*EPW* **Special Articles** *December 4, 1999*

# Everyday Life of Musahars in North Bihar

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**Mukul**

'NAMASKAR BHAIJEE' these are the words of greeting one hears in all musahar villages and 'tolas' from all ages of people. They do not fold their hands. They do not bend their body. They do not call anybody 'huzur', 'sahib', 'sir' or anything like this. This new found word, is heard repeated all over the region in village after village and haunts the heart.

Musahars belong to the scheduled castes, and according to the 1981 Census, their total population in Bihar is 13,91,000. They are widely distributed in several districts – Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Hazaribagh, Santhal Pargana, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnea, Gaya, etc. In 1891, Risley wrote, "musahar are an offshoot of the bhuiya tribe of Chhota Nagpur". Deriving meaning from the word musahar, some say they signify flesh seeker or hunter ('masu' meaning flesh, 'hera' meaning seeker), while others understand them as rat-taker or rat-eater ('musa' meaning rat). Musahars are mainly landless agricultural labourers. Very few are cultivators or work in industries and offices. According to the census, out of their total population in Bihar, 46.7 per cent are workers and among them, 95.34 per cent are agricultural labourers. Only 2.52 per cent are involved in cultivation and the remaining 2.14 per cent are in other services.

The musahars have largely remained on the periphery, and have mostly gone unnoticed so far. But this situation is changing. In north Bihar, today the 'Lok Sakti Sangathan' has organised 500 villages and tolas of musahars in four districts, where they are raising relevant issues. As Kumar Suresh Singh writes in *The Scheduled Castes,* "The expansion of capitalist agrarian relations and continuing population pressures helped to dissolve traditional patron-client relationships. With this background, there arose stirrings of discontent among the musahar sharecroppers and labourers in Bihar which led to autonomous protest movements under the leadership and organisation of militants drawn from their own community."

And namaskar bhaijee is one form of this daily resistance. "This is not a simple greeting. It is a movement. It did not come on its own. It had to be fought for strongly – to ensure that words of servitude and subordination, continuing since ages, are deleted from the consciousness. The use of words like sir, sahib, huzur, reflect a state of mind, a situation of being, the place of a community. They make them recline in sleep, in exploitation, in weakness. The essence of history lies in the progressive emancipation of these tyrannous, dominating, irrational statuses, handed down from the past," explains Deepak Bharti, a musahar who has been working among the community for many years, often risking his life. He points out: "Musahars and mallahs not only say namaskar bhaijee. They now sit on the chairs, when they go to government officials to petition or meet them. They eat in the same utensils. This was not the case in the late 1980s, and still is not the case where their organisations are not present. These are key words and key expressions, which by their use and spread mark the distinctive channelisation of their new energy. Such key words and expressions have symbolic values, which exert much influence on the nature and direction of musahars' emancipation".

When the Lok Sakti Sangathan was formed in Balbhadrapur village, Jhanjharpur, on October 11, 1992, the birthday of Jai Prakash Narayan, it had few ideas of the issues which needed to be taken up, except for personal experience of endless exploitation by the local moneylenders. Having taken only Rs 70 from a brahmin, he had to pay many hundreds of rupees for a number of years, and all his income, from selling tea and spices at a road corner, went to repay this 'debt'. "The exploitation of dalits has many dimensions, related with land, water, indebtedness, bonded work and gender. There are large tracts of land but musahars have none. The whole region is famous for its large number of water tanks but the poor have no right over them. There are various hidden forms of bonded labour existing in the region where if you take a loan and do not

pay it regularly you are obliged to do some work free. Or the poor do not get loans unless they do some work for the landlord free. The Lok Sakti Sangathan launched a series of initiatives and struggles on these issues and now they have spread to over 500 villages, in Madhubani, Saharsa, Darbangha and Supaul districts. “To create consciousness. To build pressure. To snatch our rights. To develop such strength that without the intervention and participation of dalits, it becomes impossible to do things in the region, is our aim,” concludes Deepak Bharti in a remote village of Jhanjharpur.

