



Negotiating Marginality: Transformation of Identity and Agency among the Musahars of Bihar

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ABSTRACT

The Musahar community in the Indian state of Bihar has faced historical marginalisation and has received the political designation as a Mahadalit community—, signifying a lower status even among the Scheduled Caste community in the state. Based on field observations, surveys and interviews undertaken across 70 households from the districts of Nalanda and Nawada during October 2025 and January 2026, the paper attempts an ethnographic study depicting the ways in which the Musahar community has negotiated its agency in the light of migration, digitalisation and modern cultural practices. The paper places itself at the crossroads of caste, historical injustices, and Modernisation with the objective of examining the structural inequalities negotiated by the marginalised community in question. The observations reveal that there is continuing socio-economic deprivation indicated by parameters like low literacy levels, landlessness, and an over-reliance on informal labour. Under such circumstances, migration seems to become a major livelihood strategy, which offers scanty economic relief and does not guarantee significant social mobility. Even though the use of digital technologies has been growing—a fact revealed by the survey—it may be lamented that it is mostly in the form of entertainment, accompanied by skewed access in gendered terms and the inability of youth to benefit from gadgets for their own education. Meanwhile, the process of modernisation has also resulted in selective alteration of cultures, but



without impacting overarching traditional social patterns. The community as a whole, therefore, is in need of more equitable access to amenities, education, infrastructure and diversification of livelihood for a better future.

Introduction

Back in the pre-independent years, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar once portrayed caste as a system of “graded inequality,” whereas contemporary India continues to tell a similar story through practices and institutionalised discrimination (Ambedkar, 1936). The vehement advocate of Dalit rights had argued that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, systematically denying dignity and mobility to lower castes. This observation is relevant in analysing the structural marginalisation of the Musahar community, which, even to this technologically advanced age, continues to face deep-rooted socio-economic exclusion. Taking the case of the Musahar community, the study represents the mixture of interdisciplinary subjects of caste, marginality, and social transformation. It tries to understand how identity and agency are constituted within the Musahar community in the context of migration, modernisation and digitalisation.

The Musahar community, which is listed under the Scheduled Caste list and further identified as “Mahadalits”, by the Bihar government, represents one of the most deprived communities in India (National Human Rights Commission of India, n.d.). The community name derives from the Hindi words *musa* (rat) and *hara* (to kill), meaning ‘rat eater’. which shows the generational deprivation of poverty. These identities have contributed to their social exclusion and exploitation from time to time (Sahay, 2019).

Under the provisions of Articles 38 and 46 of the Constitution of India, the Mahadalit status was provided to them in 2007 by the Government of Bihar. The Musahar community has the third largest population among the scheduled castes of Bihar, with a total population of 2,725,114 (Census of India, 2011), which constitutes 2.6% of the total population of Bihar. The population has seen a growth of around 0.4%, making 3.087% of the total population with 4,035,487 people (Bihar Caste Survey, 2023, Table 4). The community is subdivided into clans such as Manjhi, Musahar and Mandals. Women are mostly home makers and agricultural labourers contributing to the family income. A socially and economically deprived community, at the lowest in the hierarchy of the ‘caste’ system. The Musahar people were always considered the “untouchable” and sanitation workers because of being at the lowest



position in caste stratification. The Musahars find their history as tribes of chota nagpur hills who migrated towards the plains in the 12th century. They were provided the lowest status in the caste-based hierarchy.

The Musahar are divided into two categories: one is Tirhutiya, residing in northern Bihar and Magahiya, residing in southern Bihar. Both share the same history, but there is no connection between them, and no intermarriages take place (Sachchidanand, 1985; Arun Prasad, 2005).

