



Socio-Economic Conditions of the Musahars: An In-Depth Analysis

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Abstract:

The name "Musahar" carries multiple connotations. It not only represents a community historically stigmatized as rat-eaters but also encompasses those subjected to untouchability. Additionally, it signifies individuals involved in rearing pigs, characterized by landlessness and predominantly employed in physically demanding yet poorly compensated agricultural labour. These diverse aspects coalesce into the unified identity of the Musahar caste within the framework of the Hindu caste system. This composite identity plays a central role in sustaining the prevailing socio-economic structure. This paper is an empirical study of the prevailing contemporary socio-economic conditions of the Musahars. As already stated, the Musahars are the most socio-economically backward even within the category of the Mahadalit. An attempt to explain the same can be sought by making a comparative analysis amongst the other dalits— Dusadhs, Chamars, Dhobis and the Pasis. This chapter is divided into two broad sections. The first section studies the socio-economic backwardness of the Musahars by placing them and comparing them with the other Dalits who also come under the category of Mahadalit. It will do so by focusing on three key indicators — lack of land ownership, labour and migration, and lack of education amongst the Dalits. Imperative to such a study is also a critical analysis of the policies related to Dalit empowerment. The second section examines and seeks to explain the reasons for the success/failure of such policies vis-à-vis Musahars in Bihar and the other Dalits.

Section I: Socio economic backwardness of the Musahars and the other Dalits

Lack of land ownership:

The Musahars are known to be landless labourers. They not only do not own any piece of land but also the houses they live in. They build their huts on the lands of their landlords. Therefore, in an agrarian feudal society like Bihar, landlessness means much more than material poverty. And also, land represents many things – economic, social and political power, and with-it self-respect. This traps the Musahars into perpetual debt. Participation of the Musahars and other Dalit groups in the decision-making process has been prevented by their complete landlessness. This landlessness has also led to their lack of control, especially over local manifestations of the state, including the police and welfare officials (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998). Anand Chakravarti (2004) has analyzed how the agrarian class relations in Bihar are embedded in caste because whether a person controls land or not is determined by the caste status. Inequality in ownership of land is a big attribute determining an individual's position in the dominance/subordination in the hierarchical order. Land ownership is also known to be the permanent source of livelihood.

This makes those castes who do not own land totally dependent on those who do. Land reforms constitute an important step to promote dispersal of land concentrated in few hands.

However, in case of Bihar, land reforms have failed to provide justiciable land distribution. As such landlords are able to maintain their position as they continue to retain sufficient land. Also, whatever little redistribution that happened, the benefits only reached the upper and middle sections of the society, particularly the three numerous dominant castes — Yadavs, Koeris and Kurmis, who significantly took the advantage of land reforms and improved their economic position. Therefore, after land distribution, these three OBCs became landowning dominant castes in the state (Blair 1980). Marginal sections of the society of Bihar who were traditionally landless labourers did not benefit from these reforms.

As per Census 2001, around 77.6 per cent of all SCs of Bihar constitute agricultural landless labourers. According to 2007 Mahadalit Ayog report, amongst the SCs, 92.5 percent of the Musahars constitute agricultural landless labourers. The Mahadalit Ayog survey also highlighted that the Dusadhs, Chamars, Pasis and the Dhobis apart from their respective traditional occupations also engage as cultivators or in other professions. On the other hand, only 2.7 per cent of the Musahars are involved in cultivation and the remaining 4.0 per cent are engaged in other services (Table 1.1). Both the Census and the Mahadalit Aayog report enumerate Musahars to be the highest percentage of labourers compared to other major Dalit castes in Bihar.

