



Land, Dignity, Rights
Awakening of Eastern India's Musahars

**Critical
Stories of
Change**

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2013

Glossary

AA/AAI	ActionAid India
APL	Above Poverty Line
BDO	Block Development Officer
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CBO	Community Based Organisation
DM	District Magistrate
FIR	First Information Report
IAY	Indira Awaz Yojana
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
MDM	Mid Day Meal
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
MVM	Musahar Vikas Manch
MVP	Musahar Vikas Pahal
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
OBC	Other Backward Classes
RTE	Right To Education
RTI	Right To Information
SDM	Sub-divisional Magistrate
SDO	Sub-divisional Officer
SSEVK	Samajik Sodh Evam Vikas Kendra
SC/ST	Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes
UP	Uttar Pradesh

Foreword

Dear reader,

What you would find in the pages that follow, is a rare attempt to stop for a moment, take a breath and understand in some depth are “efforts” of social change that we are all engaged in, and see how it has affected the communities lives, as they are lived.

There are hundreds of partner social organisations we are collaborating with at present, and many more who have done us the honour of making us part of real, substantial and sustained change in favour of the marginalized and the excluded. At ActionAid India, we derive our inspiration and strength from the ability of the impoverished and excluded people to lead the change, working in partnership with formations of community based organisations and other social movements in their struggles for justice, equality and a life of dignity.

There is, as you may imagine a plethora of amazing stories of perseverance, courage and ingenuity of individuals, groups, villages and urban poor communities, challenging the complex structures of exclusions, poverty and patriarchy. We try our best to get many of them reported in our various publications and platforms, yet the big picture of the journey through time, often escapes us all. While data, log frames and reports contain within them ideas of ups and downs of change, very often the collective narratives of the roads less travelled are not put in one place, nor are failures, despair, fear and backlashes put on record in a “success story” driven world.

The ‘Critical Stories of Change’ is an attempt to address this and put forth a learning record of peoples’ journeys of change. They are ‘critical’ because they try to locate the critical factors which made change possible and ‘critical’ because they do not try to gloss over the difficult and painful parts. In an attempt to document the struggles and experiences of such undaunted and unfazed communities; their leaders –



women and men, who worked against all odds to challenge the unjust and inequitable structures, it seeks as much to document the failures, strife and discordant notes, along the way. 'Critical Stories' also recognise changing political factors and actors outside of us who directly or indirectly contribute to the transformative potential of such change processes

We hope that these documented experiences will provide a real picture and give worthy insights for all of us. We also hope that the stories will inspire all readers to strengthen their commitment to a just and equitable society.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Women Feature Services for agreeing to support us in this learning initiative. We owe a special thanks to Ms Pamela Philipose for so wonderfully recounting this story, **Land, Dignity, Rights: Awakening of Eastern India's Musahars.**

Happy Reading!

Sandeep Chachra

Executive Director

ActionAid India



Background

Critical stories of change

Critical stories of change is a series of stories describing the role ActionAid International plays in changing the lives of people living in poverty. But in their openness, self-criticism, detailed analysis and celebration of the active role of others, the stories are far removed from self-congratulatory 'good practice case studies'. Critical stories of change are full of life, and are intended to impart the insights, advice and confidences of a friend. ActionAid International often makes claims for its work and achievements. Yet, in the struggle to address the causes of poverty and injustice, ActionAid is often one of many players. What ActionAid rarely gets to know is the significant nature of its contribution and the factors that contributed to the outcomes.

The stories are the product of a facilitated learning process and aim to explore how change (both negative and positive) happens from the perspectives of different stakeholders. These are stories that explicitly link ActionAid and its partners' grassroots work to a rights agenda and hopefully capture the full complexity of ActionAid's development interventions and experiences: from the perspective of poor people, partners and organisation(s) and other stakeholders involved, as well as ActionAid itself. The documented lessons and experiences will hopefully provide insights for all those engaged in the struggle against poverty and injustice.

Acknowledgements

A pleasant task left to me is to acknowledge the insights and support of many people who guided me through the regions in Kushinagar and East Champaran. Foremost among them is Deepali Sharma, Senior Manager, Programmes, AAI, whose firm grasp of the issues involved proved very helpful. At Kushinagar, Arvind Kumar, Programme Manager, took us through the history of the initiative and arranged visits to project sites. The analysis of Vibhuti Chouhan is duly acknowledged. Local project activists, Ram Vilas and Durga, themselves from the Musahar community, also played a role as did Partha Ray from ActionAid's Delhi office, with his visual sense. In Bihar, Vinay Kumar Ohdar, regional manager, AAI Patna, provided a framework



with which to perceive the work in East Champaran, while his colleagues, Akhil Chandra Mishra, senior manager, and Pankaj Kumar Shwetabh, programme officer, proved to be great guides. Amar, president, SSEVK, and colleagues Hasan Imam, Dr P.N. Pandey and Hamid Raza, provided an understanding of the nuances of their work – to them my grateful thanks.

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Land, Dignity, Rights

Awakening of Eastern India's Musahars



*“Of course, change doesn’t happen in a day.
The process of gaining equality takes time.
But now even women can speak to a
superintendent of police on the phone.”*

–Vibhuti Chauhan
social leadert

*“I was appointed district president of the Mushar
Vikas Manch in 2005 and found those three
years very enriching. We broke barriers, made
complaints to the police, battled alcoholism.”*

–Soorada Devi
leader of the local women’s cooperative movement

Introduction

The monsoon rains had washed the dust off the trees and a verdant green framed the slight figure of Laloo Manjhi as he spoke. His audience – many of them women – listened raptly, not in awe of a leader but in empathy with him. It was a meeting of the Musahar Vikas Manch (MVM) in the village of Jakhara, Motihari district, and each one of the 40-odd women and men who had assembled for it had a personal story of change to relate. But it was Laloo Manjhi, most of all who represented that change – the son of a wage labourer today he is a graduate in political science and was elected district president of the MVM. The meeting had begun with the women singing a song that enjoined the community to “Get ready/Come together/Let’s continue our endless struggle...One brick, another brick/That’s how we erect an edifice...”

