

# Intervention, Identity and Marginality

## An Ethnographic Account of the Musahars

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This paper provides an ethnographic account of the changing facets of marginality for the Musahars of Uttar Pradesh. It takes a close look at how their identity is shaped by the resistance of those at the margins, by politics, and by interventions on the part of external agencies. The research deconstructs (i) the everyday resistance of the Musahars, as evident from their songs and poetry; (ii) the talk of state officials and state policies about Musahars; and (iii) the discourse of social activists, organisations and donor agencies. Armed with this information, the paper attempts to view the world from the perspective of the Musahars and focuses on how they negotiate diverse discourses to their advantage in order to transgress the boundaries of marginality, and how this process changes the notion of marginality for them.

A general perception exists about all marginal groups, manifested in everyday utterances like: “they are lazy”, “they are habitual thieves”, “they cannot save”, “they enjoy their idleness”, “they lack the ability to handle wealth and liberty”, etc. These perceptions were institutionalised during colonial rule, when such groups were branded as “criminal tribes” in many areas. Their movements were governed by special regulations and they were never considered worthy of citizen status by the colonisers. Although these communities were denotified after independence, perceptions about their behaviour continue to shape the mindset of the “worthy other”. Studies of marginal communities have documented their socioeconomic conditions, history and culture, but there is little knowledge about how these marginal groups address their “other”. Marginality has been defined as a state of limbo between at least two cultural life-worlds (Park 1928: 881-93), so an investigation into the “worthy other” in relation to the “non-worthy” becomes important. Again, little has been documented on the resistances emerging from these margins due to their interface with development, modern culture and politics.

This paper inquires into the strategic intervention undertaken by a non-governmental agency for the upliftment of the deeply deprived Musahar community of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP). At that time, they were barely recognised in the public realm. The critical force of the intervening agency broke the limits of their tolerance and posited the Musahars against the state; they were the ones who had been left out of development altogether. However, the feudal structures within which they were situated were never questioned. The agency worked as a catalyst, revealing various contours of the injustices suffered by the Musahars in the context of the non-availability of state entitlements, thereby bringing to the fore their consciousness of an unrealised citizenship. The “other” of this new subaltern was defined in terms of its easy access to the state. The new identity – “as equals” – was strategically flagged in the public realm to gain material concessions from the state. The realisation that they had been “left-out” in the developmental process led to an altered aspiration: to gain political power at the local level. Strategic intervention constructed a new notion of marginality, centred essentially around institutions of the state. This helped to register the identity of the Musahars in the public realm.

The paper is based on ethnographic explorations, spread over a period of eight years.

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Marginality as a social phenomenon was first proposed by Robert Park (1928). This concept has since entered the sociological canon and continues to preoccupy sociological studies. Later, Everett Stonequist expanded the concept to embrace “the individual who leaves one social group or culture without making a satisfactory adjustment to another and finds himself on the margin of each but a member of neither” (1935: 1-12). Sociologists continued to analyse the psychological and social pressures under which marginal people operate (Goldberg 1941; Green 1947).

The concern of this paper is, however, not with the marginal condition as such, but with the related issue of the marginal discourse, or the discourse articulated from the experience of marginality. The discourse of the marginal is not governed by any single, pure, or abstract logic. The very term “logic” is suspect in this context on account of its logocentrism, and every case of marginality is complex and special (Crewe 1991).

Again, particular experiences of marginality are also subject to change, calling for a renewed understanding with each single dislocation of the subject position. When environments or individuals located at the margins are subject to change, either because of individual choice or external influence, the understanding of marginality may be altered. In this paper, this hypothesis is explored through a study of the Musahars. I first explore the community’s understanding of their own marginality and compare it with the understanding of marginalisation that was created after an external agency intervened to facilitate their upliftment. It is important to mention at the outset that the pre-intervention understanding of marginality has only been glimpsed through the fault lines and fractures visible within the community both during and after the intervention. This has also been grasped through the understanding that different generations have of their subject position.

### The Musahar Community

The Musahar community lives in small and scattered hamlets along the banks of the river Gandak. This Musahar belt extends from the neighbouring state of Bihar, where they have a noticeable presence. In UP, the community is densely concentrated in Kushinagar, Maharajganj, Deoria and Gorakhpur districts, where they constitute a majority among the scheduled castes. Musahar settlements are also found in the districts of Banaras, Chandauli, Bhadoi, Gazipur, Jaunpur and Ambedkar Nagar. The Musahar population in Maharajganj numbers around 10,000, spread across the six blocks (touching Nichloul, Pharendra and Nautanawa) of Nichloul, Siswa, Mithora, Ghugli, Laxmipur and Brijmanganj, and covering 25 gram sabhas. In total, 74 Musahar *tola* have been identified in Maharajganj district, with 1,762 households with an average family size of six. In Maharajganj district, Nichloul is the tehsil and block with the densest Musahar concentration; there are 58 *tolas* of Musahars in nearly 16 gram sabhas.

