

Bihar is heart of India's periphery. Probably, a periphery without which India could not have achieved what it has over the years of its capitalist development. Denying Bihar a cultural and political (sub-nationalist) identity of its own, the ruling elites of India, paradoxically including many among the geographical region of Bihar itself, systematically expropriated the state of its resources.

Neither the state government nor the people of Bihar could harness or benefit from this rich natural resources of Bihar - coal, iron and many minerals, which incidentally falls under the control of the central government. Whatever industrial investments are made in the state remain essentially extractive and outward-oriented with no linkages with the economy of the state. The agricultural sector continues to remain feudal, exploitative and caste-ridden despite the endowment of fertile alluvial soil in the northern and central plains of Bihar. While the illegitimate off springs of the skewed development, the new rich, excels in the vulgar manifestations of affluence and conspicuous consumption, the traditional elite escapes into search for identities elsewhere. The new surge of consciousness among backward classes and dalits, though got expression in political power, has rarely contributed to providing the large masses of people with education, health or employment. Measured by any standard of social or human development indicators, Bihar continues to be at the bottom rung. The paradoxes of Bihar are aplenty.

Bihar has been and continues to be a net supplier of labour in India's pursuit of capitalist development; first in the mines, factories, agricultural fields and plantations in the east and now, in the agricultural fields of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh and its own urban centres. Initial impetus, in the early nineteenth century, to the large-scale migrations from Bihar came from the labour requirements in the plantations of Assam and West Bengal. Later nascent capitalist enterprises in Calcutta and other industrial centres in West Bengal, especially jute mills, attracted large scale migrations from Bihar. Studies on the migration during these period shows that the workers were willing to take up any occupation that would have given them a better wage earthwork on railways, factory employment, field labour, digging and cleaning of tanks, repairing of roads, making railway embankments and harvesting of the winter rice crop. Since independence, particularly after the advent of green revolution, the direction of the flow of migration has changed to the north and western India, to work in the high-yielding agricultural fields and in the urban centres as construction workers and informal sector workers. Nothing much has changed in the employment pattern of migrant workers from Bihar over a period of hundred years. If we see it from a different perspective, India's self- sufficiency in agricultural produce and the growth of industries and development in civic amenities have been built largely from the unrecognised sweat and labour of the poor, uneducated and unskilled workers from Bihar.

For the poor and the oppressed in Bihar, especially the sizeable number of dalits and adivasis, life is a story of unending misery and exploitation. Everyday is one of struggles-against Yadavs, Brahmins, moneylenders, fury of nature and what not? Every moment is a moment of struggle for survival.

The life of Musahars sharply focuses this phenomenon. Reverberations of a 'sampoorna kranti' is nowhere to be heard; neither does the sound of a messianic

movement to take them out of the morass of the day-to-day living. Yet, changes are taking place for the worse, landlords have become more assertive, any form of resistance is dealt with by extreme violence, rape or blatant denial of employment in the agricultural fields, money lenders thrive increasing indebtedness of the poor.

Musahars too opt for the easiest route - migration to agricultural fields of western India and they send their children for work. But more than that they are creating alternate structures and institutions keeping alive the hope for a better tomorrow. Whose tomorrow? Centre's or periphery's?

Special Report

Deena-Bhadri's Sacrifice Is Ours:Everyday Life of Musahars in North Bihar

Mukul Sharma

Musahars, a scheduled caste community of mainly landless agricultural labourers, are mostly located in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. According to the 1981 Census, their population in Bihar is 13.91 lakhs, Uttar Pradesh 1.26, lakhs and West Bengal 17,628.

In Bihar, Musahars are distributed in several districts Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Hazaribagh, Santal Pargana, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnea and Gaya etc. In 1891, Sir Risley Herbert, a colonial official wrote, "Musahars are an offshoot of the Bhuiya tribe of Chotanagpur." Musahar literally means 'rat-taker' or 'rat-eater' (from 'musa' which means rat and 'hera' means 'seeker') or even 'flesh-seeker' or 'hunter' ('masu' means flesh).

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. In Uttar Pradesh, 42.68 per cent of their total population are workers. Of them 62.04 per cent are agricultural labourers, 13 per cent in cultivation, 15.79 per cent in household industry, 4.64 per cent in other-than-household industries and the remaining 4.53 per cent in services. In West Bengal, 57.38 per cent of their total population are workers. Of them, 44.85 per cent are cultivators, 9.56 per cent agricultural labourers and 42.67 per cent in other-than-household industries.

Musahars have largely remained on the peripheries and have mostly gone unnoticed so far. But the situation is changing. At present in North Bihar the Lok Sakti Sangathan is organising 500 villages and tolas (hamlets) of Musahars in four districts, where they themselves are coming to the forefront and raising their issues. Thus writes K.S.Singh, an eminent historian, in his book 'The Scheduled Castes', "The expansion of capitalist agrarian relations and continuing population pressures helped to dissolve the traditional patron client relationships. With this background, there arose stirring 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."

