

Chapter 9

Musahars

What Keeps Musahars Entrapped in Poverty?



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Dinesh Manjhi's life has run in fast motion—at 19, he is brother to two sisters and a younger brother, son to his 55-year-old mother, and breadwinner to all. His father died a year ago, due to a sudden illness that the family is still unclear about—but it is not uncommon for men in this labouring community of Musahars to drop down dead, unable to bear the burden of back-breaking manual work on an undernourished body any further. But Dinesh's early tryst with adulthood began much before his father's demise. It was at least seven years ago that—forced by extreme poverty at home—his father first took Dinesh along to Gurdaspur, i Punjab, to help with errands on the farm that he himself worked on as a seasonal worker. Work was hard, but it added a valuable extra amount to what his father saved to bring back home every season.

When Dinesh is not labouring on farms in Punjab, he is at home, in Dumri village in Bihar, eking out a living as a construction labourer in neighbouring Muzaffarpur town, earning between ₹00–150 a day, on days that he is able to find work. His younger brother, Mukesh, 15, is following in Dinesh's footsteps—picking up the skills of construction labour, even though the work is hard and hazardous. But that is still better than opportunities in Dumri itself, as farm hand, available at most for 15–20 days a year, during the (paddy or wheat) harvesting season, at about ₹100 per day. There is no other source of income—we can only do what we are good at, working with mitti (earth) is what we do', says Dinesh, ruefully. They of course have no land of their own to till—resigned forever to till lands of others. The burden of the large debt of ₹27,000 the family owes the local moneylender on account of the expenses on his father's shraad (funeral), and Dinesh's own wedding a few months ago, mostly, but not only, means that the pressure to keep earning to survive, whilst paying off a part of the debt,

makes the search for employment a desperate one. Punjab, despite its many hardships, is still an attractive destination.

No one in Dinesh's family has a job card under the flagship wage employment scheme for the poor—the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Nor is his mother registered under the government pension scheme for widows, although the family has made many attempts to be put on both lists. There is a 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL) card in the name of his late father, but that hardly gets them much grain or anything else. Despite their acute poverty, Dinesh and his family hardly know much about welfare programmes, including those designed specifically for Dalits.

1. Introduction

Musahars, according to some anthropological accounts, draw their antecedents from the Kol tribe of Chhotanagpur (in Jharkhand), having migrated to paddy cultivable areas of what is currently Bihar, probably from the 12th century, and have been the single largest source of agricultural labour in the region since. In their movement from tribal hills to the plains, they came in contact with a sedentary, agricultural, caste-based society, characterized by Brahmanical concepts of purity and pollution, and were incorporated into the caste hierarchy at the lowest rank, becoming untouchable. According to Rafiul Ahmed, from the hills to the plains, the fate of the Musahars appears to have had a clear downward slope. The closer they came to the rice bowl, the deeper they were pulled into indigence and misery.¹ But precisely where they acquired the title Musahar is disputed—according to John Nesfield, it alludes to them being a 'flesh-eating' community, 'masu', meaning flesh and 'hera' meaning seeker.² On the other hand, Herbert Hope Risley concluded that the word referred to the Musahars' fondness

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for eating field rats.³ In either case, Ahmed says, it was an opprobrious epithet bestowed on Musahars by caste Hindus.⁴

Dinesh's story represents the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Musahars (total population: 3,500,000 nationally; 2,100,000 in Bihar state; and 60,000 in Muzaffarpur district, of which Dumri village is a part),⁵ among the poorest people in India, caught between survival and despair. There is not enough to eat, nothing to invest in education and health, and nothing, of course, for the small joys of life. Musahars, as a rule, have no choice of opportunities—being stuck with hard labour mostly on fields, but now also other manual work—for life. Social protection schemes, designed for people exactly like Dinesh, have all bypassed them, because the programmes fail to reach them, and Musahars themselves are too busy chasing survival to bother much about demanding entitlements. In effect, Dinesh and his Musahar kinsmen have little freedom or choice and little hope of gaining either soon. The abiding impression is of utter hopelessness, of the permanence of poverty and destitution, and an inability to come out of this situation. What Dinesh's condition is today was his father's, and in all likelihood will be his children's tomorrow. It is no wonder then that Musahars themselves blame it all on destiny, content to labour on and make the best of a desperate life. But is that justice? And how long can a society—even as stubbornly unequal as India's—bear the burden of this injustice? There is no escaping these questions.

What enables extreme poverty, of the kind suffered by Musahars, to endure in India? Why cannot the poorest escape the poverty trap, even across generations, despite policies and programmes, and economic and political changes and opportunities all around? This chapter seeks to understand why, in the case of the Musahars, poverty continues to be so resilient. In addressing these questions, the prism of chronic poverty is used to understand the *drivers* and *maintainers* of poverty,⁶ such as poor asset base and weak capabilities, and structural factors like unequal land distribution and caste hierarchies, which hold back marginalized communities from making use of newer opportunities. This connects to the use of the social exclusion framework,⁷ to help grasp

the nature of exclusion among Musahars, and the processes that sustain unequal relations.