The lifting of each brick in order to build a better existence for a forgotten community has demanded energy, resilience, courage, and there can be no let up in that effort...

Two regions, two states, one community, one story of change: ActionAid India has been engaged with the Musahar community in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for over a decade. The reasons why it was the Musahars, above all, who needed the benefits of a long-term,

committed, rights-based intervention, of the kind that AAI envisaged, were obvious. The community is located largely in the flood plains of the Gandak – a river system that emanates from Nepal and forms one of the tributaries of the Ganga – and is considered the lowest among the low in the caste hierarchy. Musahar presence in Bihar is significant



– they constitute the third largest group within the Scheduled Caste (SC) population in the state. In Uttar Pradesh, their numbers are smaller and they are located largely in the four contiguous districts of Maharajganj, Deoria, Gorakhpur and Kushinagar that adjoin the Bihar border.

Even the nomenclature the community bears is a stereotype invested with stigma – ‘mus-ahar’, or ‘those who eat rats’ – rat meat being regarded as the sustenance of the untouchable. In a power analysis that AAI conducted in 2009, it was found that one of the factors for this relegation to the lowest depths was due to the fact that, historically, Musahars had no distinct occupational identity, and therefore even their right to a livelihood was denied to them. Kushinagar-based social activist Vibhuti Chauhan is no anthropologist. But as someone who has interacted closely with the community and worked for the Musahar cause over the decades, he believed that it was this lack of an occupational identity and formal ownership of land that resulted in community’s almost total social exclusion.

This also meant that in order to survive Musahars were forced to forage for food in forests, fields and riversides. Conversations with Musahar women

revealed how even as recently as the 1970s, hunger within families would drive them to sweep up the grain left behind on freshly threshed fields or scoop up morsels from the burrows of rodents. All forms of molluscs, including snails gathered after hours of standing neck deep in water, went into the cooking pot, as did forest tubers and edible grasses. Discarded mango kernels were gathered and their kernels dried, powered and consumed as gruel – a starvation food to stem the pangs of hunger. Food, even when it was available, was devoid of nutrition, a combination of starch and salt.

For the Musahars, the majesty of Parliament or the state assembly had no meaning, and suffrage meant voting on the landlord’s diktat. The State, too, hardly recognised their existence. They did not figure in its policies and programmes. The only authority that controlled the lives of the Musahars was the zamindar, or landlord, on whose fields they worked. The land-owning castes, whether in eastern Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, have remained the same over the years: the Brahmin, the Rajput/Thakur, Bhumihaar and Kayasths. It was only much later that the more politically powerful among OBCs, like the Yadavs, also began to emerge as land owners. Therefore for the Musahars, who in any case had a



very poor assessment of themselves – they would describe themselves as people who knew nothing but “mitti ke kam” (digging the earth) – formal power flowed not from political institutions, but from the charpoy on which sat the landlord. Hesitant, with dhotis or saris tucked up to display bare feet – no question of wearing footwear before the mighty – they would with bent back, wordlessly follow every command hurled in their direction; submit to every insult that came their way.

While the Musahar would bring in sacks of rice into the house to fill up the granary, the moment the task was completed his presence in the abode would be considered polluting

Hypocrisy marked this relationship. Landlords needed the labour power of the Musahars for their own prosperity and the well-being of their families, but at the same time the iron laws of caste could not in any way be compromised. This led to piquant situations. While the Musahar would bring in sacks of rice into the house to fill up the granary, the moment the task was completed his presence in the abode would be considered polluting. If a feast was being served in the landlord’s home, no Musahar

would be allowed to be spotted in the vicinity. They would be asked to come in only when it was time to clear the refuse generated by the meal. Similar was the case of the Musahar dai, or midwife. During childbirth in the landlord’s family and immediately after, it was this poor woman who lived in closest proximity to the mother and newborn. She fed them, cleaned them, looked after them. Once six days passed by, the new mother was given the auspicious bath and was considered “clean” once again. The dai was then no longer granted access to the mother and baby as her touch would be polluting. Despite the untouchability accorded to the community, sexual exploitation was rife and women were routinely spirited away without questions being asked. These were the cynical and self-serving ways of the caste elite.

“What struck us immediately was the sheer exploitation that the community was subjected to,” remarked Akhil Mishra, senior manager, AA, Patna. He recalled a field visit undertaken in the three blocks of Madhuban, Tetaria, Mehsi in East Champaran in 2001. “The share croppers and workers were always cheated of their dues and their cycle of debt continued sometimes into the next generation. Almost every able bodied man migrated and contractors would exploit their illiteracy.



Workers would reach Hajipur station and the ticket master would look at their tickets and claim that they had “expired”, making them pay an additional charge. The women left behind would be terrorised and sexually exploited by the money lender or landlord, who was often the same individual. We also saw innumerable cases of kala-azar, with people dying of it without any medical assistance.” In 2003, the Jaipur-based Indian Institute of Health Management conducted a study among the Musahars living in 20 tolas of Maharajganj district in Uttar Pradesh. It revealed that a daily meal for the average family was just salt with rice or roti. The consequent malnutrition meant lower resistance to diseases, including tuberculosis and encephalitis. Literacy levels were abysmal and the prospect of



A typical Musahar dwelling where animals share space with the occupants.

the emerging generation doing better appeared slim given the negligible levels of schooling.

