

From Dearth To Mouth A Socio-Political Narratives Of Musahars

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Abstract

The proposed article aims to investigate a lower caste community called Musahars in Gangetic plain by highlighting the dynamics of caste and class relations in colonial rule as well as post-independence India. The Musahars are socially considered as an untouchable community because they catch mice and eat them too in their day-to-day life. They were excluded from the mainstream society since the colonial period and before that the Hindu caste hierarchy and the social order (Mukul 1999). In the colonial period they were declared as a notorious tribe under the criminal and Tribes Act of 1871 (Criminal Tribes Inquiry Committee Allahabad, 1948). Musahars are one of the largest sections of the lower caste population even today specifically in Gangetic Region. They were always deemed as a marginal group outside the mainstream Hindu caste society and thus accorded them immense backwardness.

Keywords

Musahars, Camias, Cultural Hegemony, Emancipation, Matriarchy, Revitalization, Micro History, Criminal Tribes Act.

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Introduction

The term Musahar is said to be derived from moos, a Bhojpuri word usually denoted to rat, on account of their generation working as a rat catchers. Most of them are still forced to do this work due to their destitution and poverty.

In anthropological studies justified by Nesfield (1888), Risley (1891), Hiralal and Russel (1916) documented Musahars as Dravidian Tribes with their origin in Chota Nagpur (eastern India). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries over the course of time they began to settle in the Gangetic plains and became the single largest agricultural tenants in colonial India, which later made them cameras (forced labour) by powerful Zamindars. The name Musahars which is a Panglossian and avocation-based nomenclature is the caste of Dalits. Interestingly they were the local kings and Rajas during the Mughal period (Prakash Bonded histories). But during the colonial period, their position was completely marginalized especially after the implementation of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. They became landless and bonded laborers as the lowest kind in society (Gait Census Commissioner 1911) categorically they have many identities namely Manjhee, Mushairas, Sada, Bhuyian and Dom.

Change From Tribe To Caste

There are many theories in existence which is related to the emergence of this particular group for example if we take colonial documents according to this the earlier work done by colonial official. In 1891 Sir Herbert Hope Risley wrote Musahars are an offshoot of the buying the tribe of Chotanagpur, they are also known as the pig rearer community. W. Crook in his work. 'The tribes and caste of the North Western province and Oudh', stated that Musahars are a Dravidian jungle tribe found in the Eastern District of the province. There are also many popular and interesting myths about the origin of the Musahars. One myth associates that once Parmeshwar (the God of Creation). Created man each caste he gave each horse to ride on and a tool to work with the other took each his tool and mount his horse but the Musahar began to dig a pair of holes in the belly of his horse in which he might fix his feet as he rode. Parmeshwar saw his folly and ordered that his descendants should live on rats which they should dig out of the earth.

Apart from that lots of the Musahars believe that they are the descendents of legendry (Safari a wife of a hunter) who offered half-eaten berries to the lord Rama and Lakshmana. In spite of belonging to a lower caste Rama ate those eaten berries because those berries were tested by Safari in order to sacrifice the best fruit to her Avatar. That is the finest example to Associate themselves with a legendry so that they might to achieve the social recognition of the Hindu caste society.

In a many other areas, the Shiv Purana myth is popular where lord Shiva concealed his identity to the meditating Arjun in the guise of a Safari and Parvati his wife in the guise of a Safari. Lord Shiva had in hand a goshala (weapon) that use by Musahar for hunting and Parvati had a basket in her heap in the college of Hermit where Arjun got the revelation of Shiva and Parvati a low caste maiden cooked the food for the Hermits Musahars believed to be the heirs of that devotee maiden. All of these myths and legends lend this marginal people a sort of confidence even in living in the lowest echelon of society that is these examples of how they subvert the Brahmanic cultural hegemony by the looking past of the religious past.

Internal Division of Mushers

Mr. Neisfield Meisfido divides this tribe into three sub-tribes that do not intermarry or eat with each other. These are the jungle or Pahari men of forest and mountains who have maintained the largest share of their primitive speech and customs and who stand entirely duet from their descendents in the open plain whom they are regarded as degenerate. The next one is Dehati who have become partially Hindu and live within reach of settled and semi-civilized communities. The third one is the Dolkarha who have a particular occupation that of carrying palanquins for hire.

Ritual Costumes: Law of Exogamy

Mr. Nelsfieb states that the rule of exogamy is as follows: on the mother's side, a girl cannot be given in marriage to the son of her mothers, sister or her mothers brother. The same thing follows on the side of the father's side, but the bar of restrictions is different from both sides - thus on the mother's side the prohibition goes back to only one generation and on the father's side goes back to two generations.