Musahar huts can be seen at the edge of villages and near forests, distant from other dalit households, and with no roads around to connect them with the mainland. They work almost as bonded labourers on their own land to repay the loans taken

from local landlords in times of distress. The most striking feature of this entire transaction is the fact that indebtedness provided them with a job security of sorts. Although they are underpaid<sup>1</sup> by moneylenders, they at least have recourse to an available source of credit. They have accepted the exploitation, hard labour and humiliation that accompanies this transaction as their fate. Indebtedness has become an indispensable part of their life; indeed, indebtedness, mortgages and landlessness together form the critical core of the Musahars’ vulnerability.

### Images of Hunger and the Resigned Self

These images of hunger were gathered from the remote area of Sohagi Barwa in the initial stages of intervention, before the rights discourse used by the agency took root.

Lacchi is a widow; her husband had died of hunger a year before. Lacchi’s cold expression while narrating the incident could lead an observer to conclude that the constant struggle for life had made death a less emotional experience. This observation was substantiated by other, similar observations during the field study. There was almost no household that had not experienced the death of a sibling or a child. For some respondents, recalling and narrating the stories of starvation deaths in their families was a huge effort. In fact, dehumanised by hunger, they have accepted such events as a part of their lives. No space remains for emotional outbursts; their immediate needs are so pressing that they constantly look for solutions to save other family members from meeting the same fate. Lacchi is now the sole breadwinner in her family. Her entire day is spent arranging food for the family. With four empty bellies at home, there is no escape from the hardship she endures.

What does having food mean for a Musahar? Lacchi’s menu for the day speaks for itself.

Today I have cooked this rice [a small pot stood on the *chulha*, half-filled with rice] and made “*chutni*”... to prepare a *chutni*, we grind green or dried red chillies depending upon the availability with salt... that’s how we always make it and use it as a substitute for vegetables and dal.

Their options are limited. The amount of money they have in hand determines the choice they can make. Meals are meticulously planned, keeping in mind the economics of everyday life; often, other needs are postponed as hunger cannot be deferred.

The uncertainty of finding work the next day renders the situation all the more precarious, and necessitates a rationing of food. Nothing is certain, except one’s preparedness to fast. The choice is between food and no food, rather than between food and tasty food, or between food and food of one’s choice.

Although it is difficult to rear children under these conditions, childlessness does not make things easier. Panmati<sup>2</sup> has no children, but there is no land either, and with no one to take care of them, old age has become a curse. For the old couple, it often becomes difficult to get work, as they have to compete with able-bodied young people in the labour market. They make their living by selling firewood. Moreover, given the widespread poverty, there is no scope for sympathetic assistance

from fellow community members. There is one persistent quandary: Whose needs are more urgent? The role of the state in such circumstances is another obvious query that comes to mind. The occasional respite that the state provides is channelled through the *pradhan*, who is more a feudal lord than a people's representative. His words are law and his discretion supreme. In this case, he skilfully shrugged off his responsibilities; as Panmati said: "Many times we went to the *pradhan* for our old age pension...he said you will get it only when someone dies in the village...you will have to wait."

For her, the wait has become an endless one. The irony is that for their life to continue, someone else's life needs to end; poverty has bestowed a utility on death.

Similarly, everyone in Bhajni's<sup>3</sup> tola knows her to be an old widow with no means of support, but they are in no position to help her daily either. She admits:

Today I had nothing to cook ... yesterday morning I cooked some rice, in the evening had nothing and slept ... in the morning had some *bhuja* [small broken pieces of rice and paddy fried in sand or salt]...if somebody gives me something to eat, things will be better, otherwise once again I will have to fast. Once I had to fast for four continuous days.

Her neighbour said, "When we didn't see her outside for many days...we guessed that something must be wrong...I came inside to check on her and found her lying unconscious."

In all the above narratives, we see that in the Musahars' language, the euphemism used for "hunger" is *upwas*, that is, fasting.<sup>4</sup> This euphemism can also be understood as a way to hide the unpleasantness associated with hunger. Although there is no spiritual value attached to it here, the language used is a potent signal of an internalisation of suffering as a normal/usual occurrence. No one gives in to an outburst against the state or any other institutional factor held responsible for the current situation. There is not even a desire for any redress from the state. How – and when – they entered this state of mind and why they find acceptance easier than resistance is explained in the next section.