Table 1.1: Distribution of workers for different Dalit communities

Category	All Dalit-India	All Dailt-Bihar	Chamar	Dusadh	Pasi	Dhobi	Bhuiyan	Musahar
Cultivators	20.0	7.9	7.9	10.3	12.3	14.8	6.6	2.7
Agricultural Labourers	45.6	77.6	80.2	75.9	46.5	48.1	86.8	92.5
Household Industry	3.3	3.3	2.1	1.6	12.2	9.6	1.0	0.8
Others Workers	30.5	11.2	9.8	12.2	29.0	27.5	5.6	4.0

Source: Tabulated by Sajjad Hassan from Mahadlit Ayog (2007)

The Musahar network grapples with widespread demanding situations stemming from landlessness and powerlessness. They are often pressured into bonded agricultural labour, creating heavy dependence on upper and center-caste landlords. This dependency is perpetuated via mechanisms like the 'kamiuti'¹ machine, concerning loans, which keeps monetary dominance for the upper-elegance landlords at the same time as making sure a constant deliver of reasonably-priced labour for his or her agricultural sports. So, it is no longer simply landlessness however also the exploitation in the feudal and semi-feudal caste machine that affects the Musahars. Unlike other Dalit groups like Dusadhs, Pasis, and Dhobis who have interaction in extra occupations which includes cultivation or sharecropping, the Musahars, basically hired as bonded workers, seldom have the opportunity. They are regularly paid meager wages. In assessment, groups like Pasis and Dhobis revel in one of a kind distributional member of the family concerning agricultural manufacturing, with landowners normally allocating half of the earnings to them. The ownership of land and engagement in farming or sharecropping offer opportunity resources of earnings for different Dalit communities, allowing them to enjoy a better first-rate of life, get entry to training, secure housing, and build savings. In contrast, the Musahars' confined assets bring about

weaker skills, undermining their hopes for a brighter future. This cycle is perpetuated by their beyond and present instances, constantly reinforcing their reputations as landless workers.

Labour and Migration: The agricultural sector in Bihar remains entrenched in feudalism, caste-based exploitation, and low wages, making it less profitable for both landlords and landless laborers. As the economy evolves, technology, such as mechanized farming, motor-pumps, and tractors, has reduced traditional skill-based employment in agriculture, leaving only a few months of work, primarily for women. This change has led to mass migration of Musahars to urban areas where they can apply their skills (Sharm:2002). During the Green Revolution, increased labour demand prompted migration to places like Punjab. Workers sought higher wages in various occupations, including railway construction, factory work, and road maintenance. However, the question remains whether this migration has severed the feudal ties with Musahar landlords (Ibid).

Despite alternative employment opportunities, some Musahars remain bound by debt mechanisms. Many migrate to brick kilns in Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal for several months each year. Some also travel to states like Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh for wheat harvesting and sowing. Regardless of location, Musahars often become debt-bonded to new creditor-employers in these labour markets, perpetuating their vulnerability. Tom Brass (2016) cites a study by Singh and Iyer (1995) noting that annual labour migration between Bihar and Punjab involves around 10,000 tribals who work as agricultural laborers in Punjab. They become bonded to labour contractors or credit-employers in Punjab. This migration also includes some individuals from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in northern Bihar, but they typically work on a seasonal basis.

Lack of education: The landless' insecure livelihood as low wage labourers in the agricultural fields, and the continuing clutches of feudal control through debt is further secured through the lack of education amongst the Musahars. It directly limits opportunities to secure livelihood, mostly to contractual and temporary forms of employment. Most of the literature uses the ethnocentric approach to analyze the reasons for their educational

¹ In 1843, the British Government depicted the abolition of slavery as a symbol of enlightenment and advancement. However, in reality, this act led to a reconfiguration of slavery, effectively transforming it into a system of debt bondage. Instead of disappearing, slavery underwent a metamorphosis, particularly evident in the case of kamias, where it adopted the guise of "voluntarily entered" servitude. As elucidated by Prakash (2003) in a subsequent analysis, the concept of kamiuti underwent a substantial shift due to evolving notions of agrarian relationships. Kamiuti was now perceived as a "loan" granted by the malik to the kamia.

In the context of the unequal feudal relationship, we observe a land-laboursystem characterized by long-term ties between laborers or "kamias" and landlords. These laborers were obligated to work for their landlords for their entire lives without making any demands.

deprivation. Their views appear to be pseudo-Frierian understanding (Kidd and Kumar 1981) of the Musahar community. The reasons for their backwardness are situated in themselves and as such the Musahars are often blamed for not only their pathetic and abysmal economic and living conditions, but also for their lack of education.

