by working in fields. But they do not have ownership of any homestead land. In activities related to agriculture they involve themselves as labourers. In

[176]Ibid.

Asarfi's village people of his community do not have any homestead land. The land receipt given by government is doubtful. At many places, such receipts have been given but no land is to be seen. It has further compounded the problem. If the Musahars try to capture land anywhere they clash with the zamindars. Though there are a very few zamindars left now, cases filed on this issue are plenty. At three places, Asarfi played a major role in getting the disputed pieces of land captured. In the native village of his wife's place also he did the same. The land there had been left fallow for many years and the Musahars did not have land to build their own houses. So, the fallow land was captured. He did the same near his village.

Reclaiming Land, Reclaiming Lives

Bapugram, a village towards the Fatehpur block and some 52 kms from the district quarter of Gaya blooms amidst the almost arid landscape of the surrounding areas. Situated on an upland Bapugram is quite unlike any other village of South Bihar. Surrounded by hillocks and lush vegetation it is dissected from other villages. As one enters the village, one comes across the school compound of the village. Passing through the narrow and undulating road, one enters the main village that is in an elongated shape until one reaches the tip of the village where a big playground lapses on the nearby foothills. Rows of houses are situated on both sides of the narrow road that dissects the whole village vertically. There are rows of plantation of various types maturing under careful eyes as well as trees of several fruits. Now a flourishing village of some three hundred Musahar households one would never imagine that it had been a wasteland once that was unsuitable for human habitation. Bapugram today bears the mark of the Musahars' effort against nature to transform the 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. Says Sudamini Devi in her late 40s, "I along with others came from Amatarai village by escaping from the clutch of our Maliks. Life here has a different meaning to us. Though the Zamindar came himself to take us back we refused to leave this place. Under the kamiauti ties I used to get 2 kilos of unmilled rice in lieu of the whole day's work."[177] Sudamini has now two semi-pucca houses built under the Indira Awas Yojana living with her family and has some cultivable land also in the village. There are some one hundred and fifty households who got their houses built under the scheme.

[177]Field Notes.

Behind the evolution and prosperity of Bapugram had been the tireless effort of Musahar social activist Baleswar Prasad and his wife, Jayanti Devi. Both had been instrumental right from the beginning in shaping the destiny of his own community in turning the hostile and infertile land into a flourishing village. Baleswarji was like any other Musahar lad living amidst poverty and destitution who got an opportunity for education in the residential school run by Samanwaya Ashram. Dwarko Sundrani, the prominent Gandhian educationist at Bodh Gaya had been quite an influential figure under whose careful eyes Baleswarji's career as a social activist flourished which made him into an important figure among the Musahar community. Today, he runs a voluntary organisation situated at the Fatehpur Block and works in conjunction with other voluntary organisations of Bihar for the welfare of his own community. He not only keeps working with other voluntary organisations in developing newer strategies, Baleswarji being educated and experienced negotiates and communicates his community's problems and demands with officials of the district authority.

Recollecting his past days, Baleswarji says, "Bapugram was a dream before us. We could not believe that one day people would inhabit such a hostile and inhospitable landscape. Many people of our own community also returned. But we did not lose hope since we knew that through our own labour we could do wonders."[178] A major problem that still persists in the village is the acute scarcity of water. Baleswarji always seemed to put an example before his own community rather than advising them on how to go about solving their own problem. Once to solve the problem of water for watering his plantation, Baleswarji dug out small wells in his ashram land and creatively constructed channels to transfer the water under natural force of gravity negotiating the undulated landscape. His technique was immediately adopted by the villagers to water their own agricultural fields in whatever land they could cultivate. Like him there had been elders in the village who had set an example by their sheer labour and creativity. Swarai Manjhi, an elderly Musahar of Bapugram remembering his fathers achievement in agriculture in the village said, "Can anyone believe cultivating sugarcane in this infertile land of Bapugram? My babuji achieved this and nobody could believe their eyes looking at the long fleshy plants of sugarcane which he cultivated. He was famous in the village for his sheer labour and knowledge of techniques of cultivation. Even the zamindar in the adjacent village under whom he worked could not help in taking an eye in my father's lustrous sugarcane field."

[178] Ibid.

[179]There were many such examples who set the benchmark for their younger generation to achieve fits in their lives. Though Bapugram suffers from various problems like scarcity of water, employment, low wage, illiteracy, etc. they had been able to survive under the most difficult circumstances and have been able to solve some of them by dint of their sheer labour and creativity they are able to aspire for a better tomorrow for themselves.

What Lies Beneath? Dignity as a Core Ethic of Musahar Community Life

A slight reflection of the emerging multiple voices of the Musahar community provides enough suggestions that for them food and dignity are not separate issues. It is clearly indicated in the voices of the social geniuses of the Musahar community that for the individual's participation in a community should by no means deny that person of his or her sense of dignity has intrinsic value, which is a fundamental and inalienable attribute he or she possesses as a human being. However, it is obviously recognised that the community also has rights, rights to honour and rights to worthiness, values and qualities that results from the sum of those rights of the individuals that constitute that society. There is an overpowering presence of being considered to be worthy and dignified in their perceived notion of change. To speak critically it will be misleading to consider that voices of these social geniuses suffer from disillusionment, grossly irrational and atomised on personalities. On the contrary, the social geniuses that the Musahar society has produced over a period are realistic to the community's idea of change and expectations from the future that emanate from their everyday life experiences and have organically developed through a dialogical process. These are concrete, realistic and futuristic drawing on everyday life experiences and are premised upon rational consciousness and will. Here dignity can be understood as a mental state or a particular quality of the soul bestowed upon all human beings. This conception implies that as a person, one is automatically *worthy and honourable*, this honour being an innate right second only to the *right of existence*.

