

## **Understanding the Lives and Struggles of Musahar Community in Hulasganj Block of Jehanabad district of Bihar, India**

**Sudip Bhui<sup>1</sup>, Marut Nandan<sup>2</sup>, Rajesh Singh<sup>2</sup>, Dipak Ranjan Mandal<sup>3\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Anthropology and Tribal Studies, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

<sup>2</sup>Khadagdhari Gramin Vikas Sansthan, Jehanabad, Bihar, India

<sup>3</sup>Former Vice-Chancellor, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

\*Corresponding Author: 2019drm@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This study examines how the Musahar community lives today in Hulasganj Block, Jehanabad District, Bihar. The Musahar community is one of the most marginalized groups among India's Scheduled Castes, and despite being millions strong, they remain almost invisible when it comes to real development. Through field research covering 823 households across six villages, the study found that most Musahars still have no land, very few can read or write, and they face discrimination in getting basic services. Even though there are government programs meant to help them, most families have not seen much change in their daily lives. This research looks at their current situation and tries to understand what might actually help them build better futures.

**Keywords:** Musahar Community, Mahadalit, Poverty, Discrimination, Development, Education, Health

### **1. Introduction**

Integrated and sustainable development of one Nation is only possible by all around development of its downtrodden, backward sections of its people. At the threshold of 79<sup>th</sup> Independence Day of our country, still we are giving significant efforts for upliftment of target people. The word "Musahar," they often think of the literal meaning - "rat-eater" in Hindi. This name has stuck to the community for generations, and it reflects immediately how society has viewed these people. But behind this harsh label, there are families with children who dream of going to school, parents who work hard every day, and elders who remember better times and hope for change.

The Musahar community is actually one of the largest groups among Bihar's Scheduled Castes. With about 2.2 million people in the state, they make up the third-largest SC group (Sahay, 2019). Though there are government development strategies, yet they live in the same villages as other communities, work in the same fields, send their children to the same schools, but their experiences are completely different.

What makes their situation particularly difficult is that they face discrimination not just from upper castes, but sometimes even from other Dalit communities. It is like being at the very bottom of a social ladder that was already stacked against them. This article seeks to gauge the contemporary Musahar experience, by examining families in Hulasganj Block of Jehanabad District. The study hoped to look beyond statistics and policy papers, and see how these families actually live, what it is they struggle with day-to-day, as well as the impact of Governmental and other development schemes on their lifestyle.

## **2. Literature Review**

Understanding the Musahar community today requires knowing something about their history. Researchers have traced their origins back to the forest regions of Uttar Pradesh, from where they gradually migrated to Bihar's more fertile plains looking for work, particularly in agriculture (Kumar & Singh, 2018). They were originally hunter-gatherers skilled in living in the forest. But as they moved on to agricultural regions, they found themselves trapped in increasingly exploitative labor relationships.

The colonial period was particularly harsh for the Musahars. They became caught up in what was called the "Kamaiauti system", essentially a form of bonded labor where they worked for landlords and could never seem to pay off their debts. This system created economic dependencies and social relationships that still affect the community today. The very name "Musahar" reflects this marginalized status. It literally means "rat-eater," referring to their historical practice of catching field rats during times when there was not enough food. What started as a survival strategy became a social stigma that has followed them for generations (Sahay, 2019).

When researchers study the socio-economic conditions of different Dalit communities, the Musahars consistently come out at the bottom of almost every indicator. The National Human

Rights Commission undertook a comprehensive study in 2018 that recorded some shocking statistics. They found that 96.3 percent of Musahars are landless, and 92.5 percent work as agricultural laborers. Their literacy rate of 9.8 percent is the lowest among all Scheduled Caste groups in India. These are not just numbers, they represent the reality that most Musahar families have no assets to fall back on and limited skills or education to find better work.

Kumar and Singh (2018) identified three specific ways that Musahars get exploited economically. First is the wage system, where they consistently get paid below minimum wages for agricultural work. Second is the loan system, where they borrow money for emergencies or basic needs but the terms keep them perpetually in debt. Third is what they call working hour monopoly, where employers demand excessive work hours without proper compensation. These three mechanisms work together to ensure that no matter how hard Musahar families work, they cannot escape poverty.