Govern through on their Panchayat

Musahars have a tribal council presided over by the hereditary president. The offenses enquired into are charges of adultery and fornication. Intertribal infidelity is punished by both parties being fined - the fine is heavy liquor, pork, rice and pulse tobacco-connection with a man or woman outside the tribe involves ex-communication and such person is declared as an outsider.

Survival of Matriarchy

According to Neisfield the prominent part taken by the mothers on both sides this is to be the finest example of survival of the matriarchy.

Review of Literature

Some scholars have focused more on the socio-economic issues of the Musahars in their studies. But I'm rather interested in their cultural and political

consciousness of them. Charu Gupta's *Representing Dalits in print* (2016), points out that mainstream history rarely delves into the representation of Dalits. She proposes a fresh inquiry into Dalit historiography. Anupama Rao in her book (2009) *The caste questions* contemplate about the caste discrimination and on the narratives of pain and suffering, which are often the cultural capital of Dalits but rarely figure in the global history of political thoughts. She approaches Dalits as 'Confrontational Identities' with positive political values. From the perspectives of Dalits, Gail Omvedt has highlighted the Dalit political movements from the beginning of the twentieth century and discusses the living condition, socio-economic forces and land questions about Dalits in India, Omvedt 91994). However, Gopal Guru (2011) asserts that Dalits were not suppressed during resistance; instead, they used Dalit perspectives to reconstruct their political identity. In other words, the works mentioned above have discussed Dalit history at the macroscopic level, which is indeed crucial but in the at times misses upon the detailed in-depth regional study. Ginzburg (1976) retrospectively said that the micro-history becomes crucial to link it into the broader narratives of the historical development for proper context with the political environment. My research will engage at the micro-level by focusing on the Musahars, a Dalit community in Bihar. This study will take a cue from general understanding of Dalit movements and history. However, it will focus on the socio-cultural and political struggles of the Musahars from the 1927s to the 1980s for detailed analyses at the regional level, which is rarely addressed in the above-cited works.

On the other, Ramnarayan Rawal (2011) who is focusing on the *Chamars* tanners in Uttar Pradesh, a state in India. Rawat uses local archival documents along with anthropological perspectives. He created a self-image of Chamars in many movements in north India.

Gyan Prakash (1990) has identified the Musahars as bonded laborers in his seminal work on bonded histories in colonial India. He argues that the zamindari system in the Gaya district of Bihar in a way attracted Musahars as tenant laborers. The fertile land of "Gangetic plains" and the expansion of capitalist agrarian relations made them available for agricultural production, and placed them *in the Kamia-malik* relationship. However, it is not clear in his writings that the "Musahars" was firstly made bonded labor and then assimilated into the Hindu caste fold, or vice-versa. The unanswered question still remains: In what way the Musahars did react against this oppressive bondage tenant system? Most of the Musahars were not only engaged as an agricultural tenants, but also in timber production in the colonial period (Kunnath, p. 26). Thus it can be pointed out that

the Musahars were subordinated both as agricultural and extra-agricultural laborers. In Nitin Sinha (2012) argues that the Manjees were indulged as laborers in road, river and railway constructions at Bhagalpur in the British period. Such laborers were being used as convicted (Criminal and Tribes Act, 1871) and cheap labor for public works by the colonial government and sometimes they were available for the safe traveling by the boats and became a channel of communication in the Bihar region.

In Sajjad Hassan's (2008) article "From misery to hope? Musahars' poverty and state in India" attempts to show how the development programs in contemporary Bihar have failed for this community, indeed not for the better. Besides, their backwardness was accentuated by their traditional avocation of killing rates, which was considered by the Brahmins as a filthy and repulsive deed. Badri Narayan's (2016) *Fractured Tales: invisible in Indian democracy*, asks the question, of why few Dalits like Chamars have succeeded in becoming politically empowered and visible, while the rest of Dalits like Musahars have been insulted behind in terms of socio-political emancipation.

Ranjit Guha's (1997) *Dominance without Hegemony: History and power in colonial India*, points out that the power and authority of colonial or nationalist regimes arose from structural split between the elite and subaltern domain of politics, and the consequent failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to integrate vast areas of the life and consciousness of the people into an alternative hegemony. That predicament is discussed in terms of the nationalist project of anticipating power by mobilizing the masses and producing an alternative historiography. In both endeavors, the elite claimed to speak for the people constitutes as a nation and sought to challenge the pretensions of an alien regime to represent the colonized. A rivalry between an aspirant to power and its incumbent, this was in essence a context of hegemony. I will place both the Hindu dominant groups and the British colonial power in juxtaposition to Musahar's struggle and resistance movement as a direct contestation to these parallel hegemonies. Similarly, Rajat Ray (2003) in his *the felt community*, undoubtedly argues that the analyses of emotion and idea can be a significant basis for the study of the political process. Further, he includes, emotions arising from deprivation. Similarly, how the Musahars had shown their emotion and idea in their political consciousness, when they had been deprived entirely of their value and norms?