Locating the musahars’ daily existence and the struggles of their present has many dimensions, where there is an attempt to dislocate untouchability,to assert their own space. How do the bits and pieces of everyday life sometimes develop in such a way where the distinction between the local and the global economy gets blurred? How does everyday becomes a part in the life of a decade of national economy? How does everyday become a contest for survival, identity and social position? How does an untouchable caste in north Bihar contend with the way that others see them? How do their own signs, symbols and institutions engage with the dominant discourse – changing it and being changed in return, producing some new spaces? Can this emergence of new organisations and movements be explored as new sites of intervention? The rest of the paper briefly looks at these during the course of four months. The themes are spread over five sections the first deals with musahars’ traditional relationship with soil and its shifting equations leading to shrinking of employment; the second with the new course of migration; the third the new expanded informal sector and child labour; the fourth, their resistances, repressions and gender roles, and the fifth the use of their owns symbols and idioms, as a means of dislocation of power.

The focus is on everyday arena, which could be micro, local, muted and hidden, not be high points and visible actions, but they are much more inclusive, pervasive and present, they are diverse and multiple and through everyday transactions and negotiations can create new meanings.Even often adopting local language and operating within the wider network of social relations, they go beyond that in the course of time.

April 1998. Sitting idle in his village Sirpur mushhari, six km away from the town of Jhanjharpur in north Bihar, Asharfi Sadai was saying, “We are two in one – musahars and ‘mitti’ (soil). Digging soil is like a physical exercise for us, much better than sitting or lying. When we don’t do it, then we feel tired.” Musahars dig deeper and faster. They have carried on the skill of measuring and assessing the quality of soil for generations. Asharfi Sadai is a representative of many thousands in the area, who take pride in their traditional skills. He does not need an inch-tape, any modern measuring devise or the advice of an engineer. He does not remember now those large number of dams, ponds, bridges or multi-storeyed buildings, where his skills and labour have been applied – in assessing, in digging, or in measuring the soil.

But now he gets less work related with soil. Since he, like many others, has no land, and most of his life has passed working with soil, his choices are very limited. However, always enterprising, and not afraid of learning new things, Asharfi has now started weaving baskets. But the going is tough. Says he, “Bamboo trees are not mine; they belong to somebody else. The Basket market is not certain. If somebody gives me the bamboo, I weave it for them.” Other than this Asharfi looks here and there for soil work. Asharfi goes to cities, like Darbangha, Samastipur, Muzaffarpur and sometimes even to Patna, the capital of the state. There is less and less demand for labour like his, in spite of various ongoing construction activities. “I see that for an activity like assessment and measurement, we are no longer required. Further, the digging work in big project works is being done by the machines,” he explains.

The musahars’ traditional job market has been squeezed by some other hidden ways, especially in the recent years. In village level developmental works, under the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana or other schemes, these are a number of works, somewhere related to digging and carrying of soil. These were all being done by musahars before, but not now.

Harhar Sadai, of the same village says, “We do the digging. But that is all. The loading, unloading and carrying of the soil – all is now being done by trucks and tractors, contractors and their labourers. Here commissions rule the game.” Surya Narayan Sadai of village Bheja in Madhapur Block complains of similar incidents, “Trolleys and contractors have taken over the scenario, leaving less space for us”. In the recent

past, the dispossession of musahars from rural land and employment has taken new turns. Since the last four-five years, landlords in Bakunia have purchased three tractors. They also hire tractors from outside as well. A landlord rents it to another for ploughing, at the rate of Rs 150-170 per bigha. “It has become easier for landlords, as now they do not require labour, cattle or plough for a major part of their farming,” says Tithar Sadai.