Research for this chapter was conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies in June 2012 in Narauli and Dumri villages, in Musahari block of Muzaffarpur district. It involved qualitative household surveys to understand the Musahar situation—their assets and capabilities, access to resources and opportunities, and expectations about themselves and their children. This ethnographic examination required our immersion in the life of the community, to observe how Musahars negotiate opportunities and barriers, and what survival strategies they choose in the face of those. Focus group discussions were held with different sections to help understand in a deeper way the group dynamics and underlying forces—social norms and attitudes—determining the choices available to people. Musahar participation in village-level institutions was also examined, to understand their access to opportunities and entitlements. Interactions with service providers helped examine how Musahars negotiate their interaction with state agents over the implementation of laws and access to entitlements. Comparisons were made across the range of variables with non-Musahar sections in the village, such as other lower castes, who seem to have been more successful in overcoming exclusion, as well as upper caste and richer groups, who are part of the explanation for the enduring Musahar destitution. And finally, a visit was made to the neighbouring East Champaran district, to observe the work being done there by the Musahar Vikas Manch (MVM). MVM is a community organization of Musahars that has been mobilizing the community for rights and entitlements, demonstrating many successes, but also frustrated in its attempts to get state agents to side more vigorously with Musahars and their struggles for dignity and a better life for their children.

The rest of the chapter is arranged as follows: In section two, the specific nature of Musahar exclusion is examined, focussing in particular on the role of caste in sustaining their exploitation and marginalization. Section three discusses some of the key characteristics of Musahar poverty and exclusion, including their extremely high level of asset and capability deprivation and its

resulting impacts on their livelihoods, expenditure and saving patterns, and human development outcomes. Section four examines attempts by civil society to mobilize Musahars and strengthen their 'voice', and, finally, section five concludes with some preliminary recommendations for reforms.⁸

2. The Enduring Power of Caste in Sustaining Musahar Exclusion

To understand Dinesh's plight, it is important to understand the social context in which the Musahars live. Dumri, a village of the Gram Panchayat by the same name, in Musahari block of Muzaffarpur district, has a population of 5,996 persons, a total of 1,262 households.⁹ It has a mixed demographic profile, with Dalits being in the majority (predominantly Musahars), along with Kurmis, Yadavs, Kayashtas, Bhumihars and Brahmins. The leader of the Sarvodaya movement, Jayaprakash Narayan, writing about the Musahari block, where he spent many months in 1970, described its situation in the following words:

*My first experience on coming face to face with the reality of Mushahari was to realize how remote and unreal were the brave pronouncements of Delhi or Patna from the actuality at the ground level. Ultimately what meets the eye are utter poverty, misery, backwardness, frustration and loss of hope.*¹⁰

He went on to describe the problem:

*The situation was characterised by a lack of land for many in the area; an uncommon dominance of the landowning families; exceptionally low wages, particularly for attached labourers; a high degree of unemployment; extreme poverty of agricultural labourers; and a general climate of discontent.*¹¹

Even today, poverty and inequality are embedded in the social structure, with upper castes controlling much of the assets and opportunities. Musahars exist at the bottom of that scale. Dependence continues to be high—exploration in Dumri and Narauli revealed aspects of Musahar

life that bound them to insecure work and poor, non-remunerative wages, involving richer landlords. Each Musahar (indeed, Dalit) family is linked to a *grihasta* family, in some sort of a symbiotic (but unequal) relationship between the two, which is wholly disadvantageous for the Musahar. Typically, the Musahar family (*kamia* or *mazdoor*), lives on land belonging to the landlord. In return the *malik* (owner) has first right over the *kamia's* labour, for work on fields or minding cattle or household chores, at a significantly reduced daily wage rate of ₹25–40 per day, paid mostly in kind. The *kamia* would be able to earn higher wages if he worked elsewhere, but that choice is not his. Only when the *malik* has no need for the *kamia's* labour can the latter choose to work elsewhere. Upper caste landlords defend the system claiming, 'we are their family and provide for them in *sukh* 'aur' *dukh* (good times and bad). We give them money they need and other forms of help'. However, as the Musahars claimed, 'all the money we borrow comes to us as loans, at steep rates of interest'. Mostly, *maliks* are the moneylenders that entrap the hapless *kamia* Musahar.

There are other forms of dependence too, such as Musahars having to use common lands in villages (*ghairmazrua* land)—that are mostly occupied illegally by upper caste families—or use land belonging to upper caste farmers, for reasons as varied as grazing livestock or meeting the call of nature, even to use ponds and water bodies for bathing and washing, and for livestock. None of these resources is owned by the poor. The rich use these assets as negotiating tools when faced with demands by labourers for better wages or against exploitation. *Maliks*, meanwhile continue to be the strongest powers in the village—having reinvented themselves as politicians, government functionaries, or traders and moneylenders—all with great local clout.' Please insert em dash between 'moneylenders' and 'all'. For Musahars—singly or collectively—to stand up to this web of local power is a tough and potentially dangerous call.

The strongest resistance by the rich and those locally called *dabbangs* (strong men), is towards attempts by Musahars and other landless groups (either by themselves or with support from the government) to obtain rights over land—homestead and agricultural. It is recognized by Musahars and sympathetic non-Musahars that land ownership

could be the game changer for landless groups like the Musahars. But there is very little progress there, belying laws and expectations. Any rights for the Musahars, as can be imagined, would come at the cost of the rich, and would cut into their authority, thus the pushback. Given the extent to which village or government land is illegally occupied by the powerful, it is no wonder that the government's attempts even to allocate the supposedly less contentious government land (as opposed to taking surplus land away from the rich for redistributing among the landless), comes up against stiff resistance. Many accounts are heard of claims by the landless and resistance by the powerful over land, and the failure of the government to enforce its own laws in favour of the landless. These are increasingly leading to class and caste tensions, often flaring up into violence