### The Musahars' Account of the Self

The secret behind the Musahars' acceptance of and resignation to their fate lies in their self-image, which has been partly imposed and partly constructed through their historical experience. An historical account of the Musahars' life in the region was difficult to obtain as their geographical presence was barely recognised. People have heard of them, but not attached much significance to where and how they live. While some people were aware of them residing in the neighbourhood, they also knew that the Musahars' neighbourhood did not fall within the civilised boundaries of village life. The faceless Musahar was only remembered as a rat eater, or more recently as a reluctant labourer. Musahars are perceived as lazy people who are uninterested in work until their last penny has been spent. These socially constructed images justify their exclusion and marginalisation from mainstream society. However, at the same time they can be, and are, used in the village society for menial jobs, work that is not enough to integrate them within the village society and economy. While meat-eating is

popular in the area, the flesh of a rat has its own stigma attached to it. The regular practice is for Musahars to collect the leftover grain scattered in the field after a harvest. Their only competitors in the field are the rats, and they are at times compelled to follow the rodents and gather grain from their burrows. They have even learnt to justify the discrimination they face in their own minds; as Ramvilas says,

We were *vanmanush*...surviving on wild fruits and animals...we were dumb and gullible with no sense of the world and its ways (*budbak*)... therefore people also maintained distance from us...untouchability was invited by our own practices...now we are learning manners.

This image of Musahars as dumb and gullible was iterated by many others in the community. They also presumed that it was precisely these traits that had led to their land being cornered by the intelligent and dominant people of the village.

The oral history of the Musahars, as passed down from one generation to the next, reflects their own marginality in the region. They informed us that during the colonial period, this area was covered with dense forests and was used by some British officials for hunting purposes. The Musahars were brought into this area by the British to clean some patches of land for the latter's recreational activities. An old *dak bungalow*, called *Kath Bangla* in the local parlance, still stands in the middle of the forest as a testimony to their history. In order to make a living, the Musahars also cleared some forest land for themselves and began practising shifting cultivation. Raju,<sup>5</sup> a Musahar, says:

Only a Musahar could have done it as we have the traditional skill of judging the property and quality of soil; and then it requires hard labour to clear forest land. Not everyone can survive in the deep forest... only a Musahar body can sustain such hardship.

This image of strength and skill is in stark contrast to the image of a reluctant labourer more interested in leisure than in hard work. While the villagers consider Musahars *vanmanush* (persons living in the forest), with a limited appetite for worldly pleasures and thus fit to remain only at the margins, they consider it a source of pride, ownership and strength. Their own understanding of marginality lies in their declining control over the forest land, which had been taken over by more informed outsiders. Since the land is fertile and the Musahar population settled in the area relatively small, there was enough for everyone to eat unless hit by a natural calamity. Other forms of forest produce would also supplement their diet. Although they are poor, they must surely have greater control over their lives. However, this fertile land slowly began attracting people from neighbouring areas, who managed to acquire large chunks of land by holding out petty, yet alluring, gifts (a piece of cloth, for instance) to the Musahars. With the passage of time, ownership of landholdings became concentrated in the hands of the upper castes. Some Musahars left their traditional homes along the riverbanks to settle wherever the local land/estate owner allowed them to live, in exchange for *begari*. Thus the Musahar, the original inhabitant of the place, was transformed into a landless agricultural labourer. The small amount of land left to them was mortgaged in times of tragedy and disaster, to

which they were increasingly vulnerable, as the area was prone to flooding.

It is worth mentioning that the Musahars had never mastered any agricultural techniques.<sup>6</sup> Outsiders came in to the area, got the forest cleared, and deprived the Musahars of their homes. The irony is that the Musahars had themselves helped to clear the forest for the land/estate owners, thereby becoming an innocent party to their own deprivation. For a very long time now, it has been easy for the dominant classes to exploit the Musahars who, on account of their limited knowledge and skill, became gradually accustomed to their dependence on their *sarkars* (lords); this dependence runs so deep that it has become impossible for them to perceive a future beyond this relationship. The outsiders introduced new cropping patterns; earlier, only coarse grains were grown, but now paddy and sugar cane are grown extensively.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, this increased the productivity and profitability of the farm (with all benefits going to the landlords), while on the other, it brought about a considerable change in the food basket of the poor. Now their food consists mainly of rice and wheat, which have to be bought from the market. Not only does this increase their dependence on the market, but it also reduces the choice available to the poor, as coarse grain is no longer available. A day without work might mean no food at all for the family. During difficult times, when work is scarce and so is the food, hunger is a constant factor that they have to live with.

At present, landownership among the Musahars is negligible. The little ancestral land they possessed has been mortgaged for small sums of money. Land is the only tradable asset they have to fall back on in the case of emergencies like death and illness. Marriage is the other important event on which they spend lavishly, again at the cost of their land. In fact, land determines the probability of leading a normal life. Once it is mortgaged, the struggle to retain ownership begins, and often one's entire life is spent in the hope that one day, "my" land will be freed. To achieve this goal, they work as bonded labourers on their own land. After land, the only tradable thing they have is their labour, which they can use to repay the loan taken from local landlords.