The Musahars: Historical Marginality and Generational Poverty

A narrative of past expectations from the community and continued deprivation needs to be explored to understand continued marginality of the Musahar community. The people belonging to this community generationally worked as labourers and had no profession related specifically to them. They have worked as agricultural labourers, and accordingly, have developed vast knowledge of agriculture. In the past, they were hired as the mouse catchers, as mice used to infest the fields, and are now hired as knowledgeable workers. A special ritual, “Ropni”, performed before sowing of seeds every season, can be performed only by the Musahar women. The Musahar community has also been working as stone breakers and in almost all fields that require skills as manual labour.

According to E. Lockwood, the collector of Munger District in 1873, the Musahar community did not receive any coin in wages; rather, they used to get grains as wages. They ate rats, mice, pigs, and snails. They worked as bonded labourers once they attained puberty. This shows that they have, for generations, been a socially marginalised community.

Their exclusion from land ownership, education, and fixed employment has led to generational poverty and limited growth (Kumar & Rastogi, 2022). Gender further adds to this marginalisation, with women experiencing most discrimination at the level of caste, class, and patriarchy (Gupta, 2021; Priyanandini, 2024).

Attempts towards Negotiating Marginality

Migration has become the best option for survival and livelihood diversification. Large-scale out-migration from Bihar to developing centres of the country has enabled them to access wage labour in construction, brick kilns, and other informal sectors that require manual labourers (Kumar & Bhagat, 2012; Roy, 2016).



Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of digital technologies after 2016 has opened new avenues for communication, skill development, and new opportunities in digital content creation. The new era of the internet and smartphones, with cheaper internet cost has enabled Musahar community members to access the digital world (Samag, 2015). Social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are used in day-to-day life, especially among younger generations (Rampal, 2019).

Even after the affirmative actions by the government providing caste-based reservation in the legislature, the representation of the Musahar people is very little. The representation and participation of women is negligible even after the implementation of 50% reservation of seats for women in panchayati raj institutions (Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 2006; Bihar Government, 2006).

Modernisation introduced new cultural practices, food patterns, and clothing patterns to the Musahars. Exposure to urban lifestyles has contributed to shifts in identity formation and social relations with the local people (Datta et al., 2014; Endow, 2017).

Despite such attempts, armed with technology and the incentive to migrate, the question still remains whether the community could successfully negotiate its marginality.

The Method

Secondary inputs are always insufficient in painting a true picture and a better understanding of a community's livelihood. The ethnographic study and participant observation undertaken as a part of this research allowed for a broad study of social interactions and cultural practices, while survey methods provided data on the socio-economic conditions of Musahars at a grassroots level. Primary fieldwork was conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 across 70 households in the districts of Nalanda and Nawada in the Magadh division of Bihar. The surveyed sites were villages like Akbarpur, Sohjana, Siswan, Atari, Kadirganj, Diaura, Bhojpur, Puri, and Ghosrawan. These locations provided variations in the data as they were within a 50 km radius. Random households were selected, which ensured diversity within the sample, which included various categories such as migrant households, women, and digitally active individuals. Data collection was through questionnaires and in person interviews.

The sections which follow document field observations into specific themes in order to better understand the contemporary status of the Musahar community in the demarcated districts of Bihar.



Educational Attainment: Benefits and Aspirations

Education has been seen to have a direct impact on the economic upliftment of any community, and a glimpse at the educational pattern of the Musahar community is necessary to understand their occupational standing. A distinct pattern of lack of awareness was observed in all villages, particularly in the field of education. Even basic primary education was found to be missing in every village. This was more observable among the older adults and most women, where literacy level was negligible. Many respondents expressed limited understanding of the importance of formal education, which appears to be shaped by long-standing social and economic conditions. Schooling is often not seen as essential, particularly when immediate livelihood concerns take priority.

There is a huge gender gap in the education sector where women have no access to education compared to men. It can be seen that male children are encouraged to pursue education, whereas female children are not sent to school, groomed for household work. As the field survey data reveals, the highest level of education possessed by any woman was matriculation in the middle-aged group. However, young women could occasionally be found pursuing higher education. Social norms, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities continue to play a major role in limiting educational opportunities, especially in the case of women.