Health research paints an equally troubling picture. Musahars face disproportionate burdens of diseases like malaria and kala-azar (leishmaniasis), largely because of their poor living conditions. The NHRC study found that 85 percent of Musahars suffer from malnutrition, with widespread vitamin D deficiency because they cannot afford diverse diets with vegetables and protein. Their health-seeking behavior is heavily influenced by economic constraints, cultural beliefs, and experiences of discrimination in healthcare settings. Many families rely on traditional healing practices or delay seeking medical treatment because they cannot afford it or have faced discrimination in the past (Farmer, 2003).

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

- To describe the socio-economic status of the Musahar Community of Hulasganj block of Gaya district
- To examine the demographic profile, livelihood patterns of Musahar households in the study area
- To assess the educational and health conditions of the community and identify key barriers to accessing basic services



This research focused on six specific villages spread across three panchayats where substantial numbers of Musahars live. In Surajpur Panchayat, Kandaul village with 83 Musahar households and 481 people, and Adrakhi Bigha village which has the largest concentration with 378 households and 2,116 individuals. Bauri Panchayat includes Bihta village with 93 households and 641 people, and Bauri village with 174 households and 1,305 individuals. Finally, in Dutta Panchayat, the study looked at Dutta village with 41 households and 241 people, and Gangapur village with 54 households and 368 people.

The study selected Hulasganj Block for a number of reasons. It has a large Musahar population across several villages, providing us with a good sample to examine. The area represents typical rural conditions you find across Bihar's plains region. There have been development organizations operating here for years, could assess whether their interventions are actually making any difference. The region also reflects the characteristic pattern of how castes live apart, do different kinds of work that gave its data a picture-perfect look at what Musahars experience more broadly around Bihar.

## **5. Methodology**

This research is conducted as the descriptive and exploratory study from which can describe or understand the current circumstance.

For primary data, the study has been conducted household surveys covering all 823 Musahar households across six villages. It was important to talk to every family rather than just a sample, because each family's story mattered. Detailed interviews with 30 community members have also been conducted by including men, women, and young people to get different perspectives, and organized focus group discussions with community leaders and women's groups to understand collective concerns and priorities. Also interviewed local government officials and development workers to get a sense of what they think works, and does not.

The secondary data came from multiple sources including Census data from 2011 and later surveys, government reports and policy documents, academic studies that other researchers have done on similar communities, and reports from development organizations that have been working in the area.

Since Musahars live in concentrated settlements called "tolis," this study included every household rather than sampling. For household surveys structured questionnaires have been opted, covering everything from basic demographics to education, health, livelihood, and what assets families own. For qualitative work, semi-structured interview guides have been used, that allowed people to tell their stories in their own words. Also used observation method to assess living conditions.

## **6. Results and Findings**

When look at the demographic picture of Musahar families in Hulasganj Block, several patterns emerge that tell the story of a community struggling with basic survival. Across six study villages, the study found 823 Musahar households with a total population of 5,152 people. The gender distribution shows 55.4 percent males and 44.6 percent females, which immediately suggests some concerning trends about female disadvantage in the region. The age structure reveals a very young population with lots of children and teenagers, which means high dependency ratios where few working adults have to support many dependents.

What struck most during household surveys was the educational situation. While the study could not conduct formal literacy tests, field observations suggested that literacy rates remain extremely low, probably less than 10 percent overall. Female literacy is particularly devastating, with some villages showing rates as low as 1-5 percent. This means that in many families, nobody can read or write, which makes it almost impossible to navigate government services, understand their rights, or help children with schoolwork.

While some Musahar children are enrolled in government schools, but regular attendance is a major problem. Economic pressures force many children to work alongside their parents in agricultural fields or brick kilns instead of going to school. The government schools themselves often have problems, teachers do not show up regularly, there are not enough books or materials, and Musahar children sometimes face discrimination from both teachers and other students. However, the study also found hope in the fact that some organizations working with Musahar children have been able to enrol more than double this number by providing teaching materials and meals and engaging families on the value of an education.

The health situation has been documented which reflects the harsh realities of how Musahar families live. Three major health problems dominate their lives. Malaria is extremely common because most families live in kutchha houses with thatched roofs and mud walls that provide easy entry for mosquitoes. The study identified numerous households who had experienced two or more episodes of malaria. Kala-azar (leishmaniasis) is a severe disease and it affects the Musahar most. A number of the families has been experienced deaths in their family as a result of this disease, which is linked to poor housing and overcrowding, with breeding grounds for sandfly near where they live. Anemia is common in children, women and men, the result of chronic malnutrition that riddles most families. Limited access to iron-rich foods and frequent infections contribute to these high anemia rates.