There are multiple shades of the notion of dignity within the Musahar community. Social geniuses like Dasarathji considers that the real source of wealth is "soul" and anybody who is born with soul and a pair of hands is worthy to live a dignified life. The Musahar community has soul and with their hands they have changed their fate. Dasarathji's single-handedly razing a hillock has a symbolic value for the whole community to be taken as worthy of shaping their own fate. In this notion of dignity and change compels the dominant communities to recognise

[179]Ibid.

not only their social geniuses but also see the whole community with respect. Bhagwati Devi, on the other hand, radicalises the very notion of development as perceived by the dominant communities. She strongly reflects on the vices of modern development that has nothing to offer to her community and others who have suffered exploitation and violence both at the hands of their maliks as well as the sarkari babus. She is immensely proud of being a Musahar and takes pride in being called a Musahar. In her most vociferous tones, she expresses the single-handed contribution of the Musahar community in the labour-intensive agrarian and industrial economy of the country and in their whole-hearted services in their various capacities to the society from time immemorial. Especially with regard to Musahar women, one can asses their valuable contribution from her speeches. Unlike the commonplace perception of the Musahar community as poor, silent, powerless and unthinking the voices of the social geniuses take cognisance of the Musahar community and see themselves as enabled, worthy to lead a dignified life and contributing immensely to the welfare of the society and nation at large. Similarly, Asharfi Sada's painful retrospective of educational life reflected serious thoughts about dignity. He sees education as a main tool for the emancipation of the whole community whereby his community can match the steps with dominant communities towards progress and held their heads high as an enabling community contributing immensely to the society. Here having dignity means to be able to educate oneself without humiliation, to be able to acquire skills to earn one's own livelihood, to be able to participate in the progress of the community, to able to be recognised by others as an enabling and progressive community. Besides these three conceptions, another thoughtful reflection on dignity comes from the Musahar social genius Baleswarji. He has a communitarian conception of dignity which depends on how the community is looked at by others. He believes that Musahars will not be able to live a dignified life unless they are able to carve out a niche for themselves. Dignity for him is having something the community has on its own which the community can take pride in. His notion almost resembles Dasaratji's notion of self-esteem. According to Baleswarji, it would be misleading to homogenise Musahar into a labouring class engaged in agriculture. To him the whole community became a labouring class under circumstances persisting during the days of feudalism. For him there is a need of enabling the environment so that the Musahar community can flourish in their own culture in which they can take pride.

So, in all these multiple voices perception of progress and change the Musahar community is perceived as worthy of dignity who should be respected under any and all

circumstances or conditions. Dignity in this context is understood as equal opportunity, sovereignty, recognition and inseparable qualities of not only autonomous beings but to the whole community itself because they can judge what is right and wrong for themselves. Therefore, human dignity is the intrinsic worth that belongs to a human being in his capacity as a responsible person and belonging to a certain community. The Musahars require just a social order that respects the dignity and freedom of every individual in their community so that they may have the opportunity to develop of their own accord and to work towards their own well-being and happiness. In this sense immunity from coercion makes human well-being possible. Their dignity provides the foundation for free men and for a free society in a caste-led feudal society. It is well understood that when their human dignity is preserved, then inalienable rights are also possible for them. Unlike development thinking which builds categories for segregating communities for development's sake these voices have a universalistic appeal that goes beyond the petty politics of identity construction which has crippled many of the emerging voices of the marginal communities leading to widespread violence both at the global and local level. Through practices of their conceptions these social geniuses of the Musahar community have been able to locate the problem of their own community. Their voices have developed unique methodologies to establish dialogue with thier own brethren and others for a peaceful and democratic transformation for change not only for themselves but for others also. Rather being involved in narrow political rhetoric ethical codes that underpins most of the multiple voices of the geniuses leads one to a higher plane where "Dignity" is seen as an end itself rather as a means.

Tryst with Education: Violence or Empowerment?

Experiencing Education, Experiencing Violence

During the pre-independence period the Musahars who were mostly kamias working under their malik, there had been initiation of juridical measures to end labour bondage and free them from the shackles of destitution and poverty. In the late 1930s, after 1934-36 inquiries into the bonded labour system showed legal remedies have failed, a varitety of other methods were discussed and proposed like providing small plots of lands to the kamias, training them in cottage industries, etc. were all offered as instruments to transform the *kamias* into free labourers. But in the post-independent period after the dilution of the kamiauti ties and the

fading feudal system, under the changing circumstances modern education became a prime focus of empowering a marginal community like the Musahars. At national level repeated Education Commissions were set up to reform the educational system to make it more attractive to the marginal communities.

Dwarko Sundrani's, famous Gandhian tryst with educating the Musahars began with his involvement as a social worker during the Bhoodan movement in the south Bihar region. As an ardent disciple of Vinoba Bhave, he was committed to do social work amidst the marginal communities which saw him travelling all along from the erstwhile Lahore region to the plains of the middle-Gangetic Plain. Dwarkoji was taken aback by the abject poverty and destitution persisting among the Musahar community during the pre-independence period. One incident that happened during his initial period of social work in the region mainly turned him to focus on the Musahar community for their emanicipation and welfare. One day Dwarkoji was passing through a village under the Barachatti block with a Frenchman driving a jeep. All of a sudden a Musahar woman in tattered clothes which could harldy cover the private parts of her body dashed over the jeep and started narrating her harrowing story. She said that she had not eaten anything for the last six days. Her husband had died of snake-bite six months ago. She had three daughters and it was becoming very hard to feed them. He gave her Rs. 5 and begged the woman to give one of her daughters for making an experiment with poverty and education, to which she readily agreed. Dwarkoji realised that perhaps it is education which could attract the poverty-stricken community that can become the most powerful tool to transform and empower the whole community. [180]He decided to start a school exclusively for Scheduled Caste boys and girls. The daughter was named Sita and thus Samanwaya Vidyapith was established on June 15 in 1968. He decided along with his workers to make a new experiment with the Gandhian concept of education. He called upon the Mahant Khajwati for a donation of land for his educational experiment. He readily agreed and donated 31 acres near Barachatti block, 35 kms south-east of Bodh Gaya. His was the first effort towards educating the Musahar community in this regard.