Change, when it arrived in these parts, did not visit the tolas of the Musahars, labelled as ‘gandagi bastis’ (dirty neighbourhoods) and invariably located in the outer peripheries of villages – a geography that underlined the community’s pariah status.

Since Musahars were largely illiterate and socially ostracised, it was easy to deprive them of the few entitlements that existed. Ration cards were either not granted, or those lucky enough to possess them were made to wait indefinitely or make endless trips for the food grain. They were also deprived of benefits for SCs/STs like pensions and Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) homes. As an AA appraisal document noted in 2002, “The only evidence of government is the rare hand pump”. It went on to note that Musahar tolas had no schools, no dispensaries, no electricity, no roads. What they invariably did have, though, was a liquor stall.

Stereotypes are usually not just invested with prejudice, which go to justify the community’s exclusion, they are blinding formulations that come





Suresh Musahar from Kushinagar district: “We were anyway regarded as animals. Nobody amongst us had even a sliver of soap to bathe or wash clothes. So there was no surprise or even sympathy when we were unjustly rounded up”

in the way of understanding a people. The Musahars had always been perceived through stereotypes, such as people who were ‘uncivilised’, who could not be trusted and who were naturally lazy. If a crime was reported anywhere in the region, the Musahars would fear for their lives and flee into the nearby forests since they also bore the burden of being deemed a criminal community from colonial times.

The police found it convenient to place every crime that took place in the vicinity at their door forcing confessions through beatings and torture. It was easy to frame them thus because, as one member of the community, Suresh Musahar from Kushinagar district, put it, “We were anyway regarded as animals, with our long nails and hair. Nobody amongst us had even a sliver of soap to bathe or wash clothes. So there was no surprise or even sympathy when we were unjustly rounded up.”

This stereotyping and lack of bargaining power translated into losses at every turn. When Musahars went to sell a bundle of wood, a chicken or a goat they had reared, they would be cheated of the true value of the produce. Their lowly social status meant they had to accept whatever sum was handed over to them without demur.

It was much the same pattern when it came to wages. They worked almost as bonded labour, getting a few seers of grain for endless hours of work. Wages for Musahars a decade ago were in the range of Rs 25 a day, much lower than the average rate prevailing at that time.



In a conversation with an AA activist, one old man had recalled, “When the landlord’s hirelings came to round us up to work in their fields we could not

even ask them a simple question like, ‘where are we being taken?’” Such was the fear exercised by the powerful, that even words froze in the mouth.

Two Ways To The Same End

In both Kushinagar district of Uttar Pradesh and East Champaran district of Bihar, ActionAid India’s initial work had two dimensions. First, to address the immediate distress the community was experiencing. Second, to build its capacities so that it would eventually be in a position to understand the issues, sustain actions and take the process of empowerment forward. Musahars were invited to be stakeholders in an initiative that was to be marked by the processes of critical self-reflection and review through regular meetings of all the stakeholders.

The initiative evolved in two separate ways in the two states. In Uttar Pradesh, the Kushinagar intervention began as a partnership with a local organisation in 2002. But the failure of that organisation to comply with its financial non-negotiables led ActionAid to take over the initiative and run it as one of its direct programmes. After an appraisal process, it set up the Musahar Vikas Pahal

samiti (MVP) in 2005. Based in Kushinagar, with strong representation of people from the Musahar community, the MVP covered a population of 16,364 directly, while an additional 18,899 came within its area of influence. The Musahars of Kushinagar district are mostly located in 10 of its 14 blocks, and the MVP initially began its work in three blocks, spreading over the next eight years to cover five blocks and 56 villages.

In East Champaran, the initiative was supported through a partnership with the Mehsi-based Samajik Sodh Evam Vikas Kendra (SSEVK), an organisation that had worked in the area for over a decade. Although AA began its partnership with the SSEVK in 2001, work on this initiative began formally from 2003-2004 in the three blocks of Mehsi, Tetaria and Madhuban. Over the next eight years, it included within its ambit 126 hamlets in 11 blocks of East Champaran, with a total of 8,468 families covered directly by it, in addition



to another 15,794 families that were indirectly benefitted.



Recalled Amar, president of the SSEVK, “The mood was electric. It was as if for the first time, the community had found an entity to truly represent them”

Both the platforms proved extremely vital for a community that had no voice or political representation. It was understood from the beginning that they had to be representative of the community, not just in membership but in

leadership with the involvement of both women and men. All the office bearers of the MVP, which had about 5000 members, were Musahars, and when later it was decided to set up an NGO – the Musahar Vikas Samajik Sansthan – once again all office bearers were from the community.

Across the UP-Bihar border, the Musahar Vikas Manch (MVM) also came to be a forum for the Musahar, of the Musahar and by the Musahar. In fact, it emerged out of a meeting called on April 14, 2004, in which thousands from the community participated. Recalled Amar, president of the SSEVK, “The mood was electric. It was as if for the first time, the community had found an entity to truly represent them. A resolution was then passed to form the MVM, with a three-tier committee that would manage it at the village, block and district levels.” Incidentally, one of MVM’s first district committee presidents was a woman, Anita Devi, and women participated very enthusiastically in it.

Thanks to the presence of these representative bodies, a cadre of members and leaders emerged that was able to articulate issues, demand their rights and negotiate directly with the officials. This collective articulation and assertion would



have been unthinkable even a decade ago. The appearance of the name of the community on a banner or placard; the repeated shouting out of the name in slogans; the coming together of people from the community to discuss common issues – all of this provided a sense of identity that had been lacking. For the first time the community could dream of being part of larger society.