What concerned us about healthcare were not just the diseases themselves, but how families respond to illness. Many community members told us they often delay seeking medical treatment because they cannot afford it, the nearest health facility is too far away, or they have had bad experiences with discrimination in the past. Traditional healers and home remedies are often the first line of treatment, not because families prefer them, but because they are the only options they feel they have.

The occupational structure of Musahars in study area confirms their concentration in the most vulnerable forms of work. Agricultural labor is the primary occupation for more than 90 percent of households, but this work is highly seasonal and irregular. During planting and harvesting seasons, there might be work available, but for several months each year, there is almost nothing. This forces many families into a pattern of seasonal migration where they travel to distant places looking for work in brick kilns, construction sites, or other manual labor.

Brick kiln work deserves special mention because it is both a major source of income and a source of exploitation for many Musahar families. Entire families, including children, often work together in brick kilns to meet production targets. The working conditions are harsh, and families frequently report that kiln owners cheat them on wages or trap them in debt cycles. Some families try diversifying their income and keeping pigs and chickens for small scale animal husbandry. Although such activities can offer a degree of income security, they are also socially stigmatized, which is another source of discrimination.

Economic analysis revealed that most households live in extreme poverty. The statistic that 96.3 percent of Musahars are landless is not just a number, it represents the fundamental reality that these families have no assets to fall back on during difficult times. Most families own very few productive assets beyond basic household items and perhaps a bicycle or some small livestock. The mix of landlessness, seasonal work and low skill levels reflects that the families face a permanent risk to economic shocks.

Living conditions in Musahar settlements paint a picture of systematic neglect and marginalization. Most families live in what are called "*tolis*", spatially segregated settlements that are typically located on the edges of main villages. These settlements are characterised by lack or limited infrastructure and social services. Housing consists mainly of single-room kutcha structures made of mud walls and thatched roofs. These huts offer no resistance to the weather and insufficient breathability. It is common to find large families sharing very small spaces, with parents, children, and sometimes grandparents all living in one room.

Access to clean drinking water is limited and inconsistent. Many households rely on hand pumps or wells that may be contaminated, contributing to waterborne diseases. Sanitation facilities are almost non-existent in most *tolis*, forcing people to practice open defecation. This not only affects dignity and safety, particularly for women and girls, but also contributes to disease transmission and environmental contamination. While some areas have been electrified under government programs, power supply is irregular and many households cannot afford electrical connections or appliances. Most *tolis* are connected to main villages by kutcha roads that become impassable during monsoons, effectively isolating the community from markets and services when they need them most.

The most troubling discoveries are probably those that concern continual social discrimination and ostracizing. In spite of legislative protections and several decades affirmative action policies, Musahars are still not allowed to access common village resources including places for socialization or religious activities. They are frequently shut out of village-level decision-making and face discrimination in employment and business. Here are some concrete examples of how such discrimination plays out in the real world. Spatial segregation keeps them physically separated from main village life. They are restricted from entering temples and other public places.

Kids are discriminated against in schools and families face discrimination when seeking healthcare. They are shut out of village-level bodies and associations that might afford them some say in local development priorities.

The Musahar community in Hulasganj Block has been targeted through various governmental and non-governmental development interventions, yet their impact remains limited. Out of 823 Musahar households across six villages, only 301 families (36.6%) have received benefits under various schemes, leaving nearly two-thirds without direct program support.

The Mahadalit Vikas Mission, launched specifically for ultra-marginalized groups, has provided some benefits but suffers from poor implementation and limited coverage. The Public Distribution System reaches most families through ration cards, though grain quality remains poor and supply irregular. Housing schemes under PM Awas Yojana have benefited only 45 households, while complex documentation requirements exclude many eligible families.

While Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan established schools and mid-day meal programs, learning outcomes remain disappointing due to teacher absenteeism, poor infrastructure, and discrimination. However, targeted NGO interventions have achieved over 80% enrolment rates among Musahar children by addressing specific barriers and providing comprehensive support.

Government health programs through Anganwadi centres have improved maternal healthcare and immunization coverage. Disease-specific programs have reduced malaria and kala-azar incidence, though underlying environmental conditions remain unchanged. Most women now deliver babies in institutions rather than at home.