In a significant effort towards reducing class tensions in Bihar in the early 1970s, Jayaprakash Narayan sought to goad landlords in Musahari block (including Dumri and Narauli, and neighbouring villages) to voluntarily part with surplus land in favour of the landless. It was clear by then that the Bihar government had failed in its attempt to enforce the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, the first major land redistribution effort in independent India. In return for this gesture of goodwill, the labouring classes were expected to engage in a programme of constructive work, and abjure violence, which was, at the time, sweeping Musahari block. It is edifying to note that while the lower classes kept their part of the bargain—Musahari and neighbouring areas have, to this day, remained islands of peace in a Bihar otherwise wrecked by caste and class violence—it was the landlords who held back, using prevarications and subterfuge to maintain their hold on the grossly unequal distribution of land, and the power that it brings.¹²

3. Key Characteristics of Musahar Poverty and Exclusion

3.1 Extreme Level of Asset and Capability Deprivation

Illustrating the near-complete absence of land reforms, a recent study on chronic poverty in Musahari block found that 80 per cent of all families

were landless, with another 13.5 per cent being marginal landholders.¹³ There was high incidence of (distress) migration, and as much as two-fifths of all lower castes were chronically poor 'owing to a persistent lack of infrastructure improvement, natural calamities like floods and droughts, and socio-economic challenges like malnutrition, caste deprivations, illiteracy, unemployment and the crime-politics nexus'.¹⁴ A household survey by the Centre for Equity Studies (CES) in Dumri, using a small sample,¹⁵ asked qualitative questions on assets, capabilities and access to public services and institutions. The survey revealed some startling facts about the village and its social profile, pointing to the roots of poverty there. While upper caste households—Srivastavs, Bhumiars and Brahmins mostly—own most of the land, (on an average 5 *bighas* per household),¹⁶ middle castes—mostly Kurmis—and the progressive sections among the Dalits—Rams, Paswans and Dhobis, for instance—though technically landless, were mostly sharecroppers on lands owned by others, or even marginal landowners. It was the Musahars, mostly, who were wholly landless. Only a handful owned the land on which their houses were built. But it is not only land that Musahars were deprived of. They lacked all forms of assets—livestock, housing and savings. The typical Musahar abode was a thatched hut or where a family was fortunate, as Dinesh's was, a brick house through the national housing scheme for the poor, the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY). A few households had poultry, or a goat or two. On the other hand, upper caste sections of the village domesticated cattle, cows and buffaloes, for milk, to consume or to supplement their income. All had brick houses on land that belonged to them. Even non-Musahar Dalits generally had some livestock, typically goats and pigs, which helped with consumption at home and extra income, when in need.

Discussions around capabilities revealed a similar story. All upper caste families had one or more members' with some degree of formal education, most men having received higher education, some even with professional degrees, such as law. Women, though lagging behind, were still educated, and girls in the younger generation, as much as boys, were attending school, with many going to private ones. Those going to government schools took private tuitions to supplement the

teaching there. Dalit families, on the other hand, were mostly uneducated. Kurmis, Rams, Paswans and Dhobis had children attending government schools, with many having gone on to high school and college. All communities demonstrated a strong desire to see their children educated and not suffer the fate they had due to lack of opportunities. Among the Musahars, none of the families had children who had attended school beyond Class III or Class IV.

Literacy rates for Musahars, shown in Table 9.1, are in fact at the very bottom, far below the national and even the all-Bihar level for Dalits, which is quite poor in itself. Among women, literacy was reported at a shocking 2 per cent. The inability of Musahars to benefit from education is also reflected in the dismal percentage of children in school (see Table 9.1), compared again to the relatively favourable trend among the rest of the Dalits. These figures are also skewed against girls. The chronic poverty survey found that among the Musahars the school dropout rate is almost 100 per cent.¹⁷

Other Dalit communities, as the data shows, have been making use of new opportunities— in the public and private realms—and gaining in literacy, in the process creating newer opportunities for themselves outside of traditional, mostly exploitative arrangements. On the other hand, poor education practically seals off their fate and banishes the Musahars to a life of labour and servitude. Though aware that education might be the game changer for their children, Musahar families appeared less sure of how to provide this for them. Parents spoke of economic hardships, their inability to discipline their children to adjust to the demands of formal education, and the fact that children did not seem to like school atmosphere.

3.2 Restricted Livelihood Opportunities

Asset and capability deprivation creates a very different set of livelihood options for Musahars, in comparison with other communities. A baseline survey of the socio-economic condition of Mahadalits across Bihar by the Mahadalit Ayog¹⁸ in 2007, threw up some revealing data on the condition of the poorest sections of Dalits, highlighting the sad plight of the Musahars even among this marginalized category. The Musahars, along with the Bhuiyans in southern Bihar, make up over 20 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Bihar. Data in Table 9.2 shows that an overwhelming majority of them were agricultural labourers—the highest for all Dalit groups, much higher than for Ravidas and Paswan, the other large agricultural communities—and only a few were cultivators or indeed engaged in any other profession. The Work Participation Rate among them was the highest for all Dalits in Bihar, in fact the highest among any social group nationally.¹⁹ This over-representation of the Musahars among the ‘toiling masses’ goes a long way in explaining why they continue to be trapped in chronic poverty.