At the same time, men were not so better off in terms of higher educational attainment. The highest qualification recorded in the villages was that of a student enrolled at the intermediate level, which indicates that access to higher education remains extremely limited overall.

The situation becomes worse when access to the digital world is considered. Most households have only one smartphone, and the device is usually owned and controlled by the male member of the family. They use it for the purpose of entertainment and news consumption. The findings also show that almost all adult male members have their own personal smartphones, whereas their contemporary female counterparts do not have access to them. There is very little evidence of smartphones being used for educational purposes or skill development. Women's interaction with smartphones is minimal and often indirect. They generally do not use the devices independently and are able to access content only when it is shown to them by husbands or children. This leads to women being disconnected not only from the digital world but also from the information and opportunities that come with it.

The Vikash Mitra scheme, which gives preference to women, has also led to their growth in access to the digital world, as they have smartphones and use them for official purposes. Their engagement with digital



technology is more active compared to other women in the villages. However, their numbers are limited, and this does not significantly change the overall pattern of digital exclusion observed among women.

Statistically, the survey data exhibits low literacy levels, with approximately 64% of respondents who attended primary schooling and very few of the 16-20 age group having access to higher education. Occupational patterns indicate limited mobility to a few states, with the majority engaged in daily wage labour (47.6%) and agricultural labour (28.6%), with others working on a contract basis in brick kilns and other factories.

Role in Village Economy

Landlessness is very high in the Musahars, with 81% of respondents having no ownership of agricultural land. They depend on informal labour markets. Such conditions reflect the structural and historical exclusion coming from caste hierarchies, where economic deprivation is closely related to the social status of Musahars (Sahay, 2019).

The findings match Ambedkar's argument regarding the systemic nature of caste-based inequality. Despite affirmative actions by the government over time, the Musahar community has seen limited transformation.

Migration and Economic Upliftment

Migration to urban areas and metropolitan cities has been seen as an age old strategy for economic mobility by communities. This holds true for the Musahar community as well.

Migration was seen in almost every household, with survey data revealing 71.4% of households reporting at least one member working as migrant labour. Musahar migrants typically found work in low-skilled sectors, which require manual labour such as construction, brick kilns, as Security guards, and house helpers across various states.

Migration typically provides a better lifestyle, education and environment with the opportunity of upward social mobility. This does not hold true for the community in question. Approximately 60% of respondents said that no significant change in social behaviour or status was seen despite migrant work.

Studies reveal that migration from Bihar is primarily due to distress rather than opportunity, showing structural inequalities in rural economies (Deshingkar et al., 2006; Kirti et al., 2023). While migration



may provide more income sources, it does not necessarily dismantle caste-based hierarchies or ensure social mobility in the rural context (Roy, 2016).

Furthermore, migrants often face exploitation, low wages, and discrimination in urban settings, indicating that marginality is reproduced across spatial contexts (Ranjan, 2024), but during the field survey, people reported very few incidents which might also be explained by regional disparities.

Digitalisation: Benefits and Unequal Access

The advocates of digital technology and globalisation had stressed upon the economic benefits of going digital. To what extent, then, was the Musahar community in Bihar able to benefit from them? Responses to the questionnaires and the interviews reveal a growing demand for digital technologies and devices among the Musahars. Approximately 81% of respondents possess and know how to use smartphones, yet choose to use them for entertainment, and secondarily, for access to news.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are widely used, reflecting broader trends in rural digital engagement (Amit, 2025). The content creation can be seen on social media platforms by people of every age group. Instagram is the most used platform by the youngsters for the creation of trendy content. Social media trends are now gradually shaping livelihoods and affecting decision-making patterns in rural areas. However, the use of digital technologies for education, skill development, or income generation remains largely limited.

A distinct gender bias may be seen in digitalisation, as women have very limited access to smartphones, and those who do have access, mostly depend upon their husbands or children to use them. This shows the disparity and gap in digital access between men and women. (Kumar et al., 2025).