Although the Mayawati government (2002) had distributed some land pattas in the villages, the fertile lands were captured by other dalit castes (Chamars), leaving the infertile, waterlogged and disputed land to the Musahars.

Agricultural work is insufficient during two months of the rainy season, that is, *Sawan* (mid-July to mid-August) and *Bhadon* (mid-August to mid-September), and two months of the winter season, that is, *Pous* (mid-December to mid-January) and *Magh* (mid-January to mid-February). In the rainy season, the adjoining fields – and sometimes the entire village – are inundated, and the Musahars are forced to migrate to the neighbouring areas of Bihar with their families. Even when there are no floods, the only work available at this time is repairing houses or laying new roofs, which earns them a meagre Rs 10-20. In the month of July, when rice is cultivated,<sup>8</sup> the rice saplings have to be planted in waist-deep water. This work is mostly done by women, who are paid only Rs 20 for their

labour. Tolas closer to the forest, like the Musahari tola of Naksabaksa, is heavily dependent on forest produce like the Dhak leaves, from which pattal are made. The situation is similar in the tolas of Ledi, Piparpatti, Baithwalia and Katahari, where people cut and sell wood. In these areas, the rainy season leads to great problems. During winters, the temperature plummets to three-four degrees Celsius, making work doubly arduous. To collect the forest produce, the Musahars have to move before the break of dawn to escape the forest officials, and leave after dusk to avoid being caught and harassed by forest guards. Durgawati (aged 25)<sup>9</sup> says: "The forest is the only source of livelihood for us. ...We are dwellers of the forest, we do not have any other skills...we do not have farming land, so it is even difficult to borrow money from the market."

The collection of minor forest produce is a challenge in itself due to the harassment these people encounter at the hands of forest officials. Yet another mode of exploitation comes in the garb of market forces. Being unaware of the market situation, they often fall into the clutches of middlemen who, by providing them with false information on market demands, force the Musahars to sell their produce at throwaway prices. Shanker<sup>10</sup> says:

We collect "*shikakai*" from the forest, but not at our own will...who will buy? When the contractor gives an order, only then do we do it. He gives us Rs 20 for two baskets of *shikakai*...the work continues for two months...In one season we earn Rs 500-600 through this. ...Now it is not done on such a wide scale...we do not get orders...they tell us that there is no demand in the market for *shikakai*.

These cases clearly show their resignation, and the way the Musahars have become almost habituated to their suffering over generations. They are aware of their own marginality, but see no avenues of either escape or confrontation. Many of them continued to survive through their link with the feudal structure. This was especially true of the older members of the community, who found it difficult to snap the ties of patronage that defined their very identity and existence, as exemplified by Raghunandan. Under such conditions, if one is offered work, there is no room left for bargaining. Wage rates become immaterial, as any negotiation might incur the wrath of the employer. No grudges are held either, as the employer appears as a saviour at that moment.

### The Intervention

In December 2002, Action Aid began its interaction with the Musahars of Maharajganj and Kushinagar districts, marking them as a vulnerable community in its plan outlay. A long-term engagement of seven years (2002-09), broken up in two phases was designed with the intention of making the community capable of fighting for its rights, especially the "right to food and livelihood". They started their work in collaboration with the local activists and agency (who were later dropped), who had some prior experience of working with the Musahars in the area.

The team members at the Action Aid field office in Nichlaul shared the following information.

Musahars as the stakeholders were invited to be part of the team in order to take charge of the initiative at the very outset. During the

period of rapport building, things were not easy. Their continued oppression had made them suspicious of any initiative on the part of outsiders to change their situation. Their reluctance was reflected in their hesitation to sit and talk with the organisation members. Slowly they opened up and started coming up with their problems. A shared understanding was reached through intensive interaction in small gatherings. [The] community was exposed to the developmental process in order to generate demand for learning skills, so as to approach the state with their problems. This helped to bring confidence in Musahars, and prepared them to initiate their collective struggle.

The above account makes clear how the community was exposed to the development process by the intervening agency. During this process, the agency shifted the locus of marginality from local centres of power to the state. The fact that they were capable of becoming stakeholders in the development propagated by the state even while remaining at the social margins of society was introduced in the Musahars' consciousness. While this shift was taking place, the strategy was to put up a public front, a planned, yet natural, reaction of a community against a government machinery that till recently was at too great a remove to consider dealing with.

The project coordinator<sup>11</sup> says:

We organised a *paidal* march to experience (the) different range of marginalities in the area...through it, we got the opportunity to engage with the community members...village meetings were organised during these marches, at which community members discussed their problems with us...we developed an understanding...we also communicated our viewpoint – that we were firmly allied with those facing poverty through our engagement with the social group...we are committed to be on the side of the poorest of poor [*hum antim samaj ke antim vyakti ka paksh lege*]. Another important aspect of our work is that we always promote the culture of self-analysis. The entire motive of initiating discussions with community members through a *padayatra* was to send a clear message that they are the ones who would decide their priorities, and we are here only to support them by joining hands with them. This basic idea was kept in mind when we motivated them to form the “Musahar Manch”.<sup>12</sup>

The agency's own understanding of the *antim vyakti* – the last person – was communicated to the community, and informed their understanding of their own self.