Research in Dumri revealed similar livelihood patterns: upper caste households were large farmers, not working on the land themselves, but employing lower caste Dalits to till the land for them. Most households also had members with salaried jobs—teachers, lawyers, clerks in government offices, and now increasingly in the private sector. This domination of the upper castes in formal employment has continued, with newer opportunities also largely cornered by them. For instance, many women from upper caste families were appointed as *shiksha mitras* (para-teachers) but none from Dalit backgrounds. Middle castes were mostly sharecroppers, having contracted

Table 9.1 Literacy Rate and Children in School for Different Dalit Communities

	All Dalit- India	All Dalit - Bihar	Dhobi	Pasi	Dusadh	Chamar	Bhuiyan	Musahar
Literacy Rate	54.7	28.5	43.9	40.6	33.0	32.1	13.3	9.0
Children (5-14yrs) in school	-	29.4	45.6	39.4	34.1	33.7	15.1	9.8

Source: Compiled from Mahadalit Ayog (2007), *Report*, Patna: Mahadalit Ayog.

Table 9.2 Percentage Distribution of Workers for Different Dalit Communities

Category	All Dalit – India	All Dalit – 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 Workers	3.3	3.3	2.1	1.6	12.2	9.6	1.0	0.8
Other Workers	30.5	11.2	9.8	12.2	29.0	27.5	5.6	4.0

Source: Tabulated by author from Mahadalit Ayog (2007), *Report*.

land from richer farmers, or were farmer-owners themselves, working small patches, although many continued to be kept out of the land market, having to work as rickshaw pullers or as help in shops, some even as head-loaders in Muzaffarpur town. Musahars were, again, unfavourably positioned in that they all worked as seasonal labourers on farms in Dumri and on construction projects in Muzaffarpur, or they migrated to do similar work elsewhere, in Punjab or Delhi or Gujarat, with their livelihoods being highly vulnerable.

Consider Dinesh—what livelihood choices does he have today? He can be a farm hand, earning ₹50 per day on average, at best ₹100–150 at harvest time, but that opportunity only presents itself once in a while. More secure is work as construction labour, what he calls *kudali ka kaam* ‘(work of the spade)’, at a relatively high wage rate and with the security of finding work more regularly. But the work is harsh and demanding, and not all have the required skills. The only other option is to leave home and hearth behind, and travel to Punjab or urban metropolises, in search of agricultural or construction-related work. There is no escape from hard labour.

Pramod Manjhi, who works in a brick kiln, close to Dumri, described his harsh daily routine.

I begin work before the break of dawn—mixing and kneading mud into fine paste, before pouring the matter into moulds, then stacking them up, nimbly, to prevent damage, and covering up the kiln before firing it. That the brick kiln sets up operations in cold months makes this difficult job all the more challenging—having to work with ice-cold mud. I rest little—it’s a 12–14 hour shift—there is little respite from the daily

grind, and I am usually too tired to eat well. I consume liquor just to ease the pain. The work sucks me dry (choos leta hai). But I like this job, and do it willingly for over six months a year, because the wage is good—₹00 a day—and employment is assured close to home’.

Overall, the Musahars seem not to have escaped the traditional link to land and labour in the caste occupational distribution in village. They are involved in very arduous physical labour, mostly on agricultural farms, but also on construction sites and brick kilns, although migration is opening up more choices not available back in the village. Wage rates on farms, and especially for women, are very low.²⁰ There is a significant seasonality in work availability, with agricultural work being available only for a few months a year. When the Musahars were asked in discussions why wages on farms were so low, they told us: ‘*maliks* (meaning landowners) are unwilling to raise it, and do so only during (peak) sowing and harvest season’, when markets do not favour them. Dumri’s location by the river Gandak and the annual cycle of flooding—which keeps much of the agricultural land submerged for an extended period during the year—means that there is only one crop where work (sowing or harvesting) is available. This puts the poor at greater risk, increasing their dependence on those with land. Outside of the peak seasons then, wage rates are much below the minimum wage rate. ‘Since there is little work available, we are in no position to refuse the work’, said one respondent, adding, ‘if we protest, there will be some among us who will go and work anyway [he did not say so explicitly, but this is presumably because of desperation], so the protest breaks up. People do not want *jhanjhat* (trouble)’, and no one protests.

Work on brick kilns brings in some money but is very disabling. In some cases entire families are involved in the work, including children. This, of course, comes at the cost of future prospects for children and access to food entitlements. Work in brick kilns, or through contractors on farms in Punjab, for example, is tied in to moneylending, and therefore verges on semi-bondage. There is little savings at the end of the day. But agricultural employment, being highly vulnerable, forces Musahars to accept what they understand are adverse forms of employment, considering that dependence on moneylenders for loans to last out the lean unemployed season is high. The fact that much of the agricultural land in the area is flooded most of the year means labourers have that much less work in their own villages—‘half the year we just live without work’, said a Musahar respondent.

Crucially, related to these occupational patterns, Dalit bondage has cultural sanction, and hence has been difficult to undo. The close relationship between different castes and the specific occupations they are expected to occupy, imposed by the Hindu *jajmani* system,²¹ has meant that the expectation, both of the upper caste population as well as Musahars themselves, in this case, is for the latter to continue to be associated with agricultural labour. Village life may be seeing real changes, and the current generation of Musahars may have the option of migrating out in search of alternatives, but dependence on *grihastas* continues to be high. This is confirmed by literature, which is unclear on whether there has been a weakening of the *jajmani* system or if it continues, perhaps in newer forms of bondage.²² Behind this is the interlocking nature of deprivations, with the social and economic structure working on the political, to ensure that a breaking out of it is arduous, if not wholly impossible.