According to Dwarkoji the notion of 'education' can be summarised in three words: yogya, udyoga and sahayoga; total development of life, i.e. physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual; coorelation between education and manual work leading to self-reliance in the basic

[180] Dwarko Sundrani(1998).“Poverty and Education: The Samanwaya Ashram”in Cultlural Dimensions of Education,IGNCA, pp.32-38.

necessities of life; and harmonious living with nature and society. To him the aim of education is not solely to induce literacy and numeracy. This is only a medium. The aim of education, according to him, is to personality develop the whole child. [181]Dwarkoji had made some pioneering experiments on poverty and education among the Musahar community on Gandhian lines. Initially, he used to ask the Musahar children to come to his residence after they finished their daily chores of grazing the cows, goats and pigs and used to teach them for an hour. At four o'clock he used to wake them up for prayer and some lessons. Then they were allowed to return to their own homes. Throughout the day they would perform their household chores and duties; they would stay with him only during the night. Through this experiment he got 29 boys.

In another experiment, he planned a fully residential school for Scheduled Caste boys and girls. But for a residential school he did not have enough resources and had to fall back on government funds. With a minimum grant he started a school at Manfar in the Barachatti block in the district of Gaya. In the residential school the recitation of *bhakti geets* and prayers were made mandatory for them. Then Dwarkoji realised that in order to bring change within the Musahar children have to be educated with other children as well. This time the funds came from the Government of India and with the encouragement from the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), he started his experiment teaching ten thousand and fifty students. But this particular experiment focused not only on the children of the Musahar caste, but those of other castes as well. Under this experiment, attempts are made to provide pure drinking water to the poor people in the surrounding villages. There is a high incidence of night blindness among the students because of deficiency of vitamin A. In the Samanwaya Vidyapith no certificates are offered and no government examinations are conducted. Students are advised to go back to their home and establish themselves within their villages.

Dwarko Sundrani's long time contribution in educating the initial as well as ongoing generations of Musahars in South Bihar is well recognised within and outside the community. Prominent Musahar social activist Baleswarji is an ardent disciple of Dwarkoji. Though an ardent disciple of Dwarko Sundrani, Musahar social activist Baleswar Manjhi has his own difference with his mentor. During his active association with the Samanwaya Ashram, he firmly expressed his point against the practice of Samanwaya Ashram of not offering certificates to students who pass out from the school by the ashram. Baleswarji holds that students should be given

[181]Ibid.

certificates by the school authority and without it they would be handicapped since they would not be eligible to apply for any kind of jobs available for them to earn their livelihoods. Thus the fruit of educating them would be lost. For his views once Dwarkoji critically commented that, "you Musahars do not see beyond your plate".[182] However, Baleswarji's own live experience of being a son of a bonded labourer could not make himself believe that a Musahar child could go to school with an empty stomach. He holds that acute poverty of the parents of the most of the Musahar children who are mostly bonded labourers is a social reality that the school system tries to ignore. For them their sons and daughters are additional hands who can earn and contribute to their family income for their daily survival. To him Dwarkoji's experiment of culturally mediated education tries to keep them away from social reality since it does not have an inherent economic logic. According to him unless there is any significant change in the socio-economic condition of the Musahar households any experiment on educating Musahar children will not be able to bring about significant change among them. He points out that though a lot of Musahar children join school at an early age but by the time they are grown up their parents want them to join them in their work and as a result most of them drop out from schools early in their educational journey. Further, he has strong reservations against Dwarkoji's notion that Musahars do not have a healthy culture and there is an urgent need to change the whole *Samskara* (mindset) of the community. He holds the opinion that any educational policy that forcefully attempts to put a cultural tag on the Musahars is in fact anti-Musahar.[183]

Dwarkoji strongly believed that Musahars are not prepared to receive education unless they go through a process of transformation. This he called *Samskara*. According to him, Musahars do not have *Samskara* and therefore they need a cultural transformation. He notes disconsolately, "I conducted the experiments in the beginning..I observed that my experiment was unable to bring about any change in their *Samskara*. Therefore I decided to open a residential school."[184] With his motto of developing civilised culture among them, Dwarko Sundrani realised that he needed a residential school for the Musahars where along with their studies they would develop *Samskara*. In the residential school the recitation of Bhakti Geets and prayers were made mandatory for them. To develop *Samskara* among them eight incidents

[182]Field Notes.
[183]Ibid.
[184] Dwarko Sundrani(1998)."Poverty and Education: The Samanwaya Ashram"in Cultlural Dimensions of Education,IGNCA, pp.32-38.

from the *Ramayana* were selected to compose folksongs in Magahi. Besides these, the original *Chaupais* and *Dohas* are also taught to them. According to him, Bodh Gaya presents a paradox – ignorance in the land of Enlightenment and the culture of poverty which has left deep scars on their personality and behaviour. They show no initiative in any work. They are totally submissive and agree to any suggestion given by anyone without applying any reasons of their own. The main reason behind the underdevelopment of the Musahar is the lack of awareness. They are not aware of their own level of development. This very notion of imparting and developing "Sanskara", however, seems an effort to put the community into the fold of Brahminic practices, of purifying them so as to make them worthy of education.

Although, constitutional rights for the marginal communities for getting education has been recognised from the early days of a young democratic country like India, in reality, however, these rights to equality and equity have little meaning to marginal communities who continue to suffer discrimination from the majority community. Though legislative measures under reservation policies has tried to guarantee the rights of the marginal communities like the Musahars, yet it has not been able to bring such communities into the mainstream in the presence of a persisting exploitative system like caste that has an overpowering presence in the educational institutions. Schools and colleges, in fact, with modern education has further tried to strengthen the caste system rather than opening up radical space for exchange of healthy discussions and debates. The emanicipatory notion of modern education in this sense has been self-defeating since the way it has introduced and functioned has led the Musahars into blind alleys.