In Bihar the Musahars, after the *Chamars* and the *Dusads* are the most populous amongst the Dalits. But their literacy rate is the lowest amongst all Dalits, i.e., it is just 4.6% (Census 2001). The recent Mahadalit Ayog Report, 2007, highlighted that the overall Musahars literacy rate is 9 per cent,

Table 1.2: Literacy levels among scheduled castes of Bihar

All Dalit-India	All Dailt-Bihar	Dhobi	Pasi	Dusadh	Chamar	Musahar	Bhuiyan
57.7	28.5	43.9	40.6	33.0	32.1	9.0	13.3

Source: Tabulated by Sajjad Hassan from Mahadlit Ayog (2007)

Their inability to get educated reflects in the dismal percentage of their children in school as compared to other dalits who are relatively more educated (Table 1.3). Their inability and lack of

i.e. they are at the rock bottom not only at the national level but even amongst the Dalits of Bihar (Table 1.2). The literacy of Musahar women is 3.9 percent (Census 2001). Hassan's (2013) work and its analysis says that other Dalits like Dhobis (43.9 percent literacy rate), Pasis (40.6 percent literacy rate) and the Chamars (32.1 percent literacy rate) are aware that education is the key factor in getting out of the traditional backwardness and a way for better future. Such awareness seems to be lacking amongst the Musahars as they are mostly engaged in traditional agricultural work.

enthusiasm to educate their children seals off their fate and banishes the Musahars to a life of labour and servitude.

Table 1.3: Children of the Schedule Castes (5-14yrs) in School

All Dalit-India	All Dailt-Bihar	Chamar	Dusadh	Pasi	Dhobi	Musahar	Bhuiyan
	29.4	33.7	34.1	39.4	45.6	9.8	15.1

Source: Tabulated by Sajjad Hassan from Mahadlit Ayog (2007)

The Musahars due to their scarce economic resources in most cases can access only Government schools located in areas populated by them. Some of such schools are recognized exclusively for the Musahars, but few children of other Dalits too are enrolled along with them. Prevalence of large-scale absenteeism of registered children is definitely not as much a reflection of their unwillingness, as much as it is a reproduction of caste relations. This reproduction of caste-based domination and subordination on one hand unduly favours some children and on other hand disfavours the others. The Musahars' children desire to go to school but are scared of the other children who belong to upper castes, and who maintain distance and discriminate against them. The caste identity is mainly reproduced by the upper caste teachers who are uninterested in teaching and very commonly beat children. Even after passing primary classes, children are unable to read the basic texts. Also, it is found that teachers and staff members are unwilling to admit Musahars' children. They are found to be openly saying "yeh, sab Jati kay log humarayyanahiaatayhain" (children of all caste groups cannot approach our school) (Chokhani 2017: 575-577). Rinki Chokhani (2017) in her close work on Musahars education called *Schooling and Inequality in the Mushars Community of Bihar* also revealed that, Musahars' children are deprived of even the basic rights of survival. They are not only

discriminated against and excluded by the non-scheduled caste populations but also by their neighbouring Dalit counterparts as well.

Although, all SC literates of Bihar did not even complete primary schooling, 28.4 percent and 13.1 percent of literate SCs attained education up to primary and middle levels respectively (Table 1.4). While one-fifth of SC literates are able to get educated up to matriculation or beyond: with only 3.6 percent graduating or going on to get a post-graduate qualification and a meager 0.1 percent gaining a non-technical or technical diploma certificate (GoI, 2001). Among the major SCs, *Dhobis* had the highest proportion of matriculates (19.7 percent). On the other hand, the Musahars and the Bhuiyas are not even able to complete primary education. Around 44 per cent of them are below the primary education level, and also only 5.5 per cent reach to pursue matriculation, which is lowest amongst the Dalits (Table 1.4). With regards to graduation and above which is most critical, it is only 0.8 per cent, and none of them even manage to get a technical diploma. Asarfi Sada a literate Musahar and state president of Musahar Vikas Manch said that nearly 70 years after India's independence, none of us have become a medical doctor and there is only one PhD scholar from the community, reflecting the sorry state of education in the community.