Thus now there is work available locally only for three four months and that too primarily for womenfolk. Bindo Sadai, another musahar labourer in the village, confirms, “Sowing and harvesting, and in between, some other work related to standing crops, are barely enough for the womenfolk. Musahar men are becoming more and more unemployed. The new landlords, the yadavs, do not want us anymore on a longer basis.” Musahar men and women work from 6 o’clock in the morning to 1 in the afternoon. They get a breakfast of two rotis at 8-9 am, and their daily wages are 2-3 kg of maize or wheat, which costs approximately Rs 12-13. Earlier, there was a variety of other work available in the village vicinity: making of paper packets, knitting of ropes, weaving of baskets, stitching of leaf plates, husking of rice and preparing eatables from it. But these opportunities of employment have disappeared today. “Rice mills have opened both in the village and at the block. Their owners are not musahars or other poor. So landlords prefer to go to these mills, rather than calling musahars to their houses, or giving gears to them for manual processing,” says Surya Narayan Sadai in Bheja village.

Similarly, Ashrafi talks about the problems of basket making and marketing. Paper packets have now virtually vanished. In the district town of Muzaffarpur, the refugee colony at Ganipur Muhalla and the old market Kali Kothi Muhalla, were once known for making of paper packets. In these two areas, around 250 families were totally dependent on this work, and among them, there were some musahar families too. They used to make 100 to 200 paper packets a day and were earning Rs 20 to 35 per day. But the coming of polythene bags, has changed the market for paper packets. 35-year-old Saumitra Das of Refugee Colony says that now they are able to earn only Rs 10-15 a day. Thus most of the families have started going for daily job market in search of any work.

Soil as such was never owned by musahars, since land did not belong to them. However their talent for work with the soil, as a skill, as an equipment, was their very own. And this interrelationship was an integral part of their daily existence. This phase witnesses not only a replacement of that equipment by a new one, but even the the control of this equipment becomes a daily site. Instruments now exist without musahars – be it trollies, tractors or construction companies. They do not require even their knowledge, as a factory needs that of the workers. As the space for such equipment expands, the room for musahars’ skill shrinks further. A related dimension of this dispossession is his acceptance of new jobs and new places and this creates a new social life and relations. The day- to-day life becomes a crossroad from where he can go left or right, backward or forward. The next section looks at this shifting space.

In May 1998, there is one sight, strikingly common, in all musahar villages. You see women, young and old, children of all ages and old men, but young/middle aged men are hardly to be seen. Those visible, can be counted instantly by the villagers. The unseen ones, everybody knows, are somewhere in Gurdaspur, Batala, Pathankoth, Chandigarh, Panipat, Sonipat, Deenanagar in Punjab and Haryana states.

Bakunia Bichali is a musahar village of 60 homes, in Navahatha block of Saharsa district. The journey off the embankment to Bakunia is difficult, as it comes between the two embankments on Kosi river. No transport reaches these villages for several kilometres, even during the dry season. Only country boats can be used for four-five months in the rainy season to move to and from the village. And one has to wade through knee deep mud within the village. There are even two-three families living, of father and sons, in one house. But presently there are only five young men in the village. Nearby is Bakunia Purabi, a village of 42 musahar homes, where there are 10 men. ‘Dukhia Punjab khatihe’ (Those who are in pain, labour in Punjab) is the local saying, tells Sitia, whose all three sons are now labouring somewhere in Punjab. “But it is also true that if we don’t labour out, we will turn into street beggars,” she adds in the same breath.

Every year, in December-January, they start moving out to Punjab, Haryana or Uttar Pradesh. They do wheat

harvesting and rice sowing there. By June end, they come back and go again in September. Then they do rice harvesting. They get wages at the rate of Rs 40 to 50 per day. Thus they work primarily as agricultural labourers for six-seven months a year. But some of them, like Domi Sadai of village Partaha, work in the rice mills of Chandigarh. He also takes some villagers along with him for working in the same mills. Then there is Hari, who works as a night watchman in a farm of Gurdaspur.