Schools have played a greater role in sustaining violence even in a supposedly secular space. In school Asarfi Sada, a Musahar social genius started experiencing discrimination and humiliation at the hands of the school authority because of being born in a lower caste. There was separate sitting arrangements for the lower caste students at school. Since he often felt alienation at school, he tried to flee from school. Finally his father enrolled him into a Harijan residential school in Madhubani. But caste loomed large in his education career and in the new school he felt like a new *pariah* among the lower caste students. Often he did not get proper food as others used to snatch it from him. Asarfi Sada is a product of the modern educational system and in his narratives one finds deep faith in the progressive nature of modern education. Improvement in educational status among the Musahars has been one of his prominent thrusts in his recent involvement as a grass-root development practitioner for uplifting members of his

own community. He ruefully remembers one of the incidents that took place in his second year in the college. “To know the results of the practical exam, I had to shell out money to the people concerned. I asked a professor about my results and he indicated that I had failed. But I could not believe myself and asked him to check the result sheet properly… When he learnt about my caste, he seemed to have more problems… insisted on taking a second look because I firmly believed that I could not fail. And that was the reality. I was among the successful ones and I applied for my admission in the second year of the college”.[185] Asarfi once threatened that he would expel him from the college. Once he strongly argued with his Principal that laws had been misused for troubling the impoverished. A letter was issued to Asarfi to the effect that strict steps for his expulsion from the college would be taken as well and his stipend had been stopped. But much to their discomfort, Asarfi successfully completed his graduation and after passing his B.A. degree he joined the T.M. College for a Master’s degree.

Asarfi’s experience at school indicates that marginal communities like the Musahars have never felt safe even in a secular space despite constitutional guarantees to be treated as equals with others. School education, in fact, had been alienating and distressing in nature. Throughout his educational career, Asarfi Sada had faced discrimination and exploitation just because he belonged to a lower caste. Educational institutions denied him the right to be treated as an equal with other upper caste students. Besides this legal and constitutional measures looking at the distressing nature of education persisting in schools other means or tools which could be emanicipatory and liberative started drawing the thoughts of intellectuals and policy makers during the 80s. After fifty years of experimentation there was a renewed recognition of the importance of “culture” as well as the role of non-governmental organisations which had been instrumental in exploring new thoughts, models and techniques to impart education at the primary level. The reports of the Kothari Commission and the Education Commission of 1986 have called attention to the need for the cultural dimension of education into account. These reports recognised the need to reform the system in a manner that the world of work and the world of education, of home, family and education of individual and society are not in conflict. A system of education was proposed to establish with an aim to stop the process of alienation of the students of the marginal communities. In the present system of education it was evident that it was continuously uprooting the children of marginal communities from their culture to which they belong.

[185] Asharfi Sada.(2002) “Striding on the Difficult Paths of Life”, *Asserting Voices*, pp. 92-99

In Bihar with the lowest literacy rate and unimaginable status of education among Dalits serious thoughts were given as to how to tackle this menacing problem. It was realised that government policies had minimal impact on the marginal comminutes who mostly belong to the labour class. Children from Dalit communities get very little opportunity of schooling and most importantly even this opportunity knocks at their door, due to the violent nature of the school system that inherits all the evils of the caste system they feel alienated in the school itself. Increasing involvement of international organisations at the global level during the 80s emerged as a major player in supporting innovative projects for promoting education of the marginal communities. In India efforts of various governmental agencies, international agencies like UNESCO, the World Bank, etc. and non-governmental organisations both at the grassroot and national level had been very instrumental in developing strategies and implementing programmes for marginalised communities. Around the mid-90s the Bihar Education Programme (BEP) was conceived with the collaboration of the Bihar State Government and the World Bank. The BEP was created as an independent body that was represented with the ablest persons working both in government as well as non-government organisations. Its main target groups were:[186]

1. Children of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
2. Children of all the Schedule Communities who have never been been marginalised and who have never enjoyed any kind of official or non-governmental benefits regarding education.
3. Children of nomadic population
4. Children of labourers and child labourers themselves
5. Children who are older and do not attend conventional schools
6. Children who had been drop- outs in schools
7. Children who had no target of school education
8. Children of agricultural labourers and children of labourers working in the un-organised sector.

Vyas Mishra who occupied the apex position in BEP during the late 90s was instrumental in mooting the innovative ideas and implementing them throuhg the BEP. Belonging to the Bihar cadre in the IAS, Vyasji in his long career as a bureaucrat serving the state in various crucial positions was moved by the abysmally low literacy of the Musahars. His long-time association

[186]Vyas Mishra, *Gehre Paani Paith*, Rajkamal Publication, New Delhi, pp.167.

and concern for the development of the state took shape in the form of BEP. He was the first to introduce "school mapping". It was found in Bihar that most of the schools are in fact far away from the localities which the marginal communities inhabit. So under the BEP programme schools were set up looking at the locational advantage for marginal communities like the Musahars so as to attract a larger number of children from the disadvantaged population. Secondly, he initiated the idea of using Musahar culture of various forms to popularise elementary and primary education among them. Under this initiative folksongs and other popular cultural forms of Musahar culture were used in schools of rural areas. It was directed towards encouraging Musahar children to come to school, especially the girl child. Vyasji's experiences of popularising school education are found in his writing published in the form of a book in Hindi entiled *Gehre Paani Paith*.

Although, Vysaji's ideas of educating the Musahars had been very innovative it failed to do much for the community. Many of the parents of the Musahar children are labourers for whom their children are assets or additional hands. These children who mostly work as child labourers or help their parents in their work did not find enough opportunities to participate in innovative programmes run under the BEP. Vyasji's innovative programmes, though well considered and meticulous, could not draw enough attention from a community that lives amidst abject poverty and hunger.