No Way to Employment

Musahars dig deeper and faster. They have carried on the skill of measuring and assessing the quality of soil for generations. But the demand for their work is rapidly disappearing today. Simultaneously there is also a squeeze on other forms of employment, even in the agricultural sector. In the recent times, both processes have been at work.

"We are two in one -- Musahars and 'Mitti' (soil). Digging soil is like a physical exercise for us. When we don't do it we feel tired," says Asharfi Sadai sitting idle at his home in Sirpur Mushhari, six km east of Jhanjharpur town in north Bihar.

Asharfi represents many thousands in the area, who take pride in their traditional skills. He does not need an inch-tape, modern measuring device or advice of an engineer. He does not remember those large number of dams, ponds, bridges or multi-storeyed buildings, where his skills and labour have been applied -- in assessing, digging, or measuring the soil.

But now he gets less work related with soil. Since he, like many others, has no land, and most of 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. "Bamboo trees are not mine; they belong to somebody else. Basket market is also not certain. If somebody gives me the bamboo, I weave it for them," he says.

Asharfi goes to cities, like Darbangha, Samastipur and Muzaffarpur and sometimes even to Patna, the capital of the state, looking for soil work. However, there is reduced-demand for labour like his in these places, in spite of various ongoing construction activities. "We are no longer required for assessment and measurement of soil and the digging works in big projects are done by machines," he explains.

There is less work, as well as less wages, in available construction jobs. "When we get work in house constructions in towns, the wages are Rs.30 to Rs.40, which is less than the prescribed minimum wages," complains Asharfi.

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 there are a number of works related to digging and carrying of soil. All these were 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 is now being done by trucks and tractors, contractors and their labourers. Here commission rules the game." Surya Narayan Sadai of Bheja village in Madhapur Block complains of similar incidents. "Trolleys and contractors have taken over leaving very little space for us!"

Musahars have always been living here without land, without cattle. But they have been surviving as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers. Even women have been sharing this work. "Initially in the 70s and 80s, various family members were working together here. They were also saving money. It is no longer possible

now," recalls Bhola.

Worsening situation with floods, shifting courses of rivers, adverse fallouts of drainage congestions, embankments and water loggings have had a serious impact on the rural agricultural scene of the region since the early 70s. Sonai Sada, a villager in Bakunia Engineer village of Saharsa district, has no hesitation in referring to embankments as "the dreaded killer of our agriculture and land".

In the recent past, the dispossession of Musahars from rural land and employment is taking new turns. For the last five years, in Bakunia itself, landlords have purchased three tractors. They now hire tractors from outside as well. One landlord rents it to another for ploughing at the rate of about Rs 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 work is available only locally for three-four months in a year and that too primarily for the women. Bindo Sadai another Musahar labourer in the village, says "Sowing and harvesting, and in between some other works related to standing crops are barely enough for the women. More and more Musahar men are becoming unemployed. The new landlords the Yadavs, do not want us anymore on a longer basis."

Musahar men and women work from 6 a.m. in the morning to 1 p.m. in the afternoon. They get a breakfast of two rotis at 9 a.m.. and their daily wages are 2-3 kg of maize or wheat which costs approximately Rs13.

Earlier, there were a variety of other works available in the village like making of paper packets, knitting of ropes, weaving of baskets, stitching of leaf plates, husking of rice and preparing eatables from it. But these works have virtually died out today.

"Rice mills have been opened both in the village and the block. Their owners are not Musahars or other poor people. 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 of Bheja village. Similarly, Ashrafi expresses the problems of basket making and marketing.

Paper packets have now virtually vanished. In the district headquarters of Muzaffarpur, the refugee colony at Ganipur Muhalla and the old market at 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 were some Musahar families too. They used to make 100-200 paper packets daily and were earning Rs 20 to Rs 35 per day. But the coming of polythene bags and their increasing use in the 80s and 90s has changed the market for paper packets. Saumitra Das, 35, of refugee colony says that now they are able to earn only about Rs 15 a day. Thus most of the families have started going to the daily job market in search of whatever work they could get.

There are a number of individual responses to the situation among Musahars in the region. They are rickshaw pullers in Jhanjharpur, Madhubani and other places. Some have turned to vending here and there and sell on piece rate basis whatever they can get from shop-owners and retailers. In Kheri village of Lakhnaur block, Mahakant has opened a cycle/rickshaw repair shop. "I was a sharecropper before,

but there was no work." Similarly, in Bakunia Bichali village, Pulakit Mandal is a tailor today with a sewing machine of his own, "In 1988-89, I first went to Punjab and worked there for some years. But it was proving to be really difficult. Somehow I managed to purchase a sewing machine in 1993 and since then this has been my work. Normally I get work for 10-12 days a month and am able to earn Rs 800 to Rs 900. Some others have also started the tailoring work. It is not easy to get work and earn some money. But I don't want to go to Punjab again."

The New Course of Migration

Large-scale migration of Musahars has a recent history, starting largely from the early nineties. Villages are now found totally deserted of young male members during most of the agricultural seasons. It enables Musahars to survive, but it makes moneylenders more accumulative and exploitative. It also releases Musahars' sense of deep humiliation and reflects the changes that are taking place between high-middle caste landowners and scheduled caste agricultural labourers.