Large-scale migration of musahars has a recent history, starting largely from the early nineties. Villages are now found totally deserted of young-middle male members during most of the agricultural seasons. It enables musahars to survive, but it makes moneylenders more accumulative and exploitative. It also releases the musahars' sense of deep humiliation and reflects the changes that are taking place between high-middle caste landowners and musahar agricultural labourers. Mallu Sadai, Rameshwar Sadai and others in Bakunia Bichali village recollect that some years back, say 10-12 years before, only two, three or four from the village were going to Punjab as labourers, and the rest were working as labour in and around the village. But now, only a few remain here in the working season. Old Subodh Sadai of Bakunia Purabi village is a father of five sons. All the three adult sons have been working in Punjab since the last seven years. He says, "They used to work here as agricultural labourers or sharecroppers before. Now they come, stay for a few months and go back again. They send us money from there through cheques or bank drafts. Their families are our responsibility. In place of them, their wives now work in the fields for some months."

This migration helps in meeting the basic survival needs, but it is not enough to counter the blood sucking moneylenders, who have an overpowering presence in the area. Whenever they go, they normally have to take loans from the local landowners, turned moneylenders, at the rate of 10 to 12 per cent per hundred per month. Mohan Ram takes a loan of Rs 600 everytime he has to go. If he pays back within three months, he pays an interest of 10 per cent. If he does not, then the interest amount gets integrated into the main loan amount and he pays interest on that amount.

Domi Sadai has more bitter experiences to narrate, "In early 1997, I had taken a loan of Rs11,000 from the local landowner, because I had to take 20 villagers along with me. Till date I have paid back Rs 30,000. But the landowner is asking for Rs12,000 more to clear off the loan. I will have to pay. Otherwise how will we be able to approach the moneylender again and then how will we go to Punjab?" Even after five-seven years of working in Punjab and other states, Domi and his other fellows have not been able to earn enough to enable them to save some money, so that they can travel on their own, or their families can sustain themselves in lean days. 'Jo kamana, so khana, kya fayeda' (whatever we earn, is barely enough for food. Is all this worth it?) is the usual feeling prevalent.

This new course of migration among musahars is going to continue. Hari Narayan Harsh, a known activist of the area, characterises this trend as one with contradictory implications, "On the one hand it involves tremendous pain which is almost like a running sore – of constant seperation, of increasing burden on women, of new exploitative mechanisms. On the other, it provides musahars with some bargaining power, gives basic sustanance to their families and has lead to changing relations in the village, where they are able to escape relatively the constant work humiliation inflicted on them locally. Degradation is there as well, but it is outside their society, which cannot be 'seen'."

This musahar who migrates, is a new untouchable, who is away from his traditional skill, and is now in a place where cash income is the centre of his activity. He is primarily involved with an economic activity which is highly competitive and also integrated with the national and the global market. Not only is his social activity severely limited, even the dominant economic activity has not been able to take root in the social and cultural systems. They are victims of a social polarisation where they cannot get integrated, and are also victims of a dicotomy between the economic and the social activity. Nevertheless they are creating a new social space, for whatever reasons, be it because of survival needs or social justice or due to the mobile and flexible character of their work. Socially invisible they may be but they are creating their own limited arenas.

Parthaha, a village of scheduled caste community in the Navahatta block of Saharsa district in Bihar, is known for child labourers. Only a few years ago, 24 children of the village were found working in the carpet

factories of Bhadohi, Uttar Pradesh. Now, amongst them, only one works there, but the rest are also not in the village. They are all in Punjab. Kamala, a middle-aged woman in the village, gets scared when one takes to her, asking her name, age and the work her child does. “My son is in Punjab now and he is working in some farm along with the adults of the village. He was in Bhadohi before. But here there is no work, no food, no school,” says she in a hush-hush manner. Similar is the case with 12-13 year old Sikander Sadai. He too was going to Bhadohi, but since the last two years, he goes to the villages of Punjab, to work in the rice and paddy fields, for at least five-six months every year.

The village, it soon becomes clear, does not want to open its mouth much in this regard. Incidentally, we meet the 12-year- old Brahmadev, who had returned from Punjab only 10 days ago. He went to school only for a few months at the age of 7-8 years. Unable to read and write, he has now learnt how to sign. Says he, “I go either to Punjab or to Delhi, work in the rice mills and carrying sacks. Gyani Kumar (14) has also been going to Punjab for the last two years. “I had nothing, not even a pen, paper or book. That is why I had to leave the school. After that I used to sit idle at home. When other children of the village started going, I decided to follow them. I usually earn about Rs 500 a month for loading-unloading of sacks,” narrates he.