The monthly meetings of the *Manch*, held to review and discuss the progress made by the community in its struggle to eradicate poverty, were seen as a new beginning. The strategy for action is decided through a consensus, and members entrusted with the responsibility for action and follow-up. There are set procedures for resolving community problems through the *Manch*. The *Manch* sits together (*ek sath baith kar panchayat karte hai*), and through the course of discussions problem areas are identified. Once that happens, they collectively pursue the concerned officials in the local area. If the matter is not resolved at this level, *Manch* members take the issue to their district-level federation, which then starts pursuing officials at that level.

What are the issues taken up in these meetings? In the initial period, seven objectives were identified by the organisation: addressing their immediate poverty; community institution-building; conscientisation of non-Musahars; policy advocacy; liaising with the government; community capacity building; and research and media advocacy. The issues identified are

addressed to the state, and through capacity building, the community learns to demand their rights from the state. The slogans of this struggle are: “*Jo zamin sarkari hai wo zamin hamari hai*” (The government land is our land); “*Jo dalit ki baat kare wo delhi pe raaj kare*” (Delhi will be ruled by he who talks of dalits); “*hum apana adhikar mangte, nahi kisi se bheekh mangte*” (We are here to demand our rights, not to beg.)

An effective strategy to realise the rights mentioned above was the organisation of various interface camps in different tolas, to which government officials were invited. Once there, they heard the Musahars' complaints and saw for themselves the plight of the community. This gave the Musahars first experience of empowerment since before this, directly facing an official and talking to him would have been considered an unusual and terrible experience. It has had a catalytic effect, and boosted their confidence no end. As far as the government officials are concerned, the experience of going to Musahar hamlets, witnessing their acute poverty, and interacting with the most vulnerable amongst them, sensitises them towards their cause. The results are evident: in an interface camp, the block development officer (BDO) of Siswa block declared that all Musahar families were entitled to the Indira Awas Yojana. Repeated follow-up visits finally saw seven Musahars benefiting under the scheme. In Gedahadua district, the district magistrate admitted that Musahars lived on the margins of society. As a result, 12 Musahars received Antyodaya cards, and one was given a disability certificate. The visit of the additional district magistrate (ADM), Maharajganj, to the Gethiyahwaa Musahar tola restarted the process of land reforms. The ADM categorically stated that people in the village would be allotted land only after the landless Musahars had received two acres. Activities such as these have helped to bridge the gap between the community and the district administration. Both have moved a step closer to each other.

### Rights Based Approach

Through organising various rallies, demonstrations and interface camps, attempts have been made to bring the hitherto unheard and unseen Musahars, to the forefront of the public domain, and to make the government machinery responsive and accountable to them. The underlying premise of a rights-based approach like this one is that the state is primarily responsible for providing all basic amenities.

As these interactions are taking place in a democracy, the community is pitted directly against the state. As the public face of the community, Musahar Manch undersigns each campaign and activity. It leads dharnas and rallies, and is hailed in every slogan (rallies *me musahar manch zindabad karte hai*). Elaborating on the logic of this strategy, the project officer<sup>13</sup> comments:

We believe in promoting the culture of self-advocacy, which on the ground means *jiski aguwai uski larayi* (the struggle belongs to the person who leads it)...therefore they (the community) should appear as a major stakeholder...we remain in the background. ...We are only facilitators, it is their problem and they should be in a position to take complete charge. ...*Hum sarkar aur samuday, in dono logo ka milan kar dete hai, aur fir hum kinare ho jate hai* (we bring the government and the community together, and then quit the scene).

The *Musahar Anaaj Kosh Tractor Yatra* was organised on 8 May 2003 to create awareness among the Musahars about the right to food. Grain was to be collected from different community groups in the village *kasbas* for the anaaj kosh. During the procession, they asked the rural community to come forward and donate foodgrains to the Musahars. Through this procession, the Manch reinforced its commitment to work for the development of the Musahars. People were asked to help in any way they could; for instance, doctors and lawyers could charge lower fees from a Musahar. Similarly, at the May Day rally (2003) they demanded an immediate ban on combine harvesters, the fixing of minimum wages, and equal wages for male and female labourers.