Explained Vinay Kumar Ohdar, ActionAid’s regional manager based in Patna, “The Musahars constituted the third largest community among the Scheduled Castes in Bihar – and accounted for about 16 per cent of the SC population – yet they had no voice. We thought we could, through this intervention, build their political and social presence. The setting up of the MVM and federating it at the state level helped immensely.”

Early Signs Of Rising

Two cases, one in East Champaran and the other in Kushinagar, demonstrated the early impact of the interventions being made. The first is the story of the Musahar tola of Dilho in East Champaran’s Madhuban Block. It comprised 65 hutments - all of them packed closely together and spread more or less under one large tree! There was no direct

road to this tola and access could only be gained through neighbouring villages. The SSVEK had made attempts to bring the Musahars of Dilho into their activities but with little success. They worked like bonded labour on the field of a local zamindar called Sushil Rai and were so terrified of him that they did not even work in his neighbour’s fields.

Recalled Amar, “In January 2003, 25 men and women from Dilho left their homes at midnight so that they didn’t attract the attention of their landlord or his retainers and came to our office by foot – a distance of 30 kilometres that entailed crossing the Gandak river. What did they want from us? They said they wanted ‘mukti’, freedom.” It was decided that since the community had already shown such initiative, they should lead their own crusade. The SSEVK helped them get on to a train – it was the first time they were actually travelling by this mode of transport – and put them in touch with the office of the then district collector, S. Shiv Kumar, at Motihari. They camped there for three days. Seeing these obviously poverty-stricken people and hearing their accounts, the collector instructed the sub-divisional officer (SDO) to go to Dilho and assess the situation. The sub divisional magistrate (SDM) was then deputed to visit the



area. The official vehicle of the SDM in the area created a stir and the landlord in question was informed in no uncertain terms that what he was doing was illegal. The residents of Dilho were ultimately given four decimals (one decimal equals one-hundredth of an acre) of land and access to a government food-for-work programme. They were also handed over a cheque of Rs 57,000, bypassing all bureaucratic norms, to build homes under the IAY. The story of Dilho proved historic. Word spread like wildfire and gave the local Musahars a new sense of confidence to resist the landlord's writ.

Seeing these obviously poverty-stricken people and hearing their accounts, the collector instructed the SDO to go to Dilho and assess the actual situation

The other case was from Kushinagar, and was one of the early legal interventions made by the MVP. It involved a case in Jangle Shankarpur in Kushinagar district. Elections to the state assembly had just ended on May 8, 2007, and three Musahar girls who had gone to collect firewood in the local forest had taken a break under a tree and were eating mangoes. Some local Kushwaha men, who were of

a higher caste, accused them of stealing their fruit and began to beat them. Two girls managed to flee, so the men turned even more ferociously on the girl left behind. Hearing her cries, her parents who were cutting wood nearby rushed to her rescue.

The men then attacked her father so badly that he collapsed and died. After much difficulty, with MVP's intervention, a post-mortem was conducted and an FIR filed under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. This was possibly for the first time ever that the Musahars here had filed a case against the upper castes.

Arvind Kumar, programme manager, ActionAid, Lucknow, pointed out that initially the police were hesitant to file a strong case against the Kuswahas but when it became clear that Mayawati was going to be the next chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, they made the case more watertight. The men involved in the incident were arrested and the case is still in the courts. As in the Dilho instance, the arrests of perpetrators of the Jangle Shankarpur violence came as a great confidence booster for the community. It sent out the message that they too had the right to justice.



Yet, there always existed the possibility of a backlash. Hasan Imam of the SSEVK recalled that after the Dilho episode, landowners in the area began to notice the impact of the new activism. “We were threatened with dire consequences and had to enter the tola from different directions to avoid being noticed. The landlords also tried to turn on

the screws in other ways. Teachers in local schools were told not to admit Musahar children or allow them to eat with upper caste children when the mid day meal was served.” It was often a cat-and-mouse game, but the important thing was to ensure that the Musahar community was not demoralised.

Issues On The Radar

Hunger

Since hunger was the most obvious reflection of the marginalisation of the community, it was the focus of the initial interventions, both in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Supreme Court of India upheld the right of every Indian to food as a fundamental right in 2001 and attempts were made through rallies like

the ‘Musahar Anaaj Kosh Tractor Yatra’ of May 2003, to raise in the public domain the issue of



All forms of molluscs, including snails gathered after hours of standing neck deep in water, went into the cooking pot, as also forest tubers and edible grass

the hunger that marked the lives of the Musahars. Among the slogans raised were ‘anna pade bhandaron mein, Musahar bhukhe gauon me’ (while the granaries are full of grain, Musahars are starving in villages).



In 2004, just as AA was establishing its presence in Kushinagar, the death of a member of the community – Nagina Musahar – ostensibly of hunger, created a huge stir in the district. It led to a special public hearing, the ‘People’s Tribunal on Starvation in Eastern Uttar Pradesh’, hosted jointly by the People’s Vigilance Committee for Human Rights, Uttar Pradesh, and the Asian Human Rights Commission,

Hong Kong, in September 2005. AA played a leading role in the event, with both the MVP and MVM participating in it. The testimonies that emerged were eye-opening: the dead man’s wife, Prabhawati, among others, revealed the dark realities of their lives and how they were sometimes driven to beg for survival.

The Musahar community, numbering 1.5 lakh, was extremely malnourished but had no access to a Public Distribution System (PDS) outlet. “A survey we conducted in five blocks found that nobody in the community had ration cards. In fact, when we contacted government officials on this, many even expressed ignorance about the existence of such a community,” Arvind Kumar recollected.