Modernisation and Cultural Change

Modernisation has led to gradual changes in lifestyle and cultural practices over time. A majority of people (85.7%) said that they had experienced shifts in eating habits, clothing, and consumption patterns, mostly driven by the trends over social media and urbanisation over the past decade.

Youngsters show interests and exhibit aspirations for urban lifestyles, influenced by migration and social media exposure. However, core cultural practices like regional gods and traditions remain largely intact, indicating a process of selective adaptation .



This coexistence of tradition and modernity reflects the complexity of social transformation in rural India with the changing dimensions of the society (Sheth, 1969; Datta et al., 2014). Rather than a complete cultural shift, modernisation manifests as a layered process where new practices are incorporated without entirely replacing traditional identities instantly, but with time, it may convert the tradition.

Recommendations

As field observations reveal, the marginalisation of the Musahar people is not just due to the economic factor, but it is mainly due to the social backwardness and the unequal access to resources. The historical social exclusion and caste discrimination emerge as the main problems of their backwardness. Migration and digitalisation have created new opportunities, but their ability to change things is still uneven and limited. Therefore, there is a need for proper policies that can help in the upliftment of the community.

Strengthening Educational Access

It can be seen in the findings that there is a poor condition of education among the children due to the migration of parents from time to time. So, residential schooling facilities for children from migrant households can ensure continuity in education. Existing government programmes like schools in particular areas for particular communities must be implemented with greater focus in Musahar-dominated regions to ensure enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes. Targeted implementation of government schemes in Musahar-dominated regions is essential to improve enrolment and retention (Kumar, 2025).

Promoting Meaningful Digital Inclusion

As more people are accessing smartphones, the research indicates that people are not using digital technologies in meaningful activities, especially in education or enhancing economic growth. The policy interventions should, therefore, shift to access in order to address digital literacy and meaningful use. Digital skills and awareness on a village level, especially among women and the young, can be improved through digital training programmes. Access disparities can also be addressed by providing access to community internet centres, which are public digital infrastructure. In capability terms, it is better to comprehend digital inclusion as the extension of substantive freedoms, but not technological access, as Amartya Sen argues. Community-based digital training programmes, especially for women and youth, can bridge the gap between access and meaningful engagement (Rampal, 2019).



Livelihood Diversification

The high degree of daily wage labour and migration indicates the absence of livelihood opportunities in the rural areas which are sustainable. Distress migration can be discouraged by increasing rural employment schemes and also through area-specific skill development programmes. Economic resilience can be boosted by encouraging self-employment by creating micro-enterprises and collective efforts such as self-help groups. These measures have the potential to help bring about a slow transition between survival-based livelihoods and more positive and diversified income streams. Self-help groups and local entrepreneurship initiatives can promote economic resilience (Kumari & Pandey, 2024).

Infrastructure Development

High rates of poor sanitation, inaccessibility to clean drinking water and poor living conditions describe the incidence of infrastructural needs that require specific interventions. It is essential to ensure that sanitation, housing and water supply initiatives are well implemented in Musahar settlements to improve the quality of life. The development of infrastructure is expected not only to meet certain urgent requirements but also to lead to the creation of long-term human development results.

Conclusion

The survey responses reveal that the Musahar community is experiencing socio-economic change through migration, digitalisation, and modernisation. The use of modern means and opportunities can be seen, yet the deep-rooted backwardness is intact. All three components have still not managed to eradicate the inequalities and atrocities that plague the community.

Migration brings some relief to the economy and education, but the social backwardness can still be sensed. On the same note, digitalisation presents a possible source of empowerment, but its advantages are unequal as they are characterised by access, literacy and resource gaps. The presence of gender inequalities and low levels of schooling also limits the transformational outcomes.

One may conclude that marginalized communities are not the passive subjects of change, and instead, are dynamic agents who are negotiating their identities in the changing socio-economic reality. Equal access to digital technology, its utility for education, and systemic changes must be at the top of the agenda of future studies so that they can facilitate more substantial and equitable development.



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