Other factors also restrict the ability of Musahars to switch to alternative forms of employment, both in agriculture and elsewhere. Ramnath Ram is a father of four and a marginal farmer who lives on the outskirts of Dumri. By Dalit standards, Ramnath has done well for himself and his family. He has some savings that he invests in cultivation—to buy seeds and fertilizer, as well as to be able to use a tractor to plough his field, measuring a decent 20 *kathas* (less than half an acre), that he has leased from Ajai Singh, the principal Bhumihar landowner in the village. His response to why other Musahars

have not been able to become sharecroppers is that landowners need assets for collateral before they can part with their land. They also need to have trust in your ability to generate a surplus for them. Musahars have neither assets that they can demonstrate to landowners nor are they accustomed to farming. Thus, even if they wanted, they would face difficulty in obtaining *bataidari*²³ (or even *thekedari*²⁴) land.

Where Musahars have tried alternative forms of employment, such as selling *sattu* (gram flour), or other items for which there is a market in the village, they have found it difficult to get by. ‘We just do not have the skills for that sort of work. We are good only for labour’, they say, ‘and cannot go selling things from house to house’. Hard, arduous labour is then the core skill of the Musahar, the comparative advantage, so to speak, perhaps also core to their bondage. They have few alternative skills and capabilities for any other form of employment besides hard labour, and do not have any assets or capabilities—land or savings—to move to self-employment ventures.

3.3 Unsustainable Savings and Expenditure Patterns

Caste differences not only determine incomes, but also the basket and pattern of expenditure. While education, food and health were major items of spending for upper castes surveyed in the study, food and health figured as the top expenses among the middle castes. However, the insecure and precarious livelihood of the Musahars forces on them an expenditure pattern that is unsustainable. Almost all that is earned in a day is spent the same day. Across research sites, it was observed that families earned between ₹100 to ₹300 a day (although the number of days was severely limited). Yet, given the large sizes of families to support (six to eight members, counting dependent parents) and the expenditure pattern, there was little left to save for emergencies. Food costs, and sometimes healthcare, accounted for most of the expenditure, but alcohol came up repeatedly as a significant item—with people spending between ₹50 to ₹150 a day. Savings are minimal, and where possible, are more in the form of grain, saved from a previous year’s share of wages. In the absence of any savings, or the ability to spend on essential areas like nutrition and education, there is little

hope of changing this state of things, and possibly moving from being labourers to farmer-owners or petty entrepreneurs. Sons and daughters toil away as their parents do and have always done. Given that social protection schemes fail to provide a safety net, the Musahars are forever trapped in the vicious cycle of eking out a living—unable to exit poverty. Particularly disturbing is the fact that while Dalits as a whole are beginning to turn the corner, as it were, and improving their performance on human development indicators, including better access to livelihoods, it is primarily Musahars who seem stuck in enduring poverty.

Tying into this economics of poor savings is a cultural belief: Musahars consider themselves *kamaake khane waale log* (people who spend away what they earn, living ‘hand to mouth’), with little urge to save for tomorrow. The assumption is that they will earn tomorrow to take care of tomorrow’s need—why bother now? In any case, there is much expenditure to be incurred. Festivals like Chhat and Holi and social events such as marriages and deaths are occasions when Musahars spend a great deal of money—much higher in percentage terms than those in the village with better incomes, and definitely higher than what their own meagre earnings could support. Why these expenditures are considered essential draws a self-fulfilling reply—‘this is what everyone does, this is what society does. If I do not spend, what will others think of me?’ It is not uncommon for Musahars to take hefty loans from moneylenders, at high rates of interest, for these expenses. This contributes to the high incidence of indebtedness, which because of the usurious interest charged by moneylenders and provision shop owners—as much as 5–10 per cent per month—results in families being trapped in debt, unable to invest what they could have saved on buying or leasing land, or starting a small business, or on education for their children.

Clearly, a poor asset base, weak capabilities, and particular social and cultural norms combine with low expectations among Musahars to create a way of life that focusses mostly on the present—with little thought to the future. Interactions with Musahars across different locations demonstrated that they were unable, even unwilling, to plan for longer than a day, spending away whatever they earned the same day. Given the precariousness of their lives, and the hopelessness of their situation,

it is not difficult to see why that is the most rational choice. Musahars, perhaps, do not see the point of investing in better education, a healthy life, a bank balance or in the future, something that comes naturally to others in less harsh situations. Further, their integration with the rest of the society is limited, something that other Dalit communities are managing to overcome, although gradually. Musahars, by and large, live as separate communities, on the outskirts of main habitations that the rest of the village—including even other Dalits—mostly avoid visiting. Being cut off from the ‘mainstream’ contributes to Musahars being unable to make use of newer opportunities, locking them into enduring exclusion.

3.4 Poor Human Development Outcomes

The combined impact of the aforementioned factors is extremely poor progress of Musahars on a wide range of human development indicators. With little money available to spend on food, the invariable consequence is severe malnutrition and high morbidity among Musahars. The Mahadalit Ayog study found evidence of high poverty, food insecurity and chronic under-nutrition among Musahars, often bordering on starvation.²⁵ In combination with poor sanitation and hygiene, the result is high morbidity and mortality—encephalitis, meningitis, cerebral malaria and other diseases take their toll disproportionately on the community.²⁶ The sex ratio is low at 923, even lower than the national average at 936. Contributing to and aggravating the gender imbalance is the low age of marriage, especially for girls. The proportion of Musahar and Bhuiyan girls marrying before the legal age of 18 is much higher than even the high figure for Bihar.²⁷

It seems quite clear that a lack of awareness, and internalization of years of oppression, exploitation and extreme poverty certainly frustrates Musahars’ efforts to improve their condition. Ramnath Ram, the Dalit marginal farmer from Dumri, was asked why he spent so much of his valuable money on his children’s education—he said it would give them *buddhi* and *soch* (intellect and thinking), and perhaps give them a life that he himself never had. Ramnath, although not educated himself, is articulate, and seems aware of the world around him, including his rights and entitlements, and the

confidence to lay claim to them—something which is noticeably absent among the Musahars of Dumri.