Road connectivity and electrification have shown visible improvements, reduced isolation and improving access to services. However, many households still cannot afford electrical connections, and sanitation programs under Swachh Bharat Mission have low usage rates.

When the study looked at government welfare program delivery, it was generally found to be mixed and often disappointing picture. On the brighter side, some families received homes through housing schemes such as PM Awas Yojana which brought a relief to few households. There is no doubt that mid-day meal program in schools do provide key nutrition support to

children who are regular attendees. Healthcare services through Anganwadi centers serve some families, particularly for maternal and child health.

However, the challenges in program implementation far outweigh these positive aspects. Many families have very low awareness about what schemes are available and what the eligibility criteria are. The documentation requirements for most programs are complex and difficult for illiterate families to navigate. The quality of services in government schools and health centers is often so poor that they do not provide meaningful benefits even when families can access them.

The Mahadalit Vikas Mission, which was specifically designed for ultra-marginalized groups like Musahars, has had particularly limited impact in study area. Found some individual beneficiaries who received support through this program, the vast majority of eligible families have never been reached by it. This gap between policy intention and ground-level implementation represents one of the key failures in current approaches to addressing Musahar marginalization.

## **7. Discussion**

What emerges from the research is a picture of a community that remains trapped in what the study might call "systemic marginalization." Despite India's impressive economic growth over the past few decades and numerous welfare programs specifically designed to help marginalized communities, the Musahar families has been studied continue to experience the kind of extreme poverty and social exclusion that should have no place in a modern democracy. Their situation reflects what development economist Amartya Sen (1999) calls "unfreedoms" - the absence of basic capabilities that enable people to live with dignity and pursue the lives they have reason to value.

The persistence of Musahar marginalization can be understood through several interconnected factors that reinforce each other. Structural factors create the foundation of their vulnerability. Landlessness and lack of productive assets mean that families have no economic security and no way to build wealth over generations. Their concentration in the most vulnerable forms of employment - seasonal agricultural labor, brick kiln work, daily wage labor - means they're always at the mercy of economic fluctuations and employer exploitation. These structural constraints

make it extremely difficult for families to invest in education for their children or take the kinds of economic risks that might lead to better opportunities.

Social factors add another layer of constraint. Caste-based discrimination and spatial segregation limit access to the kinds of social networks and opportunities that other communities take for granted. The stigma associated with the "Musahar" identity itself creates barriers that go beyond economic constraints.

Institutional factors represent perhaps the most frustrating aspect of current marginalization. The Indian state has created an extensive apparatus of welfare programs, educational initiatives, and development schemes that are supposed to address exactly the kinds of problems that Musahar families face. But the research finds that the vast majority of these programs are not meaningfully reaching their intended beneficiaries. It is about programs that are designed without understanding the real constraints that marginalized families face, and implementation systems that assume levels of education, social capital, and institutional access that these families simply do not have.

Low levels of formal education and limited exposure to opportunities beyond their immediate environment do restrict awareness and aspirations for change. Education emerges from the analysis as both the most critical intervention needed and the most difficult to implement effectively.

The health dimension of Musahar marginalization illustrates how poverty and discrimination interact to create vicious cycles. The concentration of vector-borne diseases like malaria and kala-azar reflects environmental health risks associated with poor housing and sanitation that are themselves products of economic marginalization and spatial segregation.

Economic empowerment is arguably the most difficult. The overreliance of Musahars on agriculture labor also indicates historical caste-based demarcation with respect to profession and current inhibitions towards the diversification in occupation.

## **9. Conclusion**

The reality of Musahar families in Hulashanj Block is stark, nearly everyone is landless, most cannot read or write, children go hungry, and yet these families keep fighting for a better

tomorrow. Despite constitutional protections, numerous welfare schemes, and decades of development efforts, their daily reality is still marked by extreme hardship and systematic marginalization. The statistics documented, 96.3 percent landlessness, literacy rates below 10 percent, widespread malnutrition, and disease represent not just numbers but human stories of families struggling for basic dignity and opportunity.

The Musahar families were not looking for charity or special treatment. They want the same things that every family wants - safe housing, good education for their children, healthcare when they need it, work that pays a fair wage, and respect from their neighbors.

Only when the most marginalized members of society can participate fully in economic, social, and political life can India truly claim to have achieved inclusive development. The Musahar community's journey from the margins to the mainstream represents this larger struggle for social justice and human rights in contemporary India.

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