Table 1.4: Levels of education amongst the Scheduled castes

Name of SCs	Literate without education	Below primary	Primary	Middle	Educational level attained Matriculated/secondary/higher secondary/intermediate etc.	Technical and non-technical diploma etc.	Graduate and above
All SC	6.6	33.1	28.4	13.1	15.1	0.1	3.6
Bhuiya	15.3	44.1	26.5	7.4	6	Nil	0.6
Chamar	5.9	33.6	28.5	13.4	15	0.1	3.5
Dhobi	4.5	28.3	27	14.9	19.7	0.2	5.4
Dusadh	6	32	28.5	13.7	16.1	0.1	3.5
Musahar	15.3	44	27.8	6.7	5.5	Nil	0.8
Pasi	5.7	30	27.1	13.4	17.9	0.2	5.6

Source: Census of India 2001

However, the Musahars' lack of education and temporariness of employment are interlinked as in the process they are not acquiring other skills which make them suitable for other forms of employment. Such a reproductive structure is primarily embedded in their landlessness and irregular source of income. Thus, caste and landownership not merely determine income, but also the power to access resources like education, food and health. Due to deplorable living conditions the Musahars' children too after completing their primary or secondary schooling have to work either like their ancestors as *kamia* or migrate to far off places. The hegemonic interests of the upper castes ensure that the Musahars always remain illiterate and are, therefore, a readily available source of cheap labour. In some villages, Musahars' parents even have to ask permission from landlords to send their children to school. As Van Soest and Bryant (1995) point out, the biased nature of educational institutions, rural schools in Bihar deprive the Musahars of the opportunity for emotional, cultural and intellectual growth by systematically ignoring or depreciating their cultural background. Therefore, the Musahars' dependence on the landlords continues because they receive no education that might help them acquire alternative skills to those needed in working for the landlords. As the landlords seek to reduce their own dependence on their workers to a minimum, the vulnerability of the Musahars actually increases.

The Right to Education Act, 2009 focuses on the equal opportunity for all children to acquire education. However, the findings of the study revealed that the Musahars' children are far away from benefitting from it and in fact distant even from the fundamental right of survival. The mid-day meal program was initiated with the objective to raise enrolment, attendance, retention, and the nutritional levels amongst the children (Samson, et al 2007). However, many studies depicted that the quality and quantity food is poor. The children of the Musahars shared that the grains used for MDM seem too below-standard, broken and blackish. The preparation of food is unhygienic, and on several

occasions in food one finds *Mitti, Kira, Makora, Pillu*, etc. (Chokhani 2017: 575-576).

The government of Bihar initiated a special scholarship provision to provide Rs. 1200/- per annum to each *Musahar* student for their educational development. But due to the erratic nature and delay of distribution of scholarships in school, they have not benefitted from the same. It was found that children enrolling in school for three to five years received five hundred rupees, only on one occasion. Due to their absence, Musahars are unable to take the benefits of reservation policy for SCs, not merely scholarships and also from employment, as the other Dalits do.

Breaking the Chains of Domination: The Role of Education

As discussed, the Musahars' landlessness and illiteracy continues to reproduce them as landless bonded labourers. To me, the solution of the upward mobility of the Musahars lies, particularly in gaining access to education. The more they become literate, they become better informed and are conscious about their rights. For Ambedkar, education was an instrument to liberate the depressed class from illiteracy, ignorance and superstitions. In this way, education would enable them to fight against all forms of injustice, exploitation and oppression. Ambedkar held a strong belief that, if the Dalits are educated then only, they can shed away their traditional occupations and take up secular occupations to break the age-old caste-based divisions of labourers in *varna-ashrama* based society (*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 17- Part 01*, Reprinted by Government of Maharashtra 2003; 2014:227,271).