Similarly, in encounters with members of the Kurmi community²⁸—all landless and toiling away as farm hands or rickshaw pullers—there was the desire to do better, and see a better life for their children. Mukesh Mahto, a rickshaw puller, though uneducated himself, was clear about the benefits of education for his children, and demonstrated his resolve to support them all the way to acquire a better life, ‘because it is the duty of parents to do so. I will work harder and longer, but I must get the money to get my children through their education’, he said. Another Kurmi person divided time between pulling a rickshaw in Muzaffarpur and sharecropping a small portion of the vast holdings of the local *math* (monastery) with the resources he had built to earn a modest return. ‘We owned land in the past but have been pauperized gradually. Today, we neither have the mind of the Pandit nor the reservation of the Dalit—we are ground in between, with our own body as our greatest asset. We toil and eat off that’, he declared. But the nature of toiling is different. There is also awareness, as well as understanding and the ability to articulate resentment and raise their voices. Mukesh and others like him are not resigned to their fate as the Musahars are.

What are the possible lessons to be learnt here? Other lower castes—Dalits as well as the middle castes—have, over time, managed to save and build resources, while they have realized the importance of and the need to make use of opportunities around them. Most members of prominent non-Musahar Dalits in Dumri, like Rams and Paswans, either had some land of their own, or were sharecroppers on lands owned by others, allowing them a share in the annual harvest. They also had some livestock that served as a source of consumption and supplementary income. These investments in sharecropping or farming lands, as well as in self-employment, are beginning to show results, in terms of more sustainable livelihood opportunities, coupled with rising incomes and savings. Better income means that families are able to send their children to school and also afford the extras needed to give them a decent education, such as better books and private tuition fees. As a consequence, education levels among many lower caste Dalits are rising. Reservations in jobs and the immediate

benefits they provide for secure livelihoods are a big boost for parents to further push their children towards education. Musahars, on the other hand, do not seem to have reached the critical stage yet, where they can see a direct connection between the education their children acquire and possible secure livelihoods, nor do they have role models that will help them take the leap of faith to convert that opportunity into reality, like Rams have in Jagjiwan Ram or Paswans in Ramvilas Paswan, both important, national-level political leaders. The Musahars, so to speak, have not made it yet.

Things are, of course, changing. While the living conditions of Musahars are still quite precarious, the young, especially, no longer accept the domination of the rich and powerful. Whatever may have triggered it—democracy, new rules of the game or plain opportunities—Musahars today seem to have many more choices, and seem more willing to exercise those to challenge the old order. One Musahar group was defiant in insisting that they did not have to work for the rich at low wages. ‘They cannot do anything’, they shot back, ‘If we like, we work. If not, nobody can force us now’. Such ‘everyday forms of resistance’ by Musahars, to borrow from James Scott’s evocative work,²⁹ have a long antecedent. Literature abounds in acts of resistance by individual Musahar communities, often through acts of collective flight, such as an entire Musahar *tola* migrating en masse, and establishing refuges of their own to escape exploitation and suffering at the hands of their upper caste masters.³⁰ Gyan Prakash has described such moves as the act of *kamias* resisting the superpower of *maliks* through their flight from agricultural fields.³¹

4. Pathways to Emancipation: State, Society and the Limits of Public Action

Arun Kumar argues that Musahars’ plight and the failure of many imaginative development schemes for their upliftment highlight the axiom that denial of development to certain groups has been an inexplicable part of India’s culture of development. He goes on to blame the role of state-driven development paradigms, led by local elites and former landlords.³² Tracing Musahar misery

to their incorporation into the Hindu caste system as untouchables, from jungle dwelling hunters to unfree labour, Kumar argues that this was a result of the constant need for a secure supply of labour in the paddy fields. It is the same self-interest, to ensure a regular supply of cheap labour that, Kumar claims, has led to the ruling classes subverting the pro-poor laws they themselves adopted, for instance to redistribute land among the landless and to ensure a fair wage for labour, among others.³³

Sesha Kethineni and Gail Humiston make much the same point to explain poor outcomes for Dalits as a whole. They explain 'lack of political will' as follows:

*The rising middle class may well not want any additional competition, and the wealthy, land owning upper class, which is dependent on cheap labour provided by Dalits, effectively lobbied politicians not to give priority to human rights issues, resulting in the country failing to promote human dignity or improve education among Dalits, and failing to provide economic, social, and cultural rights.*³⁴

The failure of the development effort for Musahars, in this reading of failure of laws and schemes, is not due to any oversight, poor resources or bureaucratic incapacity—rather, it is a deliberate act by those responsible for development to deny it to Musahars (and communities like them), in an attempt to perpetuate the unequal order, where the Musahar is the servant and the upper caste person is the master.

The working of various pro-poor laws and development programmes seems to bear out the aforesaid claims. Laws such as the Minimum Wages Act, 1948; Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976; Inter-State Migrant Workers' (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979; and Schedules Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Abolition of Atrocities) Act, 1989, all of vital importance to Musahars and others in similar circumstances, are routinely violated. And despite a clear consensus that land rights would be the game changer, the Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, which seeks to redistribute surplus land among the landless, such as Musahars, has remained a

complete non-starter. Of course, there are issues of poor capacity and interagency co-ordination, resulting in weak action and excessive red tape and pervasive corruption, preventing the wholesome impact of these laws. But evidence points to plain lack of interest, verging on sabotage, among those charged with implementing the laws, which explains why little attempt is made to create awareness among labourers about laws such as those relating to minimum wages, and no action is taken against employers and labour contractors who violate them.