Thus began the slow, tough process of building a system of accountability. Members of the community were contacted, identified and told where to go to register themselves for a ration card. Unfortunately, even after the card was made available, it did not translate into assured supplies of food grain at home. Getting their due entitlements from the ration shops proved a serious challenge. According to Ram Vilas, programme coordinator with the MVP, people would go to the shop to get their ration, only to face derision. Said he, “They were given such a run-around that they gradually stopped going. It was only with a great deal of information sharing and confidence building that the situation changed. Over time, the community came to know the difference between antyodaya, Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Above Poverty Line (APL) cards, and demonstrated the confidence to demand their entitlements.”

In Bihar too, corruption was so widespread within the PDS that the MVM cadres searched for new ways to address it. Attempts were made to confront PDS dealers, and put pressure on officials responsible for monitoring supplies. Supplies were also monitored and the community informed about the arrival of food grain in the shops. Today, almost



every Musahar family has a ration card unlike in the past, although many are still deprived of the antyodaya card meant for the poorest sections.

Early attempts were also made to come up with emergency food security measures such as grain banks to tide over the “hunger months”, which was the period of the rains (July/August) and foggy season of December/January when agricultural operations were generally at a standstill and there was no work to be had. Attractive looking structures to house this grain, sometimes decorated with folk



Grain banks usually have a raised plinth to help protect the stored grain from the ravages of floods and pests.

motifs, today dot many a Musahar tola in these parts. They were traditionally used to store the community’s or family’s excess grain. Borrowing this idea, grain banks were operated with grain collected by the community and buttressed by contributions from ActionAid, to be dispensed to those in need of food during the difficult days. Borrowers would then have to return the grain they had taken, along with an additional share, once they were able to do so.

Floods

As the PDS system began to deliver better, practices like grain banks fell into disuse. But food insecurity continued to be a challenge. Hunger invariably returned with the floods. Explained Pankaj Shwetabh, programme officer at ActionAid, Patna, “Floods have always been more of a disaster for the Musahars than for others. Because their homes were located in the lower reaches, the rising waters would enter their homes first. These structures, made up of clay and cane, were quickly washed away, rendering them homeless. Inundated fields meant that not only were they without a roof over their head but also without work. Homeless, displaced and with no way of earning a livelihood, Musahars were subjected to the worst forms of



humiliation and exploitation in flood situations, discriminated even in terms of rehabilitation measures.”

The project areas in both Kushinagar and East Champaran districts were flood prone, and there was at least one major event of this kind every three or four years. Amar of the SSEK elaborated, “The floods of 2003-04 were very severe and we were forced to think about ways to respond effectively.”

With support from AA, and other organisations, the affected community was supplied with tarpaulins and other survival aids. But there were also larger issues to be faced. Why, for instance, were the poorest also the most vulnerable when such disasters happened? How can the community be prepared to face such calamities before they strike? How does the community learn to take responsibility during such adverse times and demand their rights? How can the government be made more accountable?

Posing the right questions yielded important insights and a more effective way to address the floods. Risk mitigation measures were formulated. These included identifying places to store food

grain stocks and cooking material well before the rains set in, as well as higher ground to which people could move if rivers overflowed their banks. Issues of health and sanitation were discussed as well, because floods invariably brought with them severely debilitating diseases. The MVM also felt it was important to include panchayati raj institutions in flood preparations.

Schooling

The Musahars, going by the census figures of 2001, had a general literacy level of less than 10 per cent. A major concern in both Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, therefore, was the education of children. Speaking for his community, Suresh Musahar explained the situation that prevailed a decade ago, “Schools, if



they existed were six or seven kilometres away from our tolas, so how could our children go there? The few who made it to the classroom faced another hurdle. They had to sit apart from the other children because they were considered a polluting presence. The kind of learning that can take place under such circumstances, you can well imagine.”

It was the same scenario in East Champaran, as Hasan Imam of the SSEVK explained, “When we went to the villages in those days, we would see children running around instead of being in the classroom. If they were younger than ten, they wore no clothes – the one set the family perhaps possessed was used only for special occasions. The older children were put to work, either with their parents in the farms, or for collecting firewood from the forest. They saw no reason to send their children to a school.”

Given this, the initial effort was to convey the importance of schooling to a community that had always believed they were not destined for a better life and had no use of an education. They had to be convinced that schooling for their children was a vital step if they were to leave the past of inequality and injustice behind. What did help to make

schooling more attractive was to highlight to them the benefits that government provided, including scholarships and two sets of uniform every year, for winter and summer, apart from the mid day meal. In some villages, the conversation on schooling proved more productive than others and over time parents here began to complain if the mid day meal was unsatisfactory, or if their children were being denied uniforms, or if teachers did not turn up.

Some breakthrough approaches like the “bridge course schools” also paid dividends. Vinay Ohdar noted, “AA took this measure extremely seriously. By giving girls who had dropped out of school a second chance to get back into the system, not only did bridge course schools address the issue of school dropouts, it delayed the age of marriage. In 2006, around 26 people from East Champaran went to Hyderabad for special training on how to run a good bridge course. Over three years, more than 300 girls who had dropped out of the educational system could finish their matriculate and change their lives because of this intervention.” The MVM was also able to sponsor 154 children – and some of them went on to do their matriculation. By 2013, the MVM could claim that it had achieved an enrolment level of 86 per cent in the project area,



which translated into 6267 children in schools. Besides this, 62 children had matriculated, 12 were doing Inter (pre-college), while two had graduated. In Kushinagar, the MVP figures show 1752 Musahar children having been enrolled in schools, with 10 having graduated. For a community that was largely illiterate, these figures are creditable, but the challenges continue to persist.