In May 1998, there was one sight strikingly common in all Musahar villages. You see women, young and old, children of all ages and old men, but young and middle aged men were hardly seen. Those visible could be counted on fingertips. The unseen ones, everybody knows, were somewhere in Gurdaspur, Batala, Pathankot, Chandigarh, Panipat, Sonipat and Deenanagar in Punjab arid 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 two embankments on the Kosi river. No transport reaches this village for several km even during dry season. Only country boats can be used for four-five months in rainy season to move to and from the village. And one has to wade through knee-deep mud within the village. Each house has two-three families living together under the same roof. But presently there are only five young men in the village. Nearby is Bakunia Purabi, a village of 42 Musahar homes, where the counting goes only till ten.

"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.

In December every year they start moving out to Punjab, Haryana or Uttar Pradesh. They do wheat harvesting and rice sowing there. By Juneend, they come back only to go again in September. Then they do rice harvesting. They get wages at the rate of Rs.40 to Rs.50 per day. Thus they work primarily as agricultural labourers for about seven months a year. But some of them, like Domi Sadai of

Partaha village, work in the rice fields 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 in Gurdaspur.

They go in much larger numbers now which was not the case a few years ago. Mallu Sadai, Rameshwar Sadai and others in Bakunia Bichali village recollect that about 12 years ago only three or four were going to Punjab for labour and the rest were doing 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 the father of five sons. All the three adult sons have been working in Punjab for 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. It is our responsibility to look after their families. In place of them their wives now work in the fields for some months."

Shankar Sadai, brother of Subodh Sadai, has been fishing in the Kosi river for more than 30 years. His two sons used to fish along with him, but not any longer. "My one son has been going to Punjab for the last four years. The other is sitting idle but now he is also planning to go out. The lesser and lesser catch can hardly sustain all the three families," says Shankar.

Mohan Ram lives in Barhara village of Navahatha Block. For the last nine years he has been going off and on to villages in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, "I go out for about six months in a year, depending on changing circumstances of work. If I get some land here for sharecropping, I first complete the farming and then move on to Punjab. Whenever one goes during the season, one is always able to get work in the fields. The work is from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a cup of tea in the morning. After work you cook, eat and sleep. Sometimes some enjoy a little liquor, as there is hardly any other outlet or interaction outside the workplace"

Yashoda Devi of the same village is now working as an agricultural labourer in a nearby village as her three sons have gone to Punjab in the same period and their earnings are not enough to take care of the families left behind.

This large-scale 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 Rs100 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 gets integrated into the principal and he pays interest on that combined amount. "No, we never have had any savings. We are always forced to take loans for our movements," says Mohan.

Domi Sadai has more bitter experiences to narrate, "In early 1997, I had taken a loan of Rs 11,000 from a 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 Rs.12,000 more to clear off the loan. I will have to pay, otherwise how will we be able to approach the moneylender again and how will we go to Punjab?" Even after working in Punjab and other states for four years, Domi and his other fellow villagers 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 sustain themselves in lean days. 'Jo kamana, so khana, kya fayeda (Whatever we earn is barely enough to eat. Is all this worth it?), is the usual feeling among them.

Migration and moneylending are deeply intertwined in this area and have appropriated the earnings of Musahars in many ways. The interest rates on loans, which were 4-6 per cent till only a few years back, have now been increased tremendously as the Musahars have started earning in cash. The moneylenders own the local shops as well and exploit the dependence of families further by charging higher prices for things necessary for day-to-day needs. The migrant labourers send money by cheques or drafts made in the name of landowners or moneylenders as they have bank accounts and they easily take advantage of the situation.

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

Minimum Wages in Bihar

For Agricultural Workers

- All work other than reaping Rs 27.50 per day
- Reaped Crop 1 bundle out of 10
- Tractor driver, pump operator Rs1 001.80 per month
- Tractor helper, Pump helper Rs7 8.30 per month

For Earth Works

- Rs 39.70 for digging per 110 ghanfeet mould earth.
- Rs 39.70 for digging per 100 ghanfeet hard earth.
- Rs 39.70 for digging per 90 ghanfeet very hard earth.

For Road Construction

- Unskilled labourer Rs 39.70 per day
- Main Raj Mistiri Rs 54.00 per day
- Main carpenter Rs 54.00 per day

Notified by the Bihar Government on December 21, 1995

Return and Exile

The large presence of child labour, together with their dispersal across space, is not new in Musahar villages. What is new is that the now 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.

Parthaha, a Musahar village of 40 houses in Navahatta block of Saharsa district, is known for its child labourers. Only a few years ago, 24 children of the village were found working in the carpet factories of Bhadohi, Uttar Pradesh. Now of them only one works there, but the rest are also not in the village. They are all in Punjab. The other children of the village are also planning to go there.

Kamala, a middle-aged woman in the village, gets scared when one asks the name, age and work of her child. "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 there is no work, no food and no school here," says she in a hush-hush manner.