Similarly, there are failures in the implementation of development schemes. MGNREGS, so well suited to relieve Musahars of their livelihood pressures, works so poorly that it is of little relevance to them.³⁵ Food schemes, such as the Public Distribution System and the Integrated Child Development Scheme remain wrecked by inefficiencies and looting, with Musahars additionally vulnerable to exclusion due to the complicity of managers and frontline providers in depriving them of their benefits. Education initiatives create little value; low enrolment, and near universal dropout rates of Musahar children persist, while centres for out-of-school Dalit children (Utthan Kendras) are run badly and contribute little. Interventions under the Mahadalit Vikas Mission, specifically for Dalits, including Musahars, have belied their expectations, serving as these institutions in reality do the more educated and connected sections of Dalits. Interventions have failed also because of the failing of public service delivery, top down planning, over-centralization, opaque rules and procedures, and little accountability. Musahars continue to be excluded from participation in village level institutions—such as Gram Panchayats and user committees under various programmes, where most of the beneficiaries under development programmes are decided—due to the local power structure being monopolized by caste and class elites.

As with episodic acts of en masse flights from oppression, Musahars have, on occasion, responded to these failures and exclusions through a range of collective actions. Dismal agricultural wages in Madhubani district (₹5–8 per day) and the complete inability of the state to enforce the minimum wage law (₹7 per day at the time), led

Musahars in 1994, organized under the banner of Lok Shakti Sangathan, to mass agitation for fairer wages. Through a long process of mobilization and negotiations, this resulted in landowners being forced to raise wages to ₹15–18 per day.³⁶ But it is not only through mass agitations that Musahars have resisted dominance. They have used other forms too—self-help, such as setting up food banks and Gram Kosh in northern Bihar, as food security measures and to provide credit to Musahar families for meeting consumption needs.³⁷ Musahars have also increasingly turned to political action on the Mahadalit platform, and many Musahars have been elected to state and local assemblies, as well as appointed to high offices.³⁸ Some have also been known to join the ranks of Naxalites as an act of resistance.³⁹ But evidence of whether these forms of ‘participation’—democratic or violent—have resulted in Musahar upliftment is thin. Commentators have noted the salience of caste hierarchies and the durability of exclusions of Musahars in Naxal as well as electoral party spaces to explain poor outcomes.⁴⁰ A Musahar activist from East Champaran puts this in context:

*Untouchability is a deep-seated phenomenon. Even if people sit together and seem not to mind caste differences, they do not enter Dalit houses, do not eat together. The mindset does not change easily. Untouchability, and all the discrimination that comes with it is not going to disappear so easily. We will need to keep up our struggle for a long time.*⁴¹

Community initiatives, such as the one in East Champaran district of Bihar, are increasingly seeking to enable change for the Musahars. Here, a local Non-Governmental Organization, Samajik Shodh Evam Vikas Kendra (SSEVK), with support from Action Aid India, has been mobilizing Musahars’ on the issues of their rights and entitlements, ownership over land, better health and educational attainments social and justice, and against exploitation by non-Dalits, among others. The approach has been to develop Musahar voices and organizations, and to enable members to demand their rights and stand up to power and authority in that effort. The Musahar development forum, Musahar Vikas Manch (MVM), was the

outcome of this process, a community-based organization of Musahars, which, with its network of village, block and district committees, educates Musahars about their entitlements, trains members on how to access rights and engages government agencies to realize those demands. MVM started in the mid-1990s, initially with flood relief work, by partnering with the local administration to respond to health emergencies, taking up education drives and responding to food shortages with community food bank interventions. Now, at 17,000 members strong, and spread over 125 hamlets in 70 Panchayats, MVM is increasingly taking direct action against official apathy and failure to provide services to Musahars. Group meetings, rallies, protest marches and action to petition government offices help MVM reach its large network of members. The aim is to leverage their strength to put pressure on officials and elected local representatives to be accountable.

These efforts, and the approach of developing a ‘voice’ among Musahars through building community capacity to demand and obtain rights, has had a very positive impact—particularly significant given the inherent condition of destitution and subjugation of the community. Musahars in East Champaran district, through MVM, are now able to organize themselves, articulate their views and demands, ask for and access information, and acquire the self-confidence to stand up to officials and oppressive forces in the struggle for their rights. Members also have a political understanding of the larger struggles for dignity and rights, and they are forging relationships with state and regional Musahars as well as oppressed peoples’ organizations and movements. These are significant movements forward.

Since the start of 2013, these efforts at empowering Musahars have been consolidated, with MVM working with the local administration under a programme overseen by national policy bodies, in order to enable better developmental outcomes for the community. The programme entails MVM, on the one hand, working closely with the local district administration to identify Musahar needs and priorities, plan for and deliver them; and on the other hand, mobilizing and building capacities in MVM village and block committees, to put greater day-to-day pressure

on the administration to deliver on agreed plans. Programme performance is a complex phenomenon, and results are still modest—be it distribution of land, provision of wage employment under the NREGS, working of food schemes and housing support, or enforcement of minimum wage and anti-discrimination laws. Some families have obtained homestead land, families left out of IAY coverage have managed to get themselves included, and the administration is now forced to take Musahar issues seriously. Crucially, the opportunity has provided the Musahars of East Champaran, represented by MVM, a better realization of their entitlements, an understanding of the processes involved in achieving the same and the capacity and confidence to both engage with and question authority at village, district and higher levels. The year-long engagement has also mobilized the Musahars, leading to a realization among them to invest more in community capacity and forge stronger alliances with like-minded rights-based groups and networks towards better pro-poor outcomes. Laloo Manjhi, the MVM district committee president, notes that the struggle for rights and dignity is long and hard. It is only the innate strength of MVM that keeps the hope strong.