We visited the Upgraded Government Middle School in Dhuboliya village in East Champaran's Tetariya block, which has about 40 Musahars among its 600-odd students. What was immediately obvious was that the school authorities had not been sensitised to the special requirements of Musahar children. These children were expected to conform to the general standards and were bitterly reprimanded when they could not do so. The principal, for instance, complained loudly about the lack of interest Musahar parents take in their kids' education.

But as Vinod Mali, a social activist from the Dom community who is also a teacher in a girls' primary school in the village, pointed out, "Most Musahar parents are just scrambling to earn a few rupees to feed their families and have little idea about what their children are doing, or studying. As for the children,

what can they learn, when they don't have proper food, no lights in their home, and are constantly attacked for belonging to a low caste. This is the reality of schooling in this region." Mali, however, added that if it were not for the ActionAid intervention, the scenario could have been far bleaker.

Health Care

If schooling was indifferent, health care was close to non-existent. Anita Devi of the MVM recalled how when people fell ill they had no option but to go to traditional healers, or scratch about in the jungle and use some herb thought to have curative properties. "We lost many to various illnesses, such as kala-azar and tuberculosis, but we believed that this was fate playing out," she said.

What the two initiatives have been able to do is to raise awareness about health and hygiene, as well as give information on government health services that existed for them. Kala-azar, once a killer, especially in the Musahar tolas of East Champaran, has been largely eliminated through concerted measures (see box). Also, there is awareness about programmes like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), which was not the case earlier. Women are still anaemic, but here too there has



Anita Devi recalled how when people fell ill they had no option but to go to traditional healers, or scratch about in the jungle and use some herb thought to have curative properties. “We have lost many to various illnesses, such as kala azar and tuberculosis, but we believed that this was fate playing out,” she said

been improvement. The intake of iron and folic acid during pregnancy has helped, and those who had previously depended on dais, now go to hospitals.

But the failures of the government health care system continue to impact the community directly. Primary health centres in the vicinity are understaffed and lack even the most basic medication. So people here are forced to travel to the district headquarters, whether it is Kushinagar or Motihari, or opt for expensive private health care. Both options are prohibitive for a community that can ill afford such sudden expenses.

Some Land Of Their Own

Land is the single most important marker of supremacy and prestige in rural India and the most effective currency of power. Over centuries, the domination of the upper castes over society was based on their possession of land. Not only is land inherently invested with productive and collateral value, it has – as we know – great symbolic value. Those who possessed it always had a disproportionately larger influence over society and its ways of life.

Conversely, the poverty and lack of voice of the lower castes are the consequences of their lack of access to land and possession of it. Scholars have pointed out how the distribution of 10 cents of arable paddy land to poor families in Kerala through effective land reform measures has been able to usher in a more equal society in that state.



Kushinagar

The caste dimension of land is of course well-recognised. As was the case with the dalit community everywhere in the country, whether it was in Kushinagar or in East Champaran, the abject landlessness of the Musahar community only went to underline its absolute powerlessness and immiseration. For organisations like the MVP and the MVM, working with the community drove home the importance of working for the land question for their families. Arvind Kumar noted, “The MVP’s focus initially was on raising the status of the community and ensuring its dignity, but by 2007 it became clear that if that was to be achieved, we would need to work on land issues, because dignity in these parts was so closely tied to land.”

However, land ownership in this fertile belt in the Gangetic plains was a complex issue marked by conflict. Officially, zamindari had been abolished and land reform laws were on the statute books, but in actual fact the ownership of the land had not changed very significantly. The castes which had always owned the land continued to retain their grip on this asset. What was more, nobody had any clear idea of how much land existed that was available for re-distribution under the Uttar

Pradesh Imposition of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1960, or the Bihar Land Reforms (Fixation of Ceiling Areas of Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act, 1961. The MVP did try, through the Right To Information (RTI) route, to get more information on this, but to little avail, although one newspaper report maintained that there was about 8000 hectares of ceiling land in Kushinagar district alone.



To illustrate the herculean efforts needed to ensure re-distribution, one needs only take a case that ActionAid has been involved with, and which has been in the courts for many years. In 1985, the Uttar Pradesh government had acquired 1562 acres of land that belonged to the Kudwan Dhani Patti estate under the Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1951 (ZALR). An area of 220 acres of this land



was distributed by the government through pattas handed over to 420 dalit and OBC families – 240 of whom were Musahar – in the Kudwa Dilip Nagar of Kasia block. The moment this happened, the estate of Kudwan Dhani Patti sought a stay in the Allahabad High Court, and not a single patta-holder was able to take possession of the land. In 2005-06, the court ruled in favour of the patta holders.

“The MVP has been supporting 117 Musahar families to follow up on this case since 2005. So imagine the delight when, on October 16, 2012, the court dismissed the landowner’s case. The verdict was regarded as a great success for the struggling

Musahars and other landless communities of Kushinagar, and we had approached the district magistrate to ensure that the process of every family getting half an acre of land went off smoothly,” recalled Arvind Singh.



Since there was tension in the area, with the landlords threatening the patta-holders, the administration employed one Battalion of the Provincial Armed Constabulary, a riot controlling vehicle and the local police force. In this way, under the supervision of the SDM, the process was completed

Sure enough, the district magistrate directed the local administrators to distribute the pattas. On December 3, 2012, seven teams of revenue officers presided over the process. Since there was tension in the area, with the landlords threatening the patta-holders, the local administration employed one Battalion of the Provincial Armed Constabulary, a riot controlling vehicle, a fire-brigade vehicle and the local police force. In this way, under the supervision of the SDM, the process was completed. The excitement within the Musahar community was palpable and was reflected in the



headlines that appeared in the local newspaper the next day. One of them went: “*Aisa lag raha tha jaise mano unko sara jahan mil gaya* (It seemed as if they had got the whole world)”.