Similar is the case with Sikander Sadai (13). He too was going to Bhadohi, but for the last two years he goes to the villages of Punjab to work in the rice and paddy fields for at least six months in a year.

The village, it soon becomes clear, does not want to say much in this regard. Incidentally, we meet old Brahmadev (12) who had returned from Punjab only ten days ago. He went to school only for a few months at the age of 8. Unable to read and write, he has now learnt how to put his signature. "I go either to Punjab or Delhi, work in rice mills and lift up sacks full of rice" he says.

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 in sheer simplicity.

But Nandan Ram (12) still works in the carpet industry of Allahabad district. "He has been there for the last three years," his father confirms rather unwillingly after getting assured that the child would not be disturbed in his work.

Nandan Ram is not the only Musahar child who continues to work in the carpet industry in Uttar Pradesh. Deepak Bharti, Secretary, *Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra*, gives details of a survey conducted in November 1997 by his organisation on the status of child labour in Navahatta Block of Saharsa district. Dukhi Sadai, 10, son of Kamal Sadai of Bakunia Purabi village, was working in a carpet weaving unit in Allahabad. He died there, but his father does not know very much about it. His second son, Surindra Sadai 14 continues to work in a carpet weaving unit in Bhati Baraut, Allahabad. Three more children - Bijali Sadai, Ramu Sadai and

Ghuran Sadai of Kamal Sadai - had gone to a village in Allahabad in early 1997 to work in the carpet sector, and a middleman Suraj Yadav gave Rs 1,500 as advance to them.

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

Thus we find many villages in the district from where the children now go regularly to Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to work in farms, rice mills and even in houses. Pavitri Devi of Badhara village says, "Many children, more than 12, have been driven to Punjab by their parents. Here there is no money and no work. What else would they do?"

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

In Bakunia Bichali village some cases are revealed about children who went to work in the carpet weaving units in Allahabad district, but missing for the last few years. Bindo Sadai is the father of the Gugali (10), one such missing child. "My son went to work in Allahabad district in 1996, but now there is no information about him," tells the worried father. Another father Bhannu Sadai, says almost the same thing. His 9-year-old son, Manoj Kumar, went to Bhadohi in 1994 and thereafter he lost touch with him. The local middleman, through whom the children had been taken there, has disappeared and the parents don't 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 the 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 Rs1,000 in four instalments from the middleman.

From Bhadohi and other places in Uttar Pradesh to the villages in Punjab and Haryana it is the same hard life for hundreds of Musahar children. They have been sent back from one place, only to get exiled to another. Those who have not left yet are planning to leave soon. Chandra Mohan Kumar, 12, of Partaha village has made up his mind, "I was going to school till class four. 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 difficult today to continue with her child's education. "It is difficult. My child was going to school. Not now, because I have no resources," she explains helplessly.

A Contradictory Picture of Power and Powerlessness

Musahar women are now quite visible in the field,

in the village, in the labour market and in the labour organisation. They are perceiving and handling their situation in diverse ways. This appears to be also affecting the dynamics of social formation, especially in those cases where women are taking a lead in resisting oppressive structural forces. Their resurgence is often met with extreme repression with little guarantee that it would make a significant dent.

Tilaya Devi and her Khairi village witnessed an armed attack in mid-1998, something they had never experienced in their lifetime on such a scale. Around 50 people belonging to a particular community in the same village came one day and after the attack, left in an hour. Even after a month of the incident, Tilaya Devi, who was out of the village during the attack, is unable to come back. Her family members and other Musahars of the village look completely shocked and shattered.

Khairi, a village of about 100 houses of Yadavs and 70 houses of Musahars, is barely 12 km away from Jhanjharpur town in Madhubani district. Musahars live in small thatched huts in one corner of the village. Tin roofs are a luxury here. These huts have been built on a stretch of land that appeared a few years ago from under the flood water. All around the houses of Musahars are vast paddy fields, that do not belong to them. "It was around 8 a.m. when the Yadavs came with pharsas, sickles and spades and started beating everyone -- women and children, young and old. They damaged our houses, utensils and other items, spoiled the grain, took away all valuable belongings, even cows, oxen and buffaloes. They were threatening to kill each and 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.

The assailants were indiscriminate in their attack, but were specifically asking for Tilaya Devi. When they found out that she and her family members were out of the village, not only did they destroy her hut completely, they also took away her buffalo. While leaving they declared their intentions of teaching further lessons to Tilaya Devi, 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?" She further revealed that the Yadavs had boycotted their labour this year and thus they have been forced to go to other villages for work.

Tilaya Devi has taken shelter in the office of *the Lok Sakti Sangathan* and *the Samajik Vikas Kendra* 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 the 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 dressed in a sari, Tilaya Devi calls herself a Musahar. 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 to Nayal Sadai at an early age and has never gone to a school. "Nobody in the community was going to school, nobody was realising at my time the importance of education. The rich and the powerful were not willing to impart education to us," says she, matter-of-factly.