Whiter Education, Whither Empowerment?

A reflection of the above thoughts from outsiders and insiders reveals that concern for educating the Mushars had been realistic enough to bring any significant or marked change among them. These thoughts and practices no matter how innovative and honest had missed certain valid points.

Firstly, school education has failed to take cognisance of persisting social reality of the marginal communities. The influence of the caste system in this case has been looked at both by policy makers as development practitioners involved in educating the Musahars in Bihar as we have seen most of the educational intervention had tried to ignore the ever-pervasive exploitative system of caste. A total silence has been maintained in this regard. Caste finds few or no mention in the textbooks taught in the schools. However, the Musahar community's tryst with education indicates that it has been the greatest source of violence in the educational

system. The policies and programmes as we have seen in this regard do not say anything as to how to tackle this crippling problem.

Secondly, education for Musahars continues to be alienating and distressing. In most of the experiments with the Musahar community in educating them whether it is the Gandhian or Modernist line contains its own seeds of contradiction. This contradiction mainly thrives on a distorted understanding of the historical, social and economic significance that has gone into making of the Musahars itself. It can be fathomed from culturally mediated education thinking that makes one believe on one hand that the Musahars do not possess any culture and on the other, there is a drive to utilise their cultural resources in educating them. Nevertheless, whether the Gandhian or Modernist school system they had an influence on the educational programmes designed for the Musahars. Voices coming from this community recognised the importance of education but they had been critical of these approaches that did not take cognisance of the communities' own live experiences over these experiments. Their own perspective on education and culture seems to die down upon the heavy intellectual loads of the mainstream discourses.

Thirdly, most of the experiments have failed to address the issue of livelihood. The educational experiments have not tried to find out how to attract the children from the poverty-stricken community. This economic dimension seems to have being ignored under the increased stress of using the "innovative cultural forms" of the community. However, it is not to deny the importance of culturally mediated education. For the Musahars even free primary education is not a very attractive proposition since most of the children are either child labourers or working with their parents. In this context, Baleswarji's comments are worth mentioning who believes that unless the educational policies takes into account their compulsion to earn for mere survival it will prove to be a damp squib.

Conclusion: Freedom to Choose and Freedom to Change Ourselves in Our Ways

The image of the Musahar community that emerges from progressive academic debates is that either they are subjects of the modern production mechanism or an object that gets defined around the production relations. Even though traditionally conceptualised as 'oppressed', 'poor', 'powerless' and 'silent' by the dominant voices for centuries often seen through monolithic lens by the caste-led feudal society in particular as well as the emergent nation-state at large, the mode of development for bringing about change in this community has immense

significance. Be in slumber or stagnancy, whether getting support from the state or not certain modes of change have emerged within the Musahar community over the period. Change for them has been essentially an experiential notion that finds expressions in the multiple voices of the community. The anger and frustrations emanating from the conditions of living on the margins of society has shaped their ways of change. A reflection on this multiple and emerging voices reveals that there are certain basic premises of the thinking on change and how change should occur within the community which needs to be highlighted.

In the world view of the Musahar community the categories like 'public' and 'private' have less meaning. Here everything is shared be it material, psychological or spiritual realms. Even the whole knowledge base of the community bears a communitarian stamp. For them the feeling of "Us" or rather "We Self" is more important than "Me" and "I". Here the individual self is wholly fused with the self of the community. Therefore, they have developed a habit to think and do "common good". Here the community's well-being subsumed the individual's well-being. In fact, the feeling of "common good" has always helped them in getting out of a crisis. They do not use instrumental rationality for justifying individual gains. What is 'good' or 'bad' for them is mostly judged from how much it is going to help their community. Crisis for them has never been individual. Today whatever changes we see among the Musahars have come through this mode. If they own land it is because they have fought for it collectively or if they are looked upon with dignity by others it is also because they have made it for themselves. It is from their life experiences that they have developed a collective mode of problem-solving strategies.

Another significant aspect of the change, according to the ethos of the Musahar community, is that it should be essentially endogenous. Dasarathji, the Musahar social reformer, critiques the present mode of development that has been adopted for changing the community. For him change should come from within the community by the community members themselves. According to him, the "Actors" and "Agencies" of change should be only the Musahars. It should be endogenous rather than exogenous. His razing the hillock can be cited as an example where he sets an example before the community to wake up from the slumber and change themselves for their welfare. Despites his radical views on many matters like giving up rearing and eating pigs by the Musahars his views represents moral experiental framework of the whole community. For Dasarathji it would be ethically wrong to totally depend on outside support for bringing change within their community. He advocates his fellow community

members to awake and to take cognisance of their own underdevelopment and to work for the greater welfare of the community.

For Musahars any change in the community needs to organically evolve within the community and must be owned by the community. In fact, there are many instances of outside efforts of which some were very innovative and touched upon vital problems related to them have failed or had been rejected by the Musahar community since those changes are not attuned to the Musahar ethos of life. In retrospect, we have had many instances where development interventions have failed just because it did appeal to the communitarian ethos of the Mushars. For instance, educational intervention had many innovative programmes and policies even going to the extent of using Musahar culture but this always remained as alien since they could not relate it to their worldview.