The celebrations, however, did not last long. The local power elite struck back the very next day, when a 100-odd patta-holder who had gone to cultivate on the land, were beaten up by thugs organised by the Kudwan Dhani Patti estate. Even women were not spared. Fearing for their lives, the assaulted people called the Gram Pradhan, Satya Narayan Nishad, who in turn contacted the MVM.

Nishad talked about that experience to us, “The ceiling holder is a local ‘bahubali’ (local term for mafiosi), used to wielding lathis and guns to intimidate people. When I went to the area, I was myself surrounded and attacked. I was beaten from head to toe. They even followed me to the hospital, where I went to get my wounds treated. They threatened me against filing an FIR.”

Filing FIRs in this region was always a problem because the elite sections exercised total control over the police. “Filing that FIR took the whole of the next day. But we called all the victims and pradhan to the local police station and, finally, by

the evening of December 4, we could lodge a case against the 17 attackers, including local landlords, and more than 100 unknown persons,” Arvind Kumar revealed.

Matters did not end there. The very next day, the Kudwan Dhani Patti estate managed to get a stay from the High Court. The battle is clearly far from over – although the land has been formally transferred, the community cannot occupy it and therefore cannot farm it.

It is through such repressive measures that the landowning class had retained its control. How effective were their tactics was clear when we visited the Phulwa Patti tola in Kasia block where some of the beneficiaries of this redistribution effort stayed. Ten months had passed since that attack by the thugs, but the incident was still on everyone’s mind. As Shanti Devi, 35, revealed, “Yes, they had distributed pattas to us, but I am too scared to go near that land because they will chase us and hit us again if we try to cultivate it.” She herself did not come under the attackers’ lathis but she saw at least four women being very badly beaten. “I ran away and luckily escaped, but these are heartless people. They even carry guns,” she added.



Ten months had passed since the attack following redistribution of the land belonging to the Kudwan Dhani Patti estate, but the incident was still fresh in everyone's mind in this Musahar tola

Women, incidentally, have always been at the forefront of efforts to get land, and there are some happier stories that have emerged in the district. There was the case of Indrawati Devi, of Jungle Pachrukhiya in Kushinagar's Padrauna block. She was given a 10 decimal plot under a land redistribution scheme in 2008 and began cultivating on it. Then one day some men appeared on a tractor to flatten the crops and take over the land. Indrawati raised an alarm and along with other women from the village went to the local police station to lodge an FIR. That was when she was subjected to all kinds of casteist taunts.

The MVM, along with the community, then staged a dharna outside the police station. The tents they pitched were uprooted several times, but the women

stood firm and, finally, with the intervention of the superintendent of police, an FIR could be filed and 16 persons arrested.

Interestingly, it has always been found that land distributed in women's names – although it is much smaller in area than what the men have received – always remained with them. With the men, unfortunately, there is always the danger that this asset could be frittered away through drink or bad investments.

Another fact that had been noted was that even a little land in a woman's name changes family dynamics drastically. As one Musahar woman explained, "Earlier, when men used to hit us, and tell us to go back to our parents' homes when we fought them, we could say nothing. Today, we retort: 'Who are you to tell us to go? We have land here!'"

When the MVP decided to gauge the community's understanding of land, what came through clearly was that it was a major route to creating a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.





Indrawati Devi was given a 10 decimal plot under a land redistribution scheme in 2008 and began cultivating on it. Then one day some men appeared on a tractor to flatten the crops and take over the land

So it was fitting that as the initiative drew to a close, land rights was taken up in campaign mode. From February to March 2012, the MVP entered into a partnership with the Bhoomi Adhikar Manch and a five-day programme was organised in 25 villages of Kushinagar district, reaching out to ten thousand people.

In July-August 2012, a public meeting between the district administration and the community was organised, in which 2000 people, many of them women, took part. While the officials presented details about various government schemes, the Musahars testified to the realities in their villages and the atrocities they faced. This interface between the community and the administration – the first of its kind in Kushinagar – was successful and could be a model for the future.

In late December 2012, a ‘Bhoomi Adhikar Sammelan’ (Land Rights Conference) was also organised in Kushinagar, in which over 3000 Musahars as well as senior representatives of ActionAid participated. Vibhuti Chauhan spoke for everybody when he observed on the occasion that “land is like our mother – and as we can go to any length to fight for our mother’s dignity, in the same way we will continue to struggle for our right to land.” The participants then marched to the camp office of the district magistrate of Kushinagar and submitted a memorandum, the first item on which was the demand for “protection to those victims who were terrorised by powerful people of the Kudwa estate and to ensure legal action against the offenders of that attack.”



East Champaran

In East Champaran, too, land issues were perceived as crucial from the very start. The equitable and sustainable development of Bihar had always been linked to land reform. As the D. Bandhopadhyay Committee noted in 2009, while the landed elite in the state exercised an iron grip on the ownership of land, they were uninterested in increasing agricultural production. In other words, the times were right for changing the pattern of land ownership in the state through land distribution, and ushering in more equitable and dynamic agricultural growth.

When the SSEVK did a survey of landlessness among Musahar families living within the project area in 2003, its findings were educative. Among the 3865 Musahar families, 2110 were living on government land with no document to show for ownership, which, of course, made their situation very tenuous. Those who did have papers – some 1755 families – had not gained possession of the said land. In all, there were about 2520 Musahar families who could be classed as ‘homeless’.

The survey only underlined the urgency of the task at hand. One of the first demands that the MVM

One of the first demands that the MVM raised, when it was constituted, was to ask the state government to provide at least 10 decimal of homestead land in the names of the women of this landless and flood-affected community. It pointed out to the tracts of excess land – which were either part of “math-mandirs”, or in the names of absentee landlords, or were captured as part of the premises of sugar mills, and other industrial units

raised, after it was constituted, was to ask the state government to provide at least 10 decimal of homestead land in the names of the women of this landless and flood-affected community. It pointed out to the tracts of excess land – which were either part of “math-mandirs”, or in the names of absentee landlords, or were captured as part of the premises of sugar mills, and other industrial units.