Children continue to work in many hazardous industries. Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra, a social organisation working in the villages of north Bihar, gives details of a survey on the status of child labour conducted in November 1997 by the organisation, in Navahatta Block of Saharsa district: 10-year-old Dukhi Sadai, son of Kamal Sadai of Bakunia Purabi village, was working in a carpet weaving unit of Allahabad. He died there, but his father does not know much about it. His second son, 13-14 year old Surindra Sadai, continues to work in a carpet weaving unit at Bhiti Baraut, Allahabad. Three more children – Bijali Sadai, Ramu Sadai and Ghuran Sadai of the same parent had gone to a village near Allahabad in early 1997 to work in the carpet sector, and a middleman Suraj Yadavgave

Rs 1,500 as an ‘advance’ to them.

The survey identifies a total of 1,704 cases of child labour in 20 villages of Navahatta Block, of which 650 are female child labour. The need for repayment of debt to the landowners or the moneylenders is the main reason for the prevalence of this labour.

In village Sohrai, block Lakhnaur, district Madhubani, lives Fulia. She had sent her 10-year-old child Dadu, to work in a rice mill of Haryana in November 1997. “From here, a large number of children, aged between 6 to 12 years, are going to Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. Nobody goes to Bhadohi any longer,” confirms Somani Devi, another woman sitting alongside Fulia.

In the Bakunia Bichali village, some cases of child labour come to light, who had gone to work in the carpet weaving units of Allahabad district, but have been missing since the last few years. Bindo Sadai is the father of 10-year-old Gugali. “My son went to work at the Allahabad district in 1996, but now there is no information about him,” narrates the worried father. Another father Bhannu Sadai says almost the same thing. His nine-year-old son Manoj Kumar went to Bhadohi in 1994-95 and thereafter, he lost touch with his son. The local middleman, through whom the children had been taken there, has disappeared, and the parents do not know what to do in this situation. Though some child labourers have disappeared, that does not deter parents from sending their wards to the same carpet weaving units in Bhadohi and Allahabad areas. Mallu Sadai sent his 10-year-old son, Sanjay, to Kurmecha, Allahabad in May 1997 to work in a carpet weaving unit and in return he received Rs 1,000 in four instalments from the middleman.

From Bhadohi and other places of Uttar Pradesh, to villages of Punjab and Haryana, it seems the same hard life for hundreds of children of scheduled caste villages. They have been sent back from one place, to be exiled to another. Those who have not left yet, are planning to soon. 12-year- old Chandra Mohan Kumar of Partaha village has made up his mind, “I was going to school till 4th class. Then I left it. Now I will go to Punjab. What will I do otherwise? What will I eat?” Even a conscious social activist like Lakshmi Sadai, finds it hard today to continue with her child’s education. “It is difficult. My child was going to a school. Not now, because I have no resources,” she helplessly explains. The large presence of child labour, together with their

dispersal across space, is not new in the musahar villages. What is new is that the now the expanded informal sector outside the region employs new child labour of these villages, as well as the child labour which has been withdrawn from the ill-famous carpet sector.

In mid June 1998, Tilaya Devi and her Khairi village witnessed an armed attack, something they had never experienced in their life time on such a scale. Around 40-50 yadavs of the same village attacked the village and left in an hour. After the incident, Tilaya Devi, has been unable to come back to her village. Her family members and other musahars of the village are shocked and shattered.