The whole process of change needs to be self-evaluative, that can make them critical of their own practices and give them a scope for assessing themselves. Baleswarji's view also holds immense importance in this context. He blames Musahar for their own underdevelopment to an extent and has a strong belief that only they hold the key to radical changes in their life. Baleswarji opines that the present cultural practices of the Musahars whether it be rearing and eating pig or worshipping spirit cults etc. or their peculiar behaviours like laziness, readiness in accepting servitude as their ultimate fate etc. one responsible for their underdevelopment. Baleswarji is strictly against putting the present ensemble of practices and behaviours of Musahars under the umbrella of culture. Rather he pleads for a critical examination of all the cultural traits of the Musahars. His views are pragmatic to the core. According to him most of the practices and behaviours of the Musahar community are a product of the critical circumstances surrounding bondage, servitude, poverty, untouchability for centuries in the changing context of the economy and society of the south Bihar. Because of living in dehumanised conditions deformities have crept into their practices and mental set up. For him the Musahars in the present shape do not represent their actual self. Their actual self is lost in the colonising waves of feudalism, Brahminism and the homogenising project of the emerging nation-state. Following him there is a need to create a conducive environment, a social space where they are free from the tentacles of the colonising forces then only the actualisation of the Musahar self can be accomplished. And practices arising out of their actual realisation of their Self, a "culture" can flourish which can be identified with them.

Another aspect of the mode of change within the Musahar community has been that women have always been in the forefront. Musahar women had always been a powerful force of change. In fact, within the whole community women command equal respect. As women have been the bread-earners and financially independent right from the beginning they have been quite active and have equally contributed to the cause of the community. This strength or potential of the Musahar community where women enjoy a responsible position needs to be tapped by the community as well exogenous development interventions. Musahar women members of Sangharsh Vahini had been instrumental in fighting against the Mahants of Bodh Gaya for distribution of excess ceiling land.[187] Similarly developmental agencies which floated the model of Self Help Group (SHG) did wonder since women in the Musahar community had been always in the forefront in changing their community. Under the umbrella of SHG groups that now forms a widespread network connecting the remotes villages and interiors the Musahar households seemed to hit upon a new instrument to transform their families in its modest way. It's a bottom up approach where the SHGs provide concrete shape to their ideas of economic and social welfare. Their articulation of their impediments in their lives in this regard comes from their perception of everyday life of the Musahar household. Groups have been formed to generate common funds where the Musahar household has the option to borrow money at a lower interest rate and freed them from the complex system of taking loans from village landlords or middlemen. Such common pools of resources within the community have saved thousands of households falling into the death trap of money-bondage.[188]

Finally, any programme of change should necessarily respect the ethos of the community and create enabling conditions where they have the freedom to choose options for themselves. In this context, dignity and self-respect of the community hold immense importance. Any kind of change that belittles their dignity and undermines freedom has proved to be unsustainable. In this respect change should always be democratic and must contain pluralistic values. Change for them means more than the material success. It is part of their world. Material progress is always welcomed but it needs to honour and recognise the moral values of the community. Change needs to regard them as worthy and enable rather than as merely an unproductive receiver. Dignity in this regard is the core of the Musahar way of

[187] Prabhat.1999.*Jaamin Kiski Jote Uski: Bodh Gaya Bhumi Andolan*, Bihar Kisan Trust, pp. 25-44.
[188]Field Notes.

change. They consider themselves worthy of dignity and honour and demand to be treated at par with the others. To them change is not simply to acquire a set of skills or learned behaviour. Rather it is a dynamic process of *becoming*. This process of becoming goes beyond the mere learning of skills of organising the community within certain parameters. One gets a reflection of this aspect in all their movements for wage, employment and dignity. After confronting the conditions which have threatened a particular aspect of life under the auspices of different movements they are more transformed, awakened and more self-reflective.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Towards a Public Action Policy

The articles in this report provide myriad ways of looking at the interlinkages of culture and development with respect to the Musahar community. In retrospect, the arguments developed in individual chapters discussing the interlinkage of culture and development among the Musahars, although carries different shades, indicate common understandings on the fundamental issues related to culture and development. In this context, the present chapter provides an opportunity to elaborate and summarise those common agreements stemming from different arguments discussed under various chapters of the report. Though, these common understandings at this stage are needed to be further refined and sharpened, nevertheless, it demonstrates the potential for constructively developing a perspective for laying the foundation for a 'liberative public action policy' for the Musahar community.

Over the years, 'culture' has attracted the attention of development thinking in a changing globalised world. Despite this shift, there has been little agreement on the notion of 'culture', more importantly how culture matters to different existing communities of the world. Today, the concept 'culture' has remained as illusive as it was before and development thinking is still grappling with the fearsome ambiguity associated with the concept. Our common understanding of the Musahars' world-view and practices of everyday life debars from taking any particularistic and categorical meaning of 'culture'. We have seen that taking such an approach will mean compartmentalisation of the discursive and evolving life-world of the Musahars and henceforth problematic. Looking at it from the Musahar community's perspective our common findings indicate that the notion of 'culture' carries a much broader meaning.

'Culture' in the case of the Musahars has enabled them to constructively develop the 'capacity to aspire' for a better tomorrow. Here according to social thinker Arjun Appadurai 'capacity to aspire' is a specific cultural capacity function stemming from cultural regimes. It is a navigational capacity that is unevenly distributed in society. In the changing context of politics, economy and society of the Gangetic belt of North India, we have seen that a highly marginalised and untouchable community like the Musahars are creating and transforming cultural capital into political and developmental capital for the betterment of the people of the community. It is being converted into an integral constituent of their identity discourse

participating in the democratic processes of the country. The Brahminical symbols and myths are being reinterpreted in one way of glorifying their own social location in the Hindu caste hierarchy and in the other, to subvert the dominance of the upper castes. The cultural resources are being disseminated among common people mostly in the form of building temples, celebrating festivals and fairs, making icons and statues of the caste heroes. The memories around the narrative of these myths are being reconstructed as reality by the political parties concerned for mobilising the Musahars electorally. This 'new consciousness' among the Musahars that has emerged out of the decades of struggle is reflected in their recently constructed folksongs which speak about their dreams and aspirations of a better tomorrow. Today, one can come across scores of folksongs about the importance of education, articulating the desire of a Musahar to go to school.

