

Seminar on Folklore of Musahars, the Most Marginalised Community in the Middle Gangetic Region

Unlike tribal communities, well known for their indigenous and autonomous traditions of subsistence and culture, Musaharas have always been taken as a dispersed people, who have remained a peripheral but organic part of the main stream society, with nothing to speak of as their 'own' - culturally or materially. True Musahar have had a history of impoverishment, with most of them leading a life of bonded landless labour since centuries. Yet the fact that they survive, and claim resilience and an identity, is ample proof of their own tradition, skill and culture. It is more a failure of our historiography and a general oversight by society, that Musaharas' tradition still remains largely unknown and hidden. This failure is also, in a sense, the success of the politics of silence, marginalization and amnesia that we practice as a nation as a whole. At the same time the evasion of the elites' gaze by oppressed people like the dalits have meant that it has never been easy for scholars and activists, despite best of intentions, to bring to light the everyday practices of Musahar community.



Yet, we know enough to understand that the Musahars of Bihar have very rich everyday tradition, encoded in various forms like myths, songs, legends, proverbs, ballade, stories, medicine, performances and even festivals. These are traditions which are learned and transmitted orally, and cannot be accessed or understood from afar and in non-participatory contexts. Also, being part of and in tune with their location and environment, neither can these traditions be studied in isolation from the general life-style and life practices of their locales. It is important for us, therefore, to visit the locales itself to study and understand these traditions.

That we must reach such locales without delay is also because the modern media has already reached there and are actively transforming the ordinary people's taste, aesthetics and mode of culture. Since earlier indigenous tradition has never been recorded, nor have they found a place in the written/print culture of the dialects, let alone of Hindi these traditions are rapidly being forgotten before the onslaught of modernity, even by the people who themselves practice this tradition. In context of this rapid and perhaps inexorable homogenization of culture, we realize that there is urgent need to:

- Document, record and preserve the art and knowledge forms of this community.
- Disseminate and prompt these arts and skills with the youth of the community and outside.
- Host a series of culture fairs, festivals, and workshops to demonstrate the viability and richness of these traditions.
- Empower the community with their own rich and strong tradition.
- And recommend measures by which the artists from these communities can sustain themselves financially and peacefully pursue their own skills and tradition.

The purpose of the seminar was to thrash out ways to do all this, get feedback from those who had done similar work, get insight from the sociologist and other social scientists who had resolved the problems of field-work and participatory observations. The key questions discussed in the seminar were:

- How to generate dialogue with people who have generally felt betrayed by society? How to generate confidence in them that this kind of project is indeed a project of self-help rather than of charity? How to cross the wall of their silence? How to inspire them recollect and recount their experiences and past traditions, without their feeling that they are giving away their own secrets and clues to survival to outsiders?



- How to preserve and document their cultural forms, without making them into artifices on display? What should be our medium of documentation and communication? What should be the natural setting against which cultural expression could be documented without freezing them completely into commodified forms?
- How can we contribute to the transmission and dissemination of these cultural forms? Where and how should we locate, what occasions should we choose for such teaching learning events
- What methods, formal or informal, should inform our attempts at organizing festivals and fares? What relation should the spectator have with the performers on such occasions?
- How can such community be empowered? How can the community as a whole be involved in participation in such schemes of empowerment and in process of documentation, dissemination and festivals?
- What will be the modes of making traditional art and knowledge economically sustainable?