When for the first time Musahars tried to take control over some *gairmazarua* (ceiling surplus or public common) land for their housing, the deep-rooted unwillingness of the rich to share any resources with Musahars came forth and made Tilaya Devi realise the threat of attacks from the landlords of the village. "The whole lald area surrounding Khairi, approximately 170 bighas, is owned by Lokpati Singh alias Babu Sahib of Lakhaur. The land is of different kinds-ceiling, bhodani and governmental-but he is the owner of all and 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 Devi and follows her as their leader. She was the one who had taken the initiative in taking control of the land. She led the Musahars of her village. "I have been working in the fields for 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 and Haryana. We have to bear so many burdens now. We have to decide things for our homes," says she about her involvement in the works of the organisation.

Tilaya Devi's involvement in organisational work started a few years ago, when the idea of a *Gram Kosh* came to their mind. She started collecting Rs 5 per family in spite of resentment shown by the men. Once her husband beat her up mercilessly, but the women were very supportive, especially Pagia Bai. Slowly *the Gram Kosh* became a success and it was the men who got the much-needed support from the *Kosh* at the time of their going to Punjab. Then Tilaya Devi got acceptance among the men. She started moving to other villages as well with the *Lok Sakti 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 attend the conference.

With all these activities Tilaya Devi was growing in confidence about herself and also the strength of the organisation. When a few months ago landlords of Khairi village offered her some land as bribe to keep herself mum and aloof, she not only refused, but also thought of this as a vindication of her thinking. But now the brutal attack and the threat over her life and family have pained her immensely and she silently asks many questions: Why has nothing happened to the aggressors in spite of the newly-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 lifted cattle, which was providing 7 litres of milk a day for sale? Will she be able to survive and the organisation able to withstand the pressure?

A List of Land Disputes in the Madhapur Block of Madhubani District		
Name of the Village	Bhoodani land(in acres)	Ceiling or Common Surplus public (in Acres)
Andhra Musahari	32	2
Dharmaria Musahari	4	-
Sonvarsha Musahari	3	-
Daldal Musahari	24	10
Fatki Musahari	56	9 bigha
Koli Musahari	4	-
Kothu Gosau	5	-
Kothu Uttarwari	10	-
Mahatwar Poorvi Musahari	5	-
Mansara Panpiwi Musahari	4	-
(These are ongoing instances of land disputes indentified during the field visits)		

The Sweated labour

The actual wage rates of agricultural labourers here never match the minimum wage rates. Union interventions in this field, a recent phenomenon, are also not based on attainment of minimum wages. The union intervenes within the limits imposed by the power of traditional institutions manifested in the authority of the employer, caste status of the labourer, overall dependency relations and environment of the area. When the labour face the threat of eviction, boycott or brutal elimination, the complex nature of wage struggles and bargaining in pushing wage rates and the limits faced by them in such struggles, both are going to be there.

"Musahar agricultural labourers of this village faced the wrath of total boycott by the landowners for almost a year in 1994-95. We were getting only 1.5 kg of paddy husk for day-long work. But when we organised ourselves and demanded a little more and called for a bandh the landowners retaliated," narrates Rameshwar Sadai, an agricultural labourer of Hashauli village in Madhapur block of Madhubani district, revealing a new, unfolding situation in various villages. Not only Hashauli

but other villages in the same block too like Nandanvan, Navlakha, Vindeshwar, Musahari; Kheri, Khashyam, Rahuwa Sagram and Bheja Fakirana are witnessing for the first time a major dispute over payment of minimum wages to agricultural labourers.

Thus some time ago many Musahar labourers received anonymous threatening letters. Nasiblal Sadai reads one such letter, "Now the last time has arrived. This is our final statement. Bloody holi will take place. You have reached your last stage."

Though it all started in Madhapur with the formation of the *Lok Sakti Sangathan*, a mass organisation working primarily among the Musahars, the socio-political scenario dominated by the Laloo Prasad Yadav-led party seems to be a constant reference point for the contending parties. The Musahars have hopes, albeit faded, from the government, though it has not done anything to enforce the Minimum Wages Act or resolve the conflict. The landowners hold the Laloo Prasad Yadav government to be primarily responsible for creating these types of disturbances.

Hashauli is a remote Musahar village, almost 4 km away from any road or regular transport. All the 50 families of the village are totally landless and dependent on agricultural work available in Bhagwanpur village. This village is dominated by the forward caste landowners who own vast amount of agricultural land in the area. Only one adult Musahar is skilled in carpet weaving and has recently come back from Varanasi. The male workers do the main agricultural work like ploughing, sowing and harvesting and the women workers do supplementary work like carrying the crop load, taking care of the crop and cleaning the field. It is alleged that in 1978 and 1981, altogether 24 Musahar families were given 'pattas' of land, but they are not in a position to take possession of that land even today. The common and government-owned land in the village are under the control of landowners.

Kaushalya Devi and other women complain that they have been beaten up and humiliated a number of times by the landowners. The villagers allege that the landowners murdered young Jhamalo Yadav, who tried to organise the Musahars and other backward communities in the 80s.