Section II: Exploring Policy Outcomes Critical Analysis of the Policies and the Programmes for the Musahars:

Post-independence Bihar was the first state to abolish the Zamindari system in 1948 through the Bihar Zamindari Abolition Act. However, this Act was seen as inadequate for comprehensive land reform. It was later revised as the Bihar Land Reforms Act of 1950. Land ceiling measures were introduced in the Bihar Legislature in 1955 and 1962, aiming to define "surplus land" and enable its

acquisition through legislation. Unfortunately, the redistribution of surplus land among the landless has made little progress (Hassan 2014). Furthermore, these reforms also applied to those who voluntarily donated their land under the Bhoodan² program. The Bandopadhyay Committee in 2008 broadened the scope of land reforms to encompass both agricultural and homestead land. However, Bihar's legislation contained various loopholes that allowed landowners to transfer land to benami holders and relatives. P.C. Joshi criticized these reforms as not as effective as comprehensive land reforms (Joshi 1975). In addition to agricultural land issues, the Musahars also face housing-related challenges. They typically reside in makeshift huts or one-room mud houses on land they do not own. The Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) of 1985 aimed to assist rural individuals below the poverty line, including SCs and STs, freed bonded laborers, and others, in constructing dwellings or upgrading existing kutcha houses through grants-in-aid (Ministry of Rural Development, GoI 2013).

In the beginning, IAY found the SCs and STs ineligible because they neither have access to land for building a house nor have legal ownership rights over the homestead land on which they have been residing since long. Later, with the recommendations of the Eleventh Five Year Plan, the Central Government in August 2009 approved a scheme to provide homestead sites to rural BPL households. As per the scheme, the beneficiaries will be selected from the permanent IAY waitlists as per their priority in the list. State governments have also come up with schemes to regularise the land as a homestead for the BPL household. In these schemes, state government's either regularise them at the place they were situated, or they will provide land to them. Where the state governments are supposed to purchase or acquire private land for homestead sites in case suitable government land is not available for the purpose. Periodic evaluations of the scheme reveal serious limitations in the implementation of the schemes (Majumdar 2005; Nair 1999.). It is marred with favouritism, casteism and bribery in the selection of beneficiaries, disregarding official guidelines. The lump sum payment of the financial assistance is large enough to again attract substantial corruption. However, Himanshu Kumar and Rohini Than's study (2017) finds the Indira Awas Yojana successful policy, which includes one-time transfer and reaches out to the Dalits like the Musahars. Therefore, the ownership of house and homestead land is thus important for the overall well-being and

empowerment of the Dalits, especially the landless rural labourers. As per census records, rural areas account for about 71 per cent of the population and nearly 65 per cent of the housing shortage in the country (Census of India, 2001). Overall, many field studies show the reality of these land providing schemes. First Hassan's field study in Narauli village, adjacent to Dumri shows that of all landless Musahar households, only 14 had received homestead land right in 2010-2011, and 7 in 2011-2012 (Hassan 2014). He also suggests that the problem in the speedy implementation of the programme is because the government land is not available close to habitations where the Musahars would prefer. There was a livelihood compulsion; the provision of Rs. 20,000 for local authorities to buy private land from the market where not available is not adequate. However, one of the studies found that only 9.8 per cent of land could be distributed among the poor on account of large-scale evasion in the form of a transfer to the family members or *benamidars* (Sachidanand 1986). P.S. Appu cited a senior bureaucrat very much in helm of affairs of implementation of land reforms admits: "India is the only country where the judiciary has played a crucial role in frustrating and stultifying land". Appu further in case of Bihar argues that "Bihar dismal performance in the field of land reforms has been largely due to overhauling sway of large land holder over rural society and their dominant influence over the state and administration (Appu 1993: 51-53).

The Emergence of the 'Mahadalit' Category: In 2007, the Bihar government created the Mahadalit category for the most backward Dalit sub-castes, constituting 31% of the state's Dalit population. This move aimed to address the socio-economic backwardness of certain Dalit groups despite existing policies. The Bihar Mahadalit Commission identified 18 out of 22 sub-castes as Mahadalits, excluding Paswans, Pasis, Dhobis, and Chamars. The Musahars, among others, were found to be in dire conditions. The Bihar government, with the influence of social movements, established the Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission (MVM) to focus on Mahadalit development. They introduced a package of programs, mainly leveraging existing national social protection schemes, to better target and support this group. (Kumar and Somanathan 2017: 4-5).