Khairi, a village of 100 and 70 houses of yadavs and musahars respectively, is barely 12 km away from Jhanjharpur town of Madhubani district. Musahars live in small thatched huts in one corner of the village. Tin roofs are an exception. These huts have been built on a stretch of land that appeared a few years ago from under the flood waters. All around the houses of musahars are vast fields of rice that do not belong to them. “It was around 8 am, when the yadavs came with ‘pharsas’, sickles and spades and started beating up everyone – women and children, young and old. They damaged our ‘kaccha’ houses, utensils, and other items, spoiled the grain, took away all the valuable belongings, even cows, oxen, buffaloes. They were vociferously threatening to kill every musahar of the village,” recount Vaidhyanath, Mahakant, Amolia, Lichia, Bachla Sadai, Marani Devi and many others of the village. Some of them show their injuries with bandages and plasters.

Yadavs were indiscriminate in their attack, but were specifically asking for Tilaya Devi. When they found out that she and her family members were not in the village, not only did they destroy her hut completely, they also took away a buffalo belonging to her. While leaving, they declared that they would teach more ‘lessons’ to Tilaya, if she continued to defy and agitate against them. In the village, Lichia asks in anger, “Why do they want to kill us like this, when we are the ones who work in their fields? Other villages also have musahar labourers and yadav landowners, but why are the landowners here acting in this manner?” Moreover, the yadavs have stopped employing them this year and thus they have been forced to go to other villages for work. Tilaya has taken shelter in the office of Lok Sakti Sangathan in Balbhadrapur village. Looking sad and pale, she prays for more rain and darkness, so that she can go to her village someday, to see for herself the condition of her house. She was fearing attacks from yadavs since many months. One day she even went to the local Lakhnaur police station, but the police neither recorded her statement, nor lodged any complaint. Instead, she was humiliated.

Small-built and simply dressed in a sari, Tilaya calls herself a musahar and names her husband as Nayal Sadai. She works continuously, sometimes as agricultural labourer, and sometimes as maker and seller of leaf packets in the local market. She is also a well-known activist of musahars. She has been working in the fields since her childhood. She got married at an early age and has never gone to a school. “Nobody in the community was going to school, nobody realised them the importance of education. Also, the rich and the powerful were not willing to impart education to us,” says she, matter-of-factly.

When for the first time, the musahars tried to take control of some ‘gairmazarua’ (ceiling surplus or public commons) land for their housing, the deep-rooted unwillingness of the rich to share any resources with the musahars became apparent and made Tilaya acknowledge the threat of attacks from the landlords of the village. “The whole land area surrounding Khairi, approximately 150-170 bighas, is owned by Lokpati Singh, alias ‘Babu Sahib’ of Lakhnaur. The land is of different kinds – ceiling, bhoodani, governmental – but he is the owner of all, and the musahars used to do sharecropping on this. We live in a small corner in the village and were finding it hard to accommodate our growing families there. Thus we decided to build our houses in a small plot of 13 bighas, which was a gairmazarua land. A year ago, we built our houses there, and that entirely changed the attitude of landowners,” she says.

Everybody in the village listens to Tilaya, and follows her, as their leader. She was the one who had taken the initiative in taking control of the land. “I have been working in the fields since long, but that was not the case with so many other musahar women. Now more and more women work, because of increasing economic pressure and migration of the menfolk to Punjab-Haryana. We have to bear so many burdens now. We have

to decide things for our houses," says she, regarding her involvement in the work of the organisation. Tilaya's involvement in the organisational work started a few years ago, when the idea of a 'gram kosh' came to the region. She started collecting Rs 5 per family, in spite of the resentment shown by the males. Once her husband beat her up mercilessly, but women were very supportive, especially Pagia Bai. Slowly the gram kosh became a success and it was the males who got the much-needed support from the kosh at the time of their going to Punjab. When Tilaya was accepted among the male members, she started going to other villages with the Sangathan activists. The Sangathan became stronger and vibrant in Khairi and its annual conference took place there in May 1998. More than 2,000 musahars of the region gathered there, to give the organisation more strength.

With all these activities, Tilaya was getting more confident about herself, about the strength of the organisation. When a few months ago, landlords of Khairi village offered her some land as a bribe, to keep her out of organisational work, she not only refused, but also saw it this as a vindication of her suspicious. But now, the brutal attack and the threat over her life and family has pained her immensely, and she silently asks many questions: Why has nothing happened to the aggressors in spite of the new-expressed strength of musahars? Why she has to live in hiding? What will happen to her? Who will take care of her damaged house and replace the stolen cattle, which provided 6-7 litres of milk a day for sale? Will she be able to survive and the organisation able to withstand the pressure?