Likewise, a *bhat ke liye kaam* rally was organised on 4 June 2003, with the objective of demanding food for work schemes in the Musahar tola; to express their collective resentment at the ill-functioning of the public distribution system (PDS); and to draw the attention of the district administration and the public towards their "*bhookh ka sankat*". Slogans like "*anna pade bhandaron mein, Musahar bhukhe gauon me*" (grains lie in storage while Musahars starve in the villages) were raised. As a result, food for work schemes were begun in 20 gram sabhas. The "*maan samman padyatra*" was yet another landmark (28 km were covered on foot) in gaining visibility and breaking the culture of silence of the Musahar community, and liberated them from their fear of freedom. In time, the nature and orientation of these rallies changed. While earlier they had sought cooperation through sensitisation, they later became more assertive. During the *tehsil chalo* rally (25 March 2005), they took over the tehsil headquarters in Nichloul, protesting the lackadaisical attitude of revenue functionaries and demanding the speedy disposal of land disputes and corrections in government-run schemes/programmes and services.

This local-level lobbying resulted in the release of several government orders (Gos) instructing line departments to accord high priority to Musahar-dominated villages for development assistance. Block offices were directed to carry out a survey to assess the eligibility of Musahars for various government schemes. The district magistrate appointed a nodal officer to oversee the implementation of government-run schemes/programmes in Musahar hamlets in 2004. The nodal officer was appointed to establish a link between private and government authorities. A coordination committee at the tehsil level (Nichloul) was set up with the heads of the health, education, rural development, and forestry and *anganwadi* departments to coordinate and monitor the efforts aimed at Musahar empowerment through government support. Success was achieved through the adoption of a judicious mix of confrontational and collaborative styles of functioning. On the strategic front, it resembled the Gandhian "struggle-truce-struggle" mode of functioning.

The issue of building an alternative to the state structure was avoided; this was to be a back-up plan, as was, for instance, the case with grain banks and self-help groups (SHGs). Forty-nine grain banks were managed by the Manch at the tola level, to which the community had itself contributed nearly 5,889 kg of wheat and 4,300 kg of rice. ActionAid had contributed

38,200 kg of wheat and 11,770 kg of rice. The average requirement of a family is 3-4 kg of grains daily. Given the stock, the grain bank could provide food security for about a week or so. The target was to build provisions for two months, assuming that this could be met through government-run schemes.

While a one-time exercise of agency on the part of a marginalised community does not signal the beginning of an end to their marginal status, it certainly alters the discourse of the marginal. The context changes as resistance and the rise of consciousness and assertion creates their own contradictions and challenges. The growing assertiveness and self-awareness fit awkwardly within prevalent patterns of economic and social dominance. In the light of their new-found self-respect and an assertive group identity, returning to their earlier lifestyle is no longer a viable proposition. Management of the newly created public space, a consequence of successful resistance, now becomes the new challenge. During the experience of intervention, the marginalised group preferred the terminology and tools of negotiation, because their reality involved a constant negotiation and renegotiation of strategic interests and material conditions. They opted for persuasion and consensus-building more often than confrontation. Having registered their presence in the public domain, they now carefully chose the language and strategies of "claiming", "demanding", and "asserting", with a renewed understanding of marginality, an understanding that continued beyond the intervention process.

### The New Marginality

In this context, we can return to Adam Weisberger's (1992) discussion on marginality, where he describes the readjustment process of the migrant marginal group in the dominant culture. He talks about the inability of the marginal person to return unchanged to his or her original group (or, as in this case, their original condition), and thereby remaining caught in a double ambivalence. Although the adjustment patterns he suggests are not directly relevant to our case, the ambivalences of the marginal community that he outlines are significant. The reconstructed self and associated desire to transform also remakes marginality itself. How their radicalisation is expressed in their own consciousness, in their relationship with the outside community, and in their relationship with non-mobilised groups within their own community can be glimpsed through the *jagriti geet* (awareness songs), which are now very popular within the community. All the songs were written and composed by community members during the period of intervention.

#### Song 1

*Deswa mein ajab kasai re  
jhankhe nirdhan bechara  
With strange butchers in this world  
live in great expectation the penniless, the piteous.  
Humre paas nahin kuch dhan aur dharatiya  
Jyotle bina unkar khet ba padatiya  
Humse begari karvai re, tarse nirdhan bechara  
We have no wealth, no land  
their land is not tilled, left barren  
We, forced to work for free, the penniless, the piteous  
deshwa me garib satua ke mauhtaz ba*