The payment of minimum wages to the agricultural workers is a burning issue in this region. The Bihar government has fixed the daily minimum wage of agricultural labourers at Rs 27.50. But they used to get only 1.5 kg of paddy husk, wheat or maize which came to only Rs 5 to Rs 8. The agricultural labourers and their organisations were not demanding the government wage rate, but were only asking for a daily wage of 3 kg of paddy husk, wheat or maize. An activist says, "The rationale for this demand comes from the specific situation of the area. Every year floods hit the area and destroy most of the crop. Thus the landowners are also suffering. In this situation there should be a workable rate of minimum wage by which agricultural labourers can survive and landowners can also continue."

The landowners were not ready to accept even the workable rate and complained about carelessness, lethargy and limited working hours of agricultural labourers. Chandrakant Jha, *mukhia* of Bhagwanpur village, says, "We cannot bear this burden, and above all, the Musahar workers are working for very few hours. They are not delivering the goods."

Hashauli and the surrounding villages were in a constant state of tension and trauma. When the *Sangathan* asked for an increase in the minimum wages and threatened with a *bandh*, the landowners aggressively decided on a total boycott of local labourers. The landowners hired labourers from outside. Musahars were also being threatened in many ways and the landowners imposed various restrictions on them. The cattle belonging to Musahars was not allowed to go into the open fields and lands. They were not even allowed to use some of the common ways which passed near the houses of landowners. The use of tanks and wells were also heavily restricted. Some stray, violent incidents took place between the landowners and agricultural labourers, but they were controlled soon.

The Musahar agricultural workers and their *Sangathan* successfully organised a protest. Facing a boycott from landowners was really difficult but the labourers continued with their struggle and sometimes they went out to find some casual work.

The most significant development lies in the fact that the agricultural labourers from nearby villages did not work in the fields of Bhagwanpur. In some cases they actively joined the protest by Musahar labourers. Even the Yadav and Mallah agricultural labourers of Bhagwanpur village refused to work in the fields of landowners. Kheli, *mukhia* of Bhagwanpur Mallaha *toli* and DhyaniYadav, *mukhia* of Yadav *toli*, jointly asserted their solidarity.

The struggle ended with a sober gain when the landowners started giving 2.5 kg of grain, costing between Rs12 and Rs 15. And the gain of a village became the gain of many other nearby villages in the area.

There is a Silver Lining Even in Storm Clouds

Musahars' organisations have devised an alternative in an effort to make lending 'work'. Their 400 villages now have the 'Gram Kosh' (village fund), so that they do not continue to be indebted to moneylenders who charge exorbitant rate of interest or become involved in exploitative relationships with landlords. Simultaneously, this is building a sense of collectivity among the villagers and providing a forum for discussing and solving their problems. Organisations make the village fund workable and in turn, village fund facilitates organisations and political mobilisation. Thus both processes are complementary to each other.

"I need a loan to go to Punjab," was the urgent plea of Mohan Ram, an agricultural labourer of small means, to Haria Devi, leader of the *Gram Kosh* in Badhahara village of Saharsa district. This was three years ago.

Mohan Ram has been going to Punjab for several years. Every year he had to seek the favour of landowners or moneylenders, who readily lent him the money but

at exorbitant rate of interest, i.e. 10 to 12 per cent per month.

Having listened to Mohan's plea, the *Gram Kosh* decided to lend Rs 300 to him at the interest rate of 2 per cent per month as they only had a few thousand rupees. Mohan Ram was at least helped partially and he now borrows some money every year from the *Kosh* and returns it duly within the stipulated time.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Katoria, a middle-aged widow Katoria of Partaha village, says, "Thank God! My son is saved." Emotion chokes her voice and tears well in her eyes. Raising her folded arms she expresses gratitude to the representative of the *Gram Kosh*, seated next to her in a common place of the village.

Katoria has to take care of her 10-member family of two sons, who are away most of the time--in Punjab, Haryana or Delhi. She has to work in the fields to feed the family. One day when her grandchild fell ill suddenly, there was not a single penny with her. She approached the *Gram Kosh*, where its incharge, convinced of the urgency, immediately decided to grant Rs 1,165. The members of the *Kosh* are sympathetic and supportive in many other ways also.

Musahars' debt crisis persists chronically, so much so that Badri Rajak of Barhara village, who had taken a loan of only Rs 60 ten years ago and paid back Rs 50, had to give his only one bigha of land as the final payment. Suli received a bank notice in the beginning of this year to pay back a loan of Rs 5,000 taken for purchase of a pump set, whereas he had neither applied nor taken any loan from the bank. Overall, the loan and the interest rates are a crushing burden on thousands of Musahar families.

But now the *Gram Kosh* offers at least one remedy of their own in around 400 Musahar villages of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Saharsa and Supole districts. While the so-called principal actors in the banking field - government, bankers, multilateral officials and other donors - are totally absent in the area, Musahars are initiating and managing their own fund, overcoming impossible odds. Several developments have placed the prime burden of looking after the family on women. In such a situation it is good to see that most of the *Gram Koshs* are initiated and managed by women.