Hence, taking a cue from above discussed works in general and Rawat's (2011) work in particular, this research would the study the socio-political and cultural dynamics of the Musahars' participation in various movements of resistance from

the 1927s to the 1980s. Succinctly, this research will explore in what way the Musahars in their subordinate role had expressed their discontent during the period mentioned above about the relationship with their masters in their political and social discourses.

This needs to be done

In the most of the studies discussed above, the Musahars were depicted as a depressed community, living an oppressed life with no space for amelioration and revitalization. Indeed they were marginalized and living a filthy life, but gradually they introduced themselves to a distinct position during political movements when needed. Therefore this project is an attempt to reverse this erroneous perception of the Musahars.

The Musahars had an evocative history of persistent struggle against the upper caste domination in order to receive the cultivable land from the zamindars. In the context of the history of their political awakening in 1936 in Samastipur of Bihar the Musahar also protested against an indigo factory and demanded a raise in their wages which brutally turned into a lathi charge by the colonial government gradually the movement fizzled out and they got arrested under the serious criminal acts. After the 1950s Musahars participated in Bhoodan Andolan led by Vinoba Bhave and persistently fought against unequal land rights and discrimination to melt out their community. Likewise, Musahars had participated in the Naxalite movements in the decade of the 1970s and 1980s to secure minimum wages against Brahmin Malik's owners which was led by the communist party of India. During the 19th century of Bihar the Musahars played a crucial role as landed laborers which put India a producing economy in the world market there is still a gap remain to study the developments of social and political awakening among this downtrodden community from British rule to post-independence India some questions are still pending for example how the Musahars were trying to Jeopardize themselves in their political movement as an alternative to the Brahmanical order and the British colonial apparatus that had ascribed an inferior status to the Musahars to create an exploit hegemonic and divisive social order in British rule as well as Indian society. Does the next question come before us in what way the ideological and self-value revitalization movement empowered the Musahars on the margins of the periphery why Musahars moved towards the Gangetic plains gradually? How did the displacement take place? How Musahars became politically aware and conscious? If they were uncivilized how were they looking at themselves too during the time of protest? Was there any similarity between the Musahars protest and the national movements?

It becomes very important to know how this whole historical trajectory has developed and how the Musahars sustained themselves as a part of the counter-challenge in the colonial and late colonial social structure against the dominant group. Furthermore, there is still a need for how the Musahars reacted against the colonial rule as well as the Hindu Varna caste fold how they achieve the political consciousness and to what extent it proved to be helpful to achieve their objective.

The following are the main questions whose answer remains to be found-

- Under what historical circumstances the Musahars were brought under the criminal tribe by the colonial government? What was the role of Indian society in the colonial regime? In influencing the colonial attitudes towards marginal groups in bringing out such new categorization.
- What was the process whereby Musahars were transformed from a tribe to a caste? What are the noteworthy historical shortcomings which happened to them during the modificative and changeover period?
- What is the nature of political awakening or mindfulness achieved by Musahars between the colonial or late colonial phase? What are the internal dynamics or resistance movements orchestrated by this group in juxtaposition with the ongoing nationalist movement in the early twentieth century?
- How did the Musahars revitalize themselves the medium of the history of protest and resistance? Is there any possibility of reconstructing this resistance with reference to the intentions idea and language of individuals who produce this collective consciousness as a movement?

Conclusion

This short paper aims to disseminate the dynamics of the socio-political struggles of Musahar against the discrimination in colonial and post-colonial era in which this valuable social group were positioned as bonded labour, free labor and finally as a depressed group facing insurmountable sorrows and unfold hardship (used to take loan in non seasonable time and received a small plot of land grain and money for their son, or daughter's marriage under the robustness of orthodox zamindari system the Musahars were systematically exploited by the landlords in all aspects, and thus denying them the agency of emancipation. I argue the aforementioned writings, while an important contribution mostly overlooks the history of regional uprisings, functional and counter disobedience among Musahars and also I would focus on why scholars have highlighted on just particular community like chamars and ignored some others like Musahars. The structure of exploitation is not only based upon the agrarian relations with depressed groups but also

accentuated by the rationalization of the ideological domination. This article shows how the colonial administration was looking at the Musahars in juxtaposition to zamindars and how did they achieve socio-political consciousness. How did they drive the political dimension in recurring movements has been concentrated on very less by scholars.

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