A conspicuous common understanding regarding 'culture' in the context of the Musahar community is that it has been a 'resource' available in plenty for the whole community. The Musahar community's rich traditional system of knowledge, a well organised and thriving community structure provides mutual support in times of natural disasters and social crises, myths and legends, folkways, community-specific epics and modes of artistic self-expression forms the basis of their survival. Power derived from such perennial resources has helped to build up capacities to sustain the community from being a *kamia* under the feudal system to agricultural labour always keeping intact their distinct identity. Musahars are the backbone of the whole paddy cultivation based agrarian that premises upon chiefly human labour. In another context it is ‘culture’ which has been the major source of the Musahars’ prominent movements like the movement for redistribution of homestead land and minimum wages.

We have taken note of the fact that myriad cultural practices of the Musahar community in their everyday life have enabled them to identify their own capacity and strengths and shortcomings. Through these practices they have not only invented effective mechanisms of coping with their immediate problem that the community faces but also assessment of their own shortcomings. As mentioned earlier to fight the dominance of the mainstream Brahminic discourses they have realised the power in their own cultural forms. The effective and creative use of various cultural forms such as folksongs, folklores, etc. have given rise to a new kind of Dalit performing arts and aesthetics such as Nautanki of Chuharmal and Rani Reshma, ballads of various Dalit heroes performed at local fairs and festivals in the rural areas of Bihar. The reproduction of folksongs, myths, etc. in their everyday life makes them conscious of their own

sorrows, pathos, shortcomings and challenges. If there is utter despair there is also yearning for change and future challenges ahead of them. They being alive and singing the songs in itself is a statement that pain is surmountable, that they might not have been victorious in the historical-social arena, but they are far from vanquished, that life is still to be celebrated.

Quite interestingly we have found that Musahars' social thinking has been future-oriented. Although, their oppressed present has engaged them to reflect on the ongoing reality, nevertheless in their assessment of their present reality always involves keeping in mind their visions of tomorrow. As we have seen there is enough reflection of this fact in the multiple voices of the social geniuses of the Musahar community. While pursuing our exploration of Musahar discourses of change, we have noted that issues related to dignity, gender, sustainable development, harmony and peaceful coexistence are very much part of their own discourses. In the global context these issues have occupied the centrestage of the recent shift in development thinking which is considered as crucial for defining the future course of human development. In this context it would be gross misunderstanding to consider that the Musahars' visions of tomorrow are blurred by their oppressive present. In this regard, we have seen that the Musahars have always responded well to the 'spirit to time'.

Besides recognising the future-oriented nature of their thinking, we have also understood that the process of change in the Musahar community has never been individual. One of the dominant aspects of the cultural ethos of the Musahar community is their 'we feeling'. It is the 'we feeling' that has sustained the whole community in dealing with ordinary and extra ordinary events of life. This has a special connotation in the sense that among the Musahars availability of material resources has always been amazingly limited meagre. Under such a situation, normally one observes the emergence of a conflictual situation arising out the competitiveness of the individual members of the community. In our understanding of the discourses of change among the Musahar community we have seen that quite the opposite has happened. Crises in the Musahar community have always posed a challenge to the whole community. Our common findings indicate that in such a crisis rather than being competitive the 'we feeling' has always dominated their cultural course of action. They have always regrouped as a community prepared to fight their immediate crisis be it the issue of wage or homestead land or dignity. Such community sense among its members has often been a cultural resource easily available for elbowing crisis has not only sustained them in their struggle for survival but

also an overwhelming part of their own identity. In this regard the individual selves of the Musahars are always subsumed under the larger 'Self' of the community.

Going beyond their 'future-oriented' thinking we have understood that Musahars have also developed capabilities even to navigate their voices to the institutions of modernity. Through their decades of struggle the Musahar in the middle Gangetic Plain have been able to carve out a niche for themselves thus opening up the lead of radical space in the caste-ridden society of Bihar. Today, their voices are heard in the democratic institutions not only at the local level but one also finds its representation at the country's highest democratic institutions at the national level. This new aspiration and consciousness has blossomed under the changing ground reality over the decades. The opening up of the radical space has unleashed the process of social cohesion. It reflects their negotiation skills that have translated into facilitating inter and intra community mutual debate and dialogue at the grassroot level. More than this, the emerging presence of the Musahar voice has also posed newer challenges and in a way it has exposed the limitations of the institutions of modernity. In this context, we have seen with respect to the changing ground reality, the dynamics of the teacher-student has also undergone radical changes. Through the radicalisation of the space in school the Musahar community have been able to dilute the practices of untouchability and have successfully resisted the violence and humiliation inflicted on them. In fact the alienation of the marginal communities in the education system is a stark reality which has posed new challenges to the enlightenment philosophy of modern education that promotes values like equality, democracy and fraternity.

We have seen that through their cultural practices in everyday life they have been able to penetrate and been able to expand the cultural space of the dominant communities. In the changing landscapes of social reality in Bihar, we have taken note of the fact that the Musahars through the creative and constructive use of indigenous knowledge are moving towards modernising their livelihood practices. Traditionally, such practices have been branded as vile and impure under Brahminic rules of purity and pollution. The modernisation process set forth by them has been instrumental in diluting the 'untouchable culture'. In this process a changed 'public space' has emerged in rural areas that are trying to come out of the clutches of practices of 'untouchable culture' of the multi-caste society in Bihar. In this context, we feel that such recent changes in the remotest parts of Bihar are radical in nature and depict the changing reality of the caste system which has been instrumental in influencing the politics and shifting power relations at grass root level.