Secondly, the MVM focuses on the distribution of radios to educate the Mahadalit. Their target was to distribute radios to 2.2 million families, and it has already distributed 500,000 radios in 12 districts. The third focus is not merely on education rather it is also to create some vocational and skill training programmes that match the market demand. For that, the government has come up with a range of programmes, such as

² Bhoodan signifies the act of voluntarily contributing land to individuals without land ownership. Landlords willingly provided land as a gift to those who did not possess it.

mobile phone repair, which currently enrolls between 15,000-20,000 Mahadalit. The Mahadalit Awas Bhoomi Yojana policy emphasizes on the importance of land and shelter. For that the government aims to provide three decimals (*circa* 1300 square feet) of homestead land to landless Mahadalit families. Their report says that 100,000 families have received land. Despite some success of the above-mentioned policies, several policies have failed to achieve the set goals. The following sub-section enlists some such failures and accounts for the various reasons that could have led to the same.

Examining the Gaps: Why Policies Miss the Mark:

(a). Re-categorization by numbers rather than the living conditions: Many studies including the Mahadalit Ayog Report has shown the importance of making of the Mahadalit category to revise the previous insufficientness of policies and schemes for the Dalits. The creation of Mahadalit was also a realisation that the development should reach the most backward members of the society. The Dalits like Musahars, Doms and Chamars celebrated it as their dream came true. However, the vision remained to be an ideal. It entangled the masses through the techniques of the state which connive to invisibilise its past failures and to sustain those in power. It recreated the policies leading also to reverse inequalities, to gain some political mileage for the future. As we have understood though the emergence of *Mahadalit*, at the first sight seems justified on the basis of socio-economic as well as political backwardness of the masses. When we look at it the other way around it seems as if it was an appeasement to gain from their political numbers rather than being for their welfare. However, as we also know that Dusadhs was not part of the Mahadalit group before and the Commission in their later reports included the Dusadhs as Mahadalits. Their inclusion was not because of their socio-economic backwardness but due to political pressure and their numbers. Dusadhs are the second largest Dalit caste in the state. Further, it poses the question who is not a Mahadalit amongst the Dalits because the census has identified 21 of the 22 Dalit sub-castes as Mahadalits. Therefore, after the inclusion of Dusadh as Mahadalits, there is nothing to differentiate between the Dalits and the Mahadalits. The Bihar Mahadalit Commission official Uday Kumar admits that now all dalits are Mahadalits (IANS 2015).

While I interviewed Jiten Ram Manjhi he said that the decision to evolve a Mahadalit was ideally correct, but it gave up this ideal simply for the purpose of electoral gains. As per the ideal focus was on the Musahars, Doms and the Chamars. Therefore, those Dalits who are in good numbers were not merely taking advantage of policies but

also getting politically recruited as Vikas Mitra and there were reserved seats for election. Though there is the element of electoral politics in making the distinction between the Dalit and Mahadalit, there certainly is and has been an internal hierarchy between the various Dalit castes. Some of the dalits like the Dhobis, the Paswans and the Pasis behave like upper castes because of their relatively better off socio-economic conditions than the Musahars, the Doms and the Chamars.

(b). Administrative mechanism as pro-high caste and anti-Dalits: The Mahadalit Vikas Mission employs *VikasMitra* to strengthen the institutionalization of patronage network. However due to the existing administrative structure *Vikas Mitra* was unable to strengthen the marginalized people. They are busy either in completing the documents of the Mahadalit candidate or other office work. But in the beginning, their recruitment was not for office work. It was meant for mediating the gap between the people who were largely unaware of the policies and programs and the administration. Further, most of the higher positions in the administration are still held by the upper caste officers and hold immense power over resources meant for administration.

Conclusion:

This paper has made an extensive survey of the socio-economic conditions of the Dalits in Bihar and specifically the Musahars through published work as well as experiences from the field study. It used the three key indicators— land, migration and education. On all these indicators the Musahars figured at the bottom. More importantly it is found that the semi-feudal socio-economic structure continues to reproduce them as they are. The new economic reforms have only further pushed them to the margins. This chapter also made an extensive survey of the policies and programmes for the Musahars including the report of the Mahadalit Ayog and has assessed their working. It was found that not only are such policies implemented halfheartedly, but also that bureaucracy working in connivance with the powerful is least enthusiastic in delivering them. The Musahars despite falling under the category of the Mahadalit originally crafted to benefit the least advantaged like them, have gained little from such initiatives.

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