The story of *Gram Kosh* goes back to January 1992 when it was started in 20 Musahar dominated villages. Now it has spread to 400 villages. Every village has some or other savings, from Rs 3,000 to Rs 12,000. A broad estimate says that altogether they now have a total savings of around Rs 20 lakhs.

The concept of *Gram Kosh* is quite simple. In every village each family contributes 50 paise a day or Rs15 a month. Two women in each village jointly take the responsibility of the fund and thus open an account in the nearby post-office or bank. Then every family gets their own pass book from the *Kosh*. When need arises any family can take a loan for three or six months or even up to a year on a two per cent monthly interest. The message is spread simply: Change life by your own resources. Make your own organisations. Save 50 paise everyday.

Villages after villages around Madhubani and Jhanjharpur are filled with experiences of establishment and operation of *Gram Kosh*. Somani Devi in Sohrai village remembers that initially the villagers, especially the male members, made fun of the idea. The landowners too tried to ridicule it. But now all the Musahar

families of the village are members of the *Gram Kosh*.

In Sohrai, villagers have collectively taken up the task of digging up a filled up tank and then breeding fishes in it for income generation. The required money for it came from the *Gram Kosh* and "when the fish sale will fetch money, not only the loan will be repaid, but also a portion of the income generated from it will be given to the *Gram Kosh*", says Somani.

Jagdish Sadai, a landless agricultural labourer, asserts, "I don't have to bend my knees before the landowner any longer to get a few rupees to buy railway tickets. One also does not feel the pressure of working in their fields."

Seeing the pass books of individual members of the *Kosh* in villages, it becomes clear that families have taken loans for marriage, medicines, house construction and for train tickets to Punjab. They regularly deposit their contribution, mostly on a monthly basis and also, in majority of the cases, the rate of return is timely and there is not a single defaulter. Garvi Devi in Sirpur Musahari village even claims that she deposits more than the stipulated money and thus she is entitled to more benefits.

There are some other villages like Sohrai, which have started using the income generated by the *Kosh* for their collective struggle. A government tank was under the control of landowners in Sirpur Musahari village, which was taken back by Musahars in the course of a long struggle. "We have started fish breeding in the tank through a loan from the *Kosh*," says Garvi, expressing her confidence about the future of the *Kosh*. Similarly, in Khari village, they are using the *Kosh* for fighting a legal battle over the issue of Bhoodani land.

Deepak Bharti of the *Lok Sakti Sangathan*, the inspiration behind the *Kosh*, does not pretend that the battle is won. But he does believe that the experience of improving the lives of the rural poor act like seeds. If they are sown widely enough they can take over fields. "There is darkness, clouds, rains and gloomy situations. But there are silver linings too, even in the storm clouds," he says.

Child Labour in 20 village of Navahatta block in Saharsa District				
Castes	Number of Families	Children		Total
		Male	Female	
Other Backward Castes	213	232	110	342
Scheduled Castes	676	815	529	1344
Muslim	5	6	5	11
Others	3	1	6	7
Grand Total	897	1054	650	1709
Source: Survey done in 1997 by Samajik Shakshamik Vikas Kendra, Jhanjharpur				

Namaskar Bhaijee!

During the past few years, there has been a noticeable growth of different forms of collective action among the Musahars. These developments are largely outside the

mainstream institutions of politics and the state and they raise important questions about the distribution and legitimacy of power relations in many spheres. But they do more than this. They express grievances and uncertainties about everyday life as well as challenge the deep, but less visible power relationships crystallised in their shared conventions and sense of normalcy. This also shows the multiple ways in which movements contribute to greater expressions of individuals.

"Namaskar Bhaijee" is the word of greeting one hears in all Musahar villages 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. But they are very prompt with their new-found word so that it keeps getting repeated in village after village and haunts the heart.

"This is not a simple greeting. It is a movement. It did not come on its own. It had to be fought strongly -- to see to it that words of servitude and subordination, continuing since ages, are deleted from the consciousness of Musahars. The use of words like Sir, Sahib and Huzur reflect a state of mind, a situation of being, the place of a community. They make them recline in sleep, in exploitation and in weakness. The essence of history lies in the progressive emancipation of these tyrannous, dominating and irrational status handed down from the past," explains Deepak Bharti, a tireless social and political activist, who has been working among Musahars for many years risking his life several times.

Musahars not only say "Namaskar Bhaijee", they now sit on the chairs when they go to government officials to submit petitions or meet them. They eat in the same utensils. This was not the case in the late '80s and still is not the case where Musahar 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, faith and thought. Such key words and expressions have symbolic values which exert much influence on the nature and direction of Musahars' emancipation," Bharti explains.

When the *Lok Sakti Sangathan* was formed in Balbhadrapur village, Jhanjharpur, on October 11, 1992, the birthday of Jai Prakash Narayan, its initiator Bharti had very little of the issues which needed to be taken up, except his own experience as he himself had been subject to endless exploitation by local moneylenders. Having taken only Rs 70 from a Brahmin he had to pay many hundreds for a number of years and all his income incurred from selling tea and spices in a road corner went to repaying the old dues. The 1974 students' movement that broke over Bihar had a deep impact on him in his young days. And he had the exposure to several facets of exploitation of Musahars as a journalist working and writing in newspapers on issues related to them. Thus came the vision of *Gram Kosh*.

