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### Meet the Musahars : A rare encounter



**SANJAY KUMAR: Championing the cause of the Musharas.**

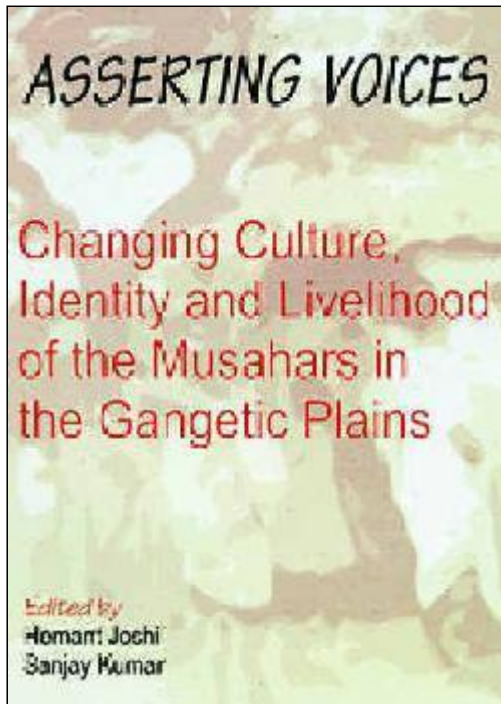
THIS OFTEN is the case. When we fail to perceive a community from a holistic perspective, we tend to slot it within a narrow paradigm. Instead of looking at its strength of survival, we, knowingly or unknowingly, try to downsize the community to fit into general notions, most often demeaning. No wonder then, when the Dalit of the Dalits, the Musahars, find mention in governmental welfare schemes, discussions, social history books, the community becomes victim to myopic generalisations. Being lowest of the low in the hierarchy of castes, the Musahars, scattered through the Gangetic plains of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, often get trapped in the orbit of extra-dimensional identities like rat-eater, pork-eater, bonded labourer, alcoholics, to name a few.

"Despite numerous welfare schemes, this non-participatory attitude becomes the prime default in any attempt to rehabilitate Musahars though they lie alarmingly low in the present world social index", says researcher and social activist Sanjay Kumar. Presently working on a Ford Foundation-funded project on the history, culture and anthropology of the Musahars of Gaya, Sanjay, along with Hemant Joshi, an educationist with the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Delhi, has recently come out with a compilation of articles penned by not only the policy-formulators and intellectuals but voices of the community on the community.

Called "Asserting Voices - Changing Culture, Identity and Livelihood of the Musahars in the Gangetic Plains", Sanjay says the book is an attempt to challenge the oft-quoted shibboleths and to establish the true identity of the Musahars. True to these words, the over 170 page pen-downs not only give fresh perspective on the questions of the identity of Musahars; how their culture is inextricably linked with their livelihood, nature and change; how does their identity constantly keep shifting with the social and productive process, how does their culture affect these very same processes, but also pertains to the Musahars understanding of these issues. The book screams for discarding of stereotypical strategies to bring the community at par with mainstream life but formation of a new perspective to bring them out of the sense of alienation of the Musahars through methods that give

an opportunity for easy intermingling and causes confidence generation.

Despite having editorial bloomers at times, the book's content becomes all the more precious when one brings into consideration the fact that not many written documents worthy of mention have so far surfaced on the subject.



In one of the articles, the Executive Director of the World Bank, which has been funding some welfare projects for Musahars, says, "though many communities organised themselves during the last 75-100 years, some of them missed out: the Musahars is one among them. Granted that casteism is not a good thing but if a caste-based educational institution help bring in universal education, it should be the thing". He, however, cautioned against the process from becoming a "handmaid of politics."

A tool of politics it has already become, for the word Dalit itself is now a cash card in the country's caste-based politics. But, whether more political participation of marginalized communities is leading to overall empowerment is another question.

Though all the articles introduce the reader to the problems faced by the Musahars from different perspectives, backed with reasons, the one penned by Kumar Suresh Singh, former Director-General of the Anthropological Survey of India and Bhagwati Devi, the lone woman representative of the Musahars, are specially worth perusal. Kumar Suresh's article, because he delves into the community as a whole and Bhagwati Devi's because of being a testimony of the sufferings emanating from short sighted definitions of them.

Writing about the community's rat-eating habit, Kumar Suresh says, "recently, I got to learn about Chhatisgarh, that in many parts of the region, which are recognised as semi-tribal from the cultural point of view, people belonging to almost all castes eat rats. Eating rats, is, thus, not the characteristic feature of any particular caste." Rues Bhagwati Devi, "the social order has become worse than feudalism. If a feudal lord beat us, he also allowed us to settle. Now, however, we are not entitled to even a piece of land... it seems we have no right to vote freely. We are deprived from the most fundamental right to live. What does freedom signify, then ?"

The book also documents the changing lives of the Musahar community today having a deep impact on their occupation. While some have taken to making leaf plates and cups, some others have started making pestles and stone idols of gods and goddesses. But the most interesting part is that piqs, an inextricable part of their

identity, have now become the basis of their economic survival rather than simply a feature of their eating habits.

Termining this development as a positive start, Sanjay Singh says, the best possible way for further development of the community with abysmally low literacy rate, malnutrition and societal prejudices, is the one followed by the Kabirpanthis. "They lived among the community to know them, to generate confidence in them and that is the need of the hour," he says. One hopes those who matter are listening.