The attack on Tiliya Devi in the face of her assertion, and her dilemmas, struggles and strengths can give us multiple readings. Male migration has widened the spatial gaps in local families and household, leading to increasing stresses and hardships in the lives of many musahar women. There has been a feminisation of the local workforce. At the same time, musahar women are now much more visible both within the household and outside it. They now have more decision-making powers. This change and rupture has often made them more aware of their oppression, giving them a new strength to assert themselves. Their involvement with the local organisation has grown. They are increasingly seeking to disrupt the social order by reworking their own space and asserting their agency. Even the landlords who attacked Tiliya Devi, and musahar men themselves are forced to recognise this increasing visibility of women. Thus disorder has crept into the moral order. Existing locations of gender and caste hierarchies have been slightly dislocated in this scenario.

It is Moghlaha village of Madhubani district in July 1998. Here brahmins, rajputs, bhumihars and yadavs are in a majority; and mallahs, doms and musahars are few, around 30, in number. All dalits are agricultural, migrant or construction labourers. At the same time, within the village, they have also been doing some work traditionally. Suppose a cattle dies in the village, it is the duty of a musahar to lift the dead body and throw it away, outside the village. If there is a feast at the time of marriage or last rites, doms clean up the mess after food is served and eaten.

An incident occurred a year ago regarding this traditional work, a villager remembers. A brahmin was constructing his house and he asked a musahar to come for a day's work. That day, the musahar had to go to some other village to see his relatives and he expressed his inability to come. The brahmin was furious and he called a meeting of all brahmins of the village that day where three decisions were taken. Musahars will not be given any work; their cattle will not be allowed in brahmin's fields; and their women will not be allowed to cut grass or to collect dry leaves in the fields and lands of brahmins.

The musahars were terriefied at this course of development. They also faced several difficulties day-to-day. For instance, a brahmin's buffalo died in the village. The musahars then refused to throw it away outside the village, and nobody else in the village was ready to perform the work. This was seen as a crisis among the village elders and thus a meeting of the villagers was called. By that time, all the dalits had begun to see that they would suffer immensely if they were scattered, and in the meeting they all said in one voice that brahmins' unilateral decision to boycott the musahars was unjust and the traditional ways of village living, where one needs another, should be restored again. Whether the brahmins got scared, or they had an urgent need, or some of them thought that the death of a buffalo was god's punishment for a wrong decision, the meeting decided to lift the boycott on musahars.

But this was not the end. Some time after this episode came the elections. This time as in the past also, brahmins and bhumihars started capturing the polling booths. However, they were met with some resistance by a few of the rich among the yadavs. There were violent clashes, where both sides seemed prepared with arms and ammunitions. The brahmins and bhumihars left the scene, but before leaving, some of their youth blasted a bomb, though without any damage. The police came and the brahmins lodged complaints against the yadavs and the dalits, both.

Some youths of the backward castes came forward at this time. They assured the dalits that the village would collectively fight for their cases. For this purpose, they even formed a 'Nav Nirman Kalyan Samiti' for collection of funds. The Samiti collected funds and started taking up other issues, like installing of tubewells for drinking water, hiring of unemployed youth to impart education to village children, etc. The Samiti also started organising Hindu festivals and ceremonies.

The brahmins and bhumihars got restive on seeing the activities of the Samiti and decided on their part to construct a Hanuman temple. The construction began with a ceremony, but soon there was a dearth of funds. They approached the Samiti for collaboration in the temple building, with the promise that the name of the Samiti would be displayed in the temple. The Samiti accepted this and supported the construction in all possible manner.

The temple was built. The statue of Hanuman was installed. But the name of the Samiti was not displayed there. Dalits say that in spite of their repeated requests, the brahmins always evaded this. They felt cheated and sharp differences surfaced within the Samiti regarding the future course of action. The Samiti also became defunct in this meanwhile.