petwa phulaike baitha lutera samaj ba  
 baith kenkhat ba malainre  
 jhankhe nirdhan bechara  
 We hunt for satttu in this world,  
 they park themselves with their bulging bellies, robbers of the world,  
 sitting and eating malai  
 with whom live in great expectation, the penniless, the piteous  
 Neta log khai gain desh ka khazana  
 gundai ke bal pr kaam hoat ba manmana  
 nyaya bati sutal alsai re  
 jhankhe nirdhan bechara  
 leaders in politics gulp treasures of state  
 their muscles rule the roost, as  
 the law yawns and sleeps,  
 here in great expectation, live the penniless, the piteous  
 BDOji gaile balak dhan khai  
 bachal khuchal pradhan secratary lekhpalkarle safai  
 kekara pr asara lagai re  
 jhankhe nirdhan bechara  
 The BDO eats the block's money and walks away,  
 Pradhan, Secretary and lekhpal sweep away the rest  
 on whom to pin hopes,  
 live in great expectation, the penniless, the piteous  
 papiha niyar garib asara lagwale  
 punjipati sursa lekhan muh failawne  
 charo oar se gaili bichilai re  
 jhankhe nirdhan bechara  
 Looking around with hope  
 Like the papiha for a drop of rain  
 With capitalists' wide open mouths like sursas  
 Lost from all corners of the world, yet  
 live in great expectation, the penniless, the piteous  
 coat kachahriya naikhe sunwai  
 nirdosh garibwan ke farzi case me dael sab faswai  
 jhanke nirdhan bechara  
 The courts do not hear us  
 instead they implicate us in false cases  
 as we live in great expectation, the penniless, the piteous.

In the song above, we can see that the word "Musahar" has been used nowhere. This signifies a change in the community discourse from Musahar as a stigmatised identity, complete with constructed images and peculiar eating habits, to Musahar as a disadvantaged group of poor people. While earlier they could not see beyond their dependence on feudal lords, now they are critically aware of their dependence, and the way they are forced to work for free on their own land. They can also compare the difference between their ability to access food and those of others. Once again, they realise the folly of expecting mercy from those responsible for their condition. Their worldview has broadened, and they now see clearly the injustices in the political, administrative and judicial systems. They also understand the nature of the capitalist who, despite amassing plenty of wealth, is always looking for more, while they yearn for the bare minimum. They understand that competition is unfair and their chances very slim, yet remain hopeful. They know that even the law favours the powerful, but still expect the system to respond. And this hope for change is no fantasy; there is a strong desire to break away from the chains of bondage and repression, as narrated in the next song.

## Song II

Gulamiya ab hum nahi bajaibo  
 Azadiya humor ke bhavela  
 We will not slog as slaves anymore  
 We adore the freedom now  
 Jheeni-jheeni banavni chadaria lahre la tohare kanhe  
 Jab hum tan ke kapara mangi aave sipahiya banhe  
 Sipahiya se ab hum nahi darayibe  
 Azadiya hamro ke bhavela  
 We weave the cloth that hangs from your shoulders  
 you call the police when we ask for cloth to cover our bodies  
 Now we will not fear the policemen anymore  
 We adore the freedom now  
 Kankar chuni-chuni mahal banawali hum, bhaini pardesi  
 Tohre kanuniya margal gaini katai na bhaille peshi  
 Kanuniya se ab nahi daraibe  
 Mahaliya hamra ke bhavela  
 We collected the stones to build your mansions and then turn strangers  
 Your law assaults us with no hearing  
 Now we will not fear laws anymore  
 We adore the mansion now  
 Dinawa khadaniya se sonawa nikalani  
 Ratiya lagawani angutha  
 Sagro ziginiya karze me dubali  
 Kaile hisabwa jhotha  
 Ziganiya ab hum nahi dubaiwe  
 Akcharia humra ke bhawela  
 In daylight we dig out the gold from the mines  
 And at night put thumb marks  
 Our whole life is spent in debt, all records are faked  
 Now we will not ignore letters anymore  
 We adore the letters now  
 Hamare jagarva se dharti fulaile fulwa me khushbo bharela  
 Humke bandukiya se kaile bedakhlo  
 Tohare maliyayi chalela  
 Bandukiya se ab hum nahi daraibo  
 Bandukiya humor ke bhavela  
 Gulamiya ab nahi bajaibo  
 Azadiya humra ke bhavela  
 Our labour flowers the earth and the fragrance spreads  
 When we claim this earth you expel us at gun point  
 Now we will not fear the gun anymore  
 We adore the gun now  
 We will not slog as slaves anymore  
 We adore the freedom now

This song is a call to break away from slavery. I heard it when I visited one of their public gatherings, organised by the Manch in order to reach out to other, similarly placed communities among the dalits. About 400 people from different dalit communities of UP, like Bansfoad, Valamiki, Pasi and Musahar, had gathered in Kushinagar to share their experiences. The song says that freedom, the letters, the big mansion and the gun all attract them now, and they are ready to pay any price to get them. They seek freedom from the age-old bondage and back-breaking labour, as they now realise that neither fetches even the minimum reward. They also understand that while the riches of the world have been built on their labour, they have been denied the right to claim even a part of it. Their entire lives are spent in debt, as all records pertaining to them are fake and fudged. When they do ask for mercy to cover their naked bodies, to feed their hungry children, the exploiters retaliate with violence. They are victims of both state and individual violence, but have no place to go to register a complaint.

The law either favours the oppressor, or remains silent. As far as they are concerned, all they can do is embrace education and acquire skills to counter repression. They are even ready to take the law in their own hands to secure their freedom, wealth, land and dignity.