"The exploitation of Musahars has many dimensions related with land, water, indebtedness, bonded labour and gender. There are huge amounts of land but Musahars have none. The whole region is famous for a 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 don't pay it

regularly you are obliged to do some work free. Or the poor don't get loans unless they do some work for the landlord free. But the most severe form of exploitation is taking loan from moneylenders, who make you feel dead for generations together," says Bharti.

Gram Kosh gives a breathing space. It gives some relief and confidence. But unless the Musahars get land and water in the region they will remain in poverty and misery. With this understanding, the Lok *Sakti Sangathan* launched a series of struggles on issues of Musahars' rights over land, tanks and fish resources. And now the struggle has spread over 500 villages in Madhubani, Saharsa, Darbhanga and Supaul districts.

"The government programmes and policies must be contested and reconstructed. It gives goats and cattle, but where do Musahars have the land to feed their goats? Our goats and cattle are being taken into custody and a source of permanent tension is created between the landowners and the landless. It gives some relief at the time of drought and flood, but hardly gives any productive assets capital or resources on which Musahars can build their lives without the fear of day-to-day survival," says Bharti. Both he and the *Sangathan* have had many bitter experiences with the government and its machinery all these years. Even this year when they rightfully claimed the ownership of Bhoodani land in Khari village the police and the local administration made Bharti, Tilaya Devi and other main activists of the organisation their target. Khari has suffered the continuous attack of landowners and these activists are facing charges and warrants in several cases lodged by the landowners. This is particularly a bad time when some of them have been absconding for some time in fear of police repression and arrests.

"To create consciousness. To build pressure. To snatch our rights. To develop such strength that without the intervention and participation of Musahar community it becomes impossible to do things in the region, is our aim," concludes Bharti in a remote village of Jhanjharpur.

Deena-Bhadri's Sacrifice is Ours

Musahars' social and cultural landscapes, with uses of their own symbols and idioms, have hitherto been invisible and unknown. However, today they are trying to evolve diverse mediums to strengthen processes of social questioning and sometimes offering parallel structures to the past and present social order. Within this socio-cultural milieu lie the consciousness, contradictions and dichotomies of Musahars. The ways in which it is revealing itself in daily lives and directing local contexts of culture and association is a reflection of changing location and distribution of power in society.

In Moghlaha village of Madhubani district, Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Yadavs are in a majority; Chamars, 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 Chamar 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 every time the food is served.

An incident occurred a few years ago regarding this traditional work a villager recollects. A Brahmin was constructing his house and he asked a Chamar to come for a day's work. That day the Chamar had to go to some other village to see his relatives and he expressed his inability to go. The Brahmin got furious and that day itself, he called a meeting of all Brahmins of the village. The meeting took three decisions--Chamars will not be given any work, their cattle will not be allowed in Brahmins' fields and their women will not be allowed to cut grass or collect dry leaves in the fields and lands of Brahmins.

Chamars got quite scared with this course of development. They were also facing several day to-day difficulties. Incidentally, a Brahmin's buffalo died in the village. The Chamars 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 were feeling that they would suffer immensely if they were scattered and in the meeting they all said in one voice that the Brahmins' unilateral decision to boycott Chamars was unjust and the traditional ways of village living, where one needs another, should be restored' again. Whether the Brahmins got scared, 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 Chamars.

But this was not the end. Sometime after this episode came the elections. This time also Brahmins and Bhumihars started capturing the polling booths. However, they were met with some resistance by a few of the rich among the backward castes. 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 dalits with the purpose of creating a terror.

Some youths of the backward castes came forward in support of the dalits. They assured the dalits that the village would collectively fight 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 some other issues, like installing tubewells for drinking water and hiring unemployed youth to impart education to village children. 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 a collaboration in the temple construction 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 and 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 got defunct in the process.

Identities of various castes and communities are being negotiated in multiple ways in the Moghlahu village, depending on social and economic needs. "Harijans 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 Chamar 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 get 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--to lift and throw away the dead body of a cattle. 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 200 for a work like this. The son, however, shows his clear disapproval and emphasizes that he would prefer to go to Patna or Muzzafarpur to pull a rickshaw than lift a dead cattle.

Khairi village under Lakhanaur police station stands shattered as armed Yadav landlords attacked Musahars there, ransacked their huts and took away whatever cattle, wealth and other belongings they had. Musahars and Yadavs, both lodged police complaints against each other, alleging provocation and attack by the other. The police had not come earlier in spite of 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 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, "Police came and they are now camping here. They have lodged our complaint. All this is happening because of Laloo Yadav's regime. Otherwise we would have got a raw 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 Khairi incident and would certainly take part in the forthcoming protest programmes of Musahars. In one of their meetings organised in the village they were sitting under two flags hoisted on two long bamboo poles. 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 house-to-house and 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 ours. The suffering of Khairi is also ours," says Domi Sadai forthrightly.