Identities of various castes and communities are being negotiated in multiple ways in this village, depending on social and economic needs. "Musahars have always been considered impure, and brahmins would not like to be touched even by their shadows," complains a local villager. But then I saw a brahmin landowner touching the body of a musahar, while having a conversation with him in the same village. I wondered and asked the brahmin, "Have things changed here?" He replied, "Now there is no labourer found in the village. Everybody goes out. If I behave like this, they are happy and only then do they come to work."

A young dalit of the same village says that he would never take up the job being done by his father, i e, lifting and throwing away the bodies of cattle carcases. The old father contests him and says that he would have to do it after his death. Otherwise from where else would he get Rs 150-200 for a work like this. The son however shows his clear disapproval and says that he would prefer to go to Patna or Muzzafarpur to pull a rickshaw, than to lift a dead cattle.

Khairi village under Lakhanaur police station stands shattered, as armed yadav landlords attacked the musahars there, ransacked their huts and took away whatever cattle wealth and other belongings they had. The musahars and the yadavs, both lodged police complaints against each other, alleging provocation and attack by the other. The police did not came earlier, in spite of the musahars' reported fears of being attacked. Now there is a police camp in the village, but they are arresting people from both sides and there has been no recovery of looted cattle or other goods.

One hears contradictory voices from the musahars. Charitra Sadai, who was seriously injured in the attack, says in a disillusioned tone that it was the people of the Lok Sakti Sangathan, and not the police, who took the injured to Darbhanga hospital and arranged food and necessary things for them. At the same time, a local activist comments, "the police came and they are now camping here. We have lodged our complaint with them. All this is happening because of Laloo Yadav's regime. Otherwise we would have got a worse deal, as was happening in the previous regimes." He gets wide nods from other villagers gathered there.

Bakunia Bichali village is in Saharsa district, very far from Khairi. But the musahars there know about the Khari incident and plan to take part in the forthcoming protest programmes of the musahars. In one of their meetings organised in the village, they sit under two flags, hoisted on two long bamboos; the two flags

symbolise their two gods – Deena and Bhadri, who were brothers. The two musahar brothers sacrificed for the cause of their community in an ancient time. “Every year in June, we remember Deena-Bhadri. In small groups, we go from house-to-house, village-to-village to collect rice or paddy, so that their memory is kept alive. They are remembered because they suffered and sacrificed. They are our only gods. Their sacrifice is our’s. The suffering of Khairi is our’s,” says Domi Sadai in a forthright manner.

The musahars’ own symbols and idioms are much more visible today in the social and cultural landscape of the region. They are today trying to evolve diverse mediums to strengthen processes of social questioning and offering parallel structures to the past and present social order. An emergence of a new symbolic order is there, where what was defiled till now, is being turning into an instrument of worship, and what was considered as pure, is being rejected and questioned. Within this socio-cultural milieu lie the consciousness, contradictions and dichotomies of the musahars. The ways in which it reveals itself in daily lives, directing local contexts of culture and association, is a reflection of changing location and distribution of power in society.

Though not very visible and not much heard about, the musahars are causing fissures in the caste, gender and ritual hierarchies of the region. Several dynamics are at work, at the village, leading them to a situation in which they seek to disrupt a prevailing order, and want to create their own, though some forms of acquiescence with the present also continue. The musahars were musahars because of the location of their caste, occupation and place, which acted as fundamental signs of their identities. Today however, some of these signs are getting dislocated and are vanishing. Their previous identity as untouchables and rat seekers is shifting into the periphery. More visible today are issues of their survival, their economic and social aspirations, their demands and struggles. At the same time, this new image represents more of aspiration, and less of an achieved entity. It is in the process of formation, without yet reaching full realisation. It is moving and transitory, and yet provides alternative grounds for the society.

[I am thankful to Nandini Gooptu, Barbara Harris White, Charu Gupta and Aditya Nigam for their support in writing this paper.]

( This article is based on ssvk work )