Why such a radical step, though? It is because they have broken away from the illusion that their patrons are benevolent. The mercy on which they seemed to have survived all this while was a false one.

These songs provide a window into their lifeworld. Whether they are able to do what they desire is not important; what is significant is that they now have these desires. This desire, coupled with the ability to recognise the source of their deprivation, has changed their own understanding of marginality. The community has now identified the centre in relation to marginality – this centre constitutes the state and the local power structure.

The introduction of the rights-based approach by the agency helped to define state authorities and agencies as the primary duty-bearers in protecting and promoting rights, and emphasised individual citizens (here, the Musahars) as rights-holders. The visibility of, and possibility of measuring successful individual claims and implementation of state obligations shifted the focus of marginality from less visible mediating structures to state-given entitlements.

While the entry of the state is a new phenomenon, the understanding of “local” has also undergone a change. Local people are now viewed as exploiters, rather than as patrons. In the jagriti geet above, we see a recognition of subjective local experience; however, the understanding of feudal privileges is viewed in the context of the Musahars’ ability to access state

entitlements like land, food, clothes, education and employment. Again, their realisation that all the poor are similarly exploited as the law and the courts do not stand by them, favouring the powerful instead, is a new one. As a corollary, their faith in fate has declined, and there is a renewed sense of self and agency for redress. From these margins, we now hear a call: “*Abhi to ye angrai hai aage aur ladai hai*” (this is just the beginning, our battle is long).

### In Conclusion

Before the intervention, the Musahars understood their marginality in relation to local structures of power and dominance. The strategic intervention located their deprivation in the development rhetoric of the state, by positing their fight vis-à-vis the state. The nature of this resistance constructed a notion of marginality that was removed from the structural locales of power and dominance, centring it around state institutions instead. The transformation of marginality from heterogeneous local position to homogeneous formulation, whereby all marginal groups could be understood within a single framework of development “left-outs”, carries a mixed baggage for a marginal community. In the case of the Musahars, this meant a rupturing of the old ties of dependence and securities on the one hand; on the other, it also led to their identity, which till then had been understood only through non-recognition or distant recognition, being registered in the public realm. This led to the construction of a new self for the Musahars. This self, unlike the previous one, is assertive, articulate and aroused, and contains the capacity to become an autonomous actor demanding a greater space for themselves.

### NOTES

- 1 Men are paid Rs 30-35 and women get between Rs 20-25.
- 2 Panmati is 65 years old and lives with her ailing husband. They have no children to care for them. The couple has virtually no source of livelihood. They were interviewed in Barhawa tola of Sohagi Barwa gram sabha on 25 December 2005.
- 3 She is a 65-year-old widow interviewed on 24 December 2005 in Khutahawa tola of Shikarpur gram sabha. She gave birth to two daughters, one of whom died at the age of two. The other is married, and lives in another village with her family.
- 4 Fasting is self-denial, abstinence for the achievement of a higher or spiritual goal.
- 5 Resident of Sohagi Barwa, Bazar tola, aged 25, as interviewed on 23 December 2005.
- 6 They were traditionally known for pig rearing and mudworks, as emerged from the field discussions held with Musahars in December 2005.
- 7 As informed by the Musahars during the field-work.
- 8 *Bangar* is the land or soil that is good for cereals, while *Bhat* is the land that is most suitable for sugar cane cultivation.
- 9 She has four children; the eldest is seven years old. She is a beneficiary of the Antyo-daya scheme. She has no agricultural land. In her tola, which is located near the forest, Musahars and Chamars live together. She was

interviewed on 22 December 2005 in Musahari tola of Naksha-Baksha gram sabha of Mithora block.

- 10 He is a 40-year-old man. He lived with his wife and two sons, both of whom were married. He owns a small piece of land, which had been mortgaged for his wife’s treatment. Later, with the help of Musahar Manch, he repaid the loan and freed his land. He was interviewed on 23 December 2005.
- 11 Interviewed on 15 November 2006 at the Lucknow Regional Office of ActionAid.
- 12 Musahar Manch is a community-based organisation. The Manch works on two levels: the tola (hamlet) level and the district level. All residents of the tola are members of this Manch and pay Rs 5-10 per month as membership fee. At the tola level, the president and treasurer are selected by the community through a consensus. The quorum for the meeting is 10 members, and a member who remains absent for more than three or four meetings without prior information can have action taken against him/her. At the district-level federation, one man and one woman are chosen by each Manch, that is, 148 persons come together at the district level and form a federation. This federation then elects its own executive council, consisting of president, treasurer and secretary, 25 members in all. Election for the executive body takes place every year.
- 13 Interviewed on 29 December 2005 at the Nichlaur field office of Musahar Vikas Pahal, ActionAid unit for the intervention.

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