The question arises here as to how we see this changing reality. Do we have any parameters to understand this evolving and transforming reality? Our common understanding in this context indicates that there are definite and concrete ways of looking beyond the fatally obscuring vision of the mainstream development thinking. We strongly feel that there is a need to see beyond the veritable 'whirlpool of reduction' where we see them doing, living, thriving, creating, innovating and changing. We have suggested that one constructive way to look at the changing reality before us could be taking into consideration the 'multiple vantage points'. This will entail that we do not consider the present reality as it appears to us but look beyond it in order to unearth the dynamics deeply rooted in society, economy, history and politics in the local context. It will not only provide us with a holistic picture of the present reality but will also open the gate to see the interplay of power relations that has produced such reality. We have seen that migration of labour a present reality of the Musahar society in not simply an economic phenomenon, rather it has been a complex phenomenon coming out of the interplay of power relations within a multi-caste society in changing circumstances. Mainstream development thinking has always tried to overlook or rather it has been unable to grasp the complexities of the multi-caste and class society in Bihar. We have argued that because of such approach programmes and policies have always remained unrealistic and therefore unsustainable. In our analysis we have seen that development programmes and policies when conflates with the existing exploitable system has further reproduced social inequality.

From our close reading of the multiple voices of social geniuses we have found that Musahar society has its own philosophies or thought of development that has organically evolved within the community from their practices of everyday life. Such thinking richly draws from their everyday life experiences. These are concrete and real philosophies of life that guides much of their ideas on change and development. 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. In this dignity and respect of self-esteem the community has immense importance. Dignity among the Musahars is inherently interwoven in their aspirations, voices of hope and everyday struggle. It is a way-of-life which is intimately communicated in their cultural practices. Dignity provides space for freedom and is inbuilt within the process of ‘progress’ or ‘change’. In this respect change should always be democratic and must contain pluralistic values. Change for the Musahars more than material has moral meaning to the community. Material change is always welcomed but it

needs to honour and recognise the moral values of the community. Change needs to regard them as worthy and enable rather than as merely an unproductive receiver. However, such sustainable culture, as seen through the lens of mainstream development thinking one would always like to brand them as 'poor of the poorest' rather than an enabling, thriving and living community.

Given these unique capabilities of the Musahar community, one always wonders why mainstream development thinking has failed to capture their attention. In this context, we argue that development thinking has always premised on the 'deficiency model'. In our close examination of mainstream discourses development thinking we have found that this 'deficiency model' has always tried to look at the drawbacks of the Musahar community vis-à-vis the mainstream community. Looking through such distorted lens the Musahars always appear as ignorant destitutes in the 'land of enlightenment' who are still not prepared to receive the civilisational gift of the mainstream community. Such ideological bulwarks of the 'deficiency model' have always conceptualised the Musahar community as deficient needing heavy doses of development intervention under the auspices of various programmes and policies from outside. Our common understanding in this regard is that through the practice of mainstream development discourse it has given rise to another culture- the 'culture of farce'. The 'culture of farce' which desists from looking at the thriving capabilities of the Musahar community. An offshoot of this depreciated legacy of hazy idealism of the 'deficiency model' has been the dizzying homogenisation process. True, the termites of reductionism have always tried only to consume the 'cultural' resources of the Musahar community under the coverage of neo-liberal development policies rather than enabling them to choose their own way.

We strongly feel that unless and until the 'deficiency model' rules the roost of the mainstream development thinking it will be merely impossible to count on or believe that the Musahar community has something to offer to the mainstream development thinking and society at large. We believe in this regard that if a conducive environment is created where a harmonious relationship among various communities could be established between communities based on reciprocity and mutuality only then can the actual goal of human well being be realised. This would entail us going beyond the binaries and thinking of a 'liberative public action policy'. Our common understanding in this regard has been a culture-sensitive development which respects the right of the community to their identity, traditions, beliefs and ways of life; identifies the cultural resources and skills within the community looking for

opportunities of using these resources and skills to create, innovate, grow and build social capital for yielding positive change. It is a process of mutual understanding, learning and sharing from each others' experiences which can contribute to sustainable development and peaceful coexistence in harmony with others. We have seen that 'culture' to Musahars carries a broader meaning which possesses much scope and potential to constructively incorporate today's development thinking. In this context the notion of 'culture' among the Musahar community to borrow a term coined by social thinker Amartya Sen is as a 'set of capabilities'.

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S. No.	Resource Person	Village	Block
1	Shirrot Das	Utliwara	Tankuppa
2	Jethu Manjhi	Manjhauli	Tankuppa
3	Muni Baba	Shripur	Bodh Gaya
4	Ramji Manjhi	Shripur	Bodh Gaya
5	Mahesh Manjhi	Laxmipur	Tankuppa
6	Karu Manjhi	Beldar Bigha	Tankuppa
7	Raimuni Devi	Bahadura	Tankuppa
8	Bagdo Manjhi	Bhola Bigha	Bodh Gaya
9	Babu Chand Manjhi	Bhola Bigha	Bodh Gaya
10	Bipat Paswan	Mastipur	Bodh Gaya
11	Basant Manjhi	Mastipur	Bodh Gaya
12	Ramchandra Manjhi	Mastipur	Bodh Gaya
13	Umesh Ravidas	Sarwan Bazaar	Barachatti
14	Dhanwanti Devi	Dema	Mohanpur
15	Uma Shankar Pathak	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya
16	Sushil Kumar Mishra	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya
17	Chndrika Singh	Laadu	Mohanpur
18	Ashok Singh	Paroriya	Manpur
19	Jitendra Singh	Paroriya	Manpur
20	Ramdhani Yadav	Tulsi Bigaha	Manpur
21	Jagdish Yadav	Tulsi Bigaha	Manpur
22	Anuj Kumar Yadav	Tulsi Bigaha	Manpur
23	Ram Balak Paswan	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya
24	Virendra Paswan	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya
25	Vishwajit Kumar	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya
26	Shankar Paswan	Bakraur	Bodh Gaya

27	Kishori Mohan	Baali	Mohanpur
28	Ganesh Das	Bandhua	Manpur
29	Gokul Ram	Bandhua	Manpur

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