5. Lessons for the Greater Empowerment of Musahars

In conclusion, a number of important steps are critical in order to support improvements in the conditions of Musahars, on both the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of the equation.

On the ‘demand’ side, key areas include the following:

- Strong ‘institutions of the poor’ on the ground, on the lines of MVM, to constantly negotiate power relations with social forces and state agents, so that the interests of Musahars are upheld. MVM, by organizing Musahars, building capacity among them and mobilizing them to demand their rights and pressurize state agents to deliver, has opened up opportunities for better realization of rights and entitlements. More such institutions need to be strengthened especially at the village level, by building their capacities not only to mobilize the community but also to engage with state actors at local as

well as higher levels to negotiate a better deal for Musahars.

- Strong institutions of the poor enable effective social mobilization, which underlies all successful cases of positive change. For Musahars to transform their condition would require unprecedented social mobilization.
- This, in turn, would require serious and sustained investment in education, to create the awareness, aspiration and capacity to enable the Musahars to become agents of change.

On the ‘supply’ side:

- Given the strong resistance of powerful groups to demands for rights and entitlements by the poor, including Musahars, successful implementation of pro-poor policies would require strong state support to counter anti-poor forces and ensure provisioning of entitlements. Musahars are too vulnerable to be left to do the fighting all by themselves, given the strong anti-poor character of society and the familiar anti-poor stance that state agents themselves take when the interests of the poor conflict with those of the non-poor. State commitment—at the state, district, block and village levels—is crucial to mobilize Musahars and groups like them (to secure their rights and entitlements) and implement development programmes (like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan).
- Equally important are the space and opportunity for Musahars to participate in local governance (Panchayats and various local level committees). Effective participation will come about with support (reservations, capacity-building) and also by Musahar organizations and all those working for them constantly engaging Panchayats and other local institutions, raising demands, asking questions and, where needed, collaborating to help deliver programmes. The participation of Musahars in these fora will be directly proportional to improved Musahar outcomes.
- In terms of interventions, human rights-based approaches and outcomes (food, social justice, education, etc.) have been seen to work better for the most excluded groups, ensuring they get at least ‘minimum’ entitlements and that those are justiciable. The challenge in the case

of Musahars will be seeing—through use of law, advocacy and engagement with stakeholders—that these entitlements are actually delivered. Similarly, affirmative action policies and interventions that equalize opportunities and bring the excluded on par with the rest of society, improving not only assets but the returns on those assets, need to be further strengthened. Despite reservation policies and special arrangements, most benefits for Dalits are cornered by non-Musahars. The challenge is to enhance Musahar access to special arrangements, through tailor-made interventions, coaching and capacity-building.

- Sectorally, Musahars face particular disabilities in securing not only decent and sustainable livelihoods, but also housing, food and nutrition, health and sanitation, as well as security and dignity. Each requires targeted and sustained

work to enhance access to the relevant laws and schemes. This would require focussing on a wide basket of entitlements, including social security programmes, public services, security and dignity, along with collectives facilitating income-generation activities.

- Musahars face particular livelihood challenges. They also have unique skills and abilities—crafts, animal husbandry and agricultural practices among others. Successful attempts to help them graduate from hand-to-mouth existence to secure livelihoods would require investing in and developing livelihood models that leverage the strengths while addressing specific threats. The National Rural Livelihood Mission would do well to concentrate on the models adopted, for example, for bonded labour and migrant labour.

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
12. Kumar and Kant (2011), 'Post Conflict Face of Poverty and Society', p. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
15. Thirty-three in all, 20 Musahar, four Ram, two Dhobi, two Kurmi, four Bhumihar, one Kayashta.
16. One *bigha* roughly equals 2,520 sq. metres.
17. Kumar and Kant (2011), 'Post Conflict Face of Poverty and Society', p. 45.
18. Set up by the Bihar government to look into the specific problems of 'the Dalits among Dalits'. These included 18 sub-castes, later increased to 21, of the 22 that are included among the Dalit category. Only the Paswan caste is not included.
19. Mahadalit Ayog (2007), *Report*, p. 22.
20. Rs 30–60 for women; Rs 100 for men, or payment in kind (5 kg of rice for a day's work).

21. Whereby the *kamins*, the clients, usually unfree agricultural labourers from the low castes, also *mazdoors*, are tied in hereditary patron–client relationships to the *jajman*, the patron, usually landed proprietors from the upper and middle castes, also called *grihasta*, to provide free labour and other specialized services to the latter.
22. Ira Gang, Kunal Sen and Myeong Su Yun (2012), ‘Is Caste Destiny? Occupational Diversification Among Dalits in Rural India’, *Brooks World Poverty Institute Working Paper*, no. 162, pp. 5–6.
23. Sharecropping, where input and the produce are shared equally between the landowner and the tiller.
24. Where the landowner only contracts out the land for a fixed return. Inputs and produce are the tiller’s.
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28. Members of the Other Backward Classes, unlike Dalits.
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