As in Uttar Pradesh, in Bihar too unending litigation had meant that those with pattas could



not access the land redistributed in their names. So the demand was raised for the setting up of fast track courts to decide on cases involving land within six months. To follow up on this, the MVM began to organise those Musahar families who had been given possession papers but could not occupy their land. Mass applications for land were also filed.

Some successes followed. For instance, in 2006, in the villages of Garahiya and Manikpur, the MVM was successful in preventing the upper castes from ploughing their land. That assertion was one of the first of its kind, and led to members taking possession of several acres of land in the project area through collective action. Today, in Garahiya village all the Musahar families have their own pucca houses built under IAY. Besides this, 85 Musahar families managed to get an acre each of agricultural land that they are presently cultivating.

The village of Stripur also provided a good example of a successful land struggle. In 2008, 70 Musahar families here successfully captured 14 bighas of land that had no ownership claim on it. They were able to set up homes on that land and over time were able to get formal ownership of it. However, they are still to access their IAY entitlements, although

applications for them have been filed at the BDO's office.

As in Kushinagar, in East Champaran too women had been at the forefront of the land movement. In 2009-2010, women were mobilised under the SSEVK/MVM banner and they made mass applications for homestead land at the block offices. While the impact of that action is yet to fructify, it has helped to raise consciousness among the women of the community. They now realise that since they have equal rights to land as the men in the family, the ownership papers should be registered jointly.



Activists from the Bhoomi Adhikar Andolan on their way to Patna in 2010.



In 2010, SSEVK did another survey of landlessness among Musahars. It revealed that although change had indeed taken place, it was modest. More families had pattas to government land – 2973 families in all as opposed to 1755 families earlier – but they still had no possession of it.

However, 319 families did manage to get both the documents and actual possession of homestead land, after the MVM staged a mass application campaign for homestead land.



Musahar woman holding holding up a land ownership deed.

supported by AA, emerged. Thousands of people on cycles and on foot from all over the state converged on the state capital on December 28, 2010, with the demand that the recommendations of the D. Bandopadhyay Commission be implemented. The marchers asked for homestead land to be distributed to the homeless, with the titles in the name of women.

They also wanted Bhoodan land – the land donated during the Bhoodan movement of 1951 – to be distributed to the poor without delay. The impact of this mass action was significant. The Nitish Kumar government, which had earlier committed itself to distributing 3 decimals of homestead land to over two lakh families of ‘Mahadalits’, including Musahars, reiterated its pledge and was now held accountable for it.

Commenting on the MVM’s efforts in terms of land, Vinay Ohdar pointed out that it was important to recognise that NGOs have their limitations when it came to such an issue, especially in agricultural states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where the tyranny of the landlords and their hegemony over the oppressed was almost total.



What has made the issue even more intractable is that land has now become a commodity that is invested with huge value, whether cultivated or not, so the resistance to changing ownership patterns is even greater. As Ohdar put it, “Obviously, we

cannot afford to take the law into our hands. The most we can do is to try and strengthen the hands of Musahars to demand their right to the land, and put pressure on the administration and government to act.”

Many Ways To Empowerment

Livelihood Initiatives

Owning land is, of course, just the beginning. Since Musahars, as a community, had always worked on other people’s farms, their understanding of agricultural techniques was limited. **Providing them with information on good farming practices that can increase crop productivity without destroying the fertility of the soil was, therefore, a felt need.** Both in Kushinagar and East Champaran, training programmes for farmers were organised. In December 2011, when a one-day event of this kind was held at the Rajendra Agriculture University at Samastipur, 29 farmers were selected by the MVM to participate. They were exposed to various methods of multi-cropping, as well as organic cultivation. Similarly, in Kushinagar, in September-October 2012, 18 farmers – of whom 10 were women – learned about how to make vermi-



compost as well as organic fertiliser out of locally available material such as cow dung and husk.

Agricultural operations, typically, have their lean seasons, when there is no farm work available. This, in the old days, had led to distress migration with able-bodied men leaving villages in their thousands. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) was enacted in 2005 to address



this by promising to provide 100 days of guaranteed work per family. Both the MVM and the MVP made efforts to raise awareness about MGNREGA through rallies and public meetings. They also helped the largely illiterate Musahar worker to enrol for job cards and apply for work. But the problem everywhere was that such work was not always available and, when it was, wages were invariably delayed.

Suganti Devi, speaking at a meeting in Kushinagar, shared her experiences of getting her dues, “We were at first happy to get MGNREGA work, but when we did not get paid, even after three months, we went to the pradhan. Nothing happened. Then we decided to petition the district magistrate (DM) although the pradhan tried to dissuade us from doing this by issuing threats. Only after we met the DM was the pradhan forced to come personally and hand out payments to me and 17 others.”

Women’s Articulation

The fact that Suganti Devi could take the initiative in this case was an indication of the new level of confidence among Musahar women. Stories abound of women in remote corners asserting themselves, as, for instance, the women of Kolhua village in

Kasia block of Kushinagar district, who persisted and finally got some land of their own (see box).



One of the approaches ActionAid adopted was setting up ‘Reflect’ circles. In East Champaran district, 23 ‘Reflect’ circles of women were created and they met regularly to discuss the issues that affected their lives. Akhil Mishra, who had presided over innumerable meetings of this kind, explained, “Typically, some 20-22 women would form a circle and the effort was to turn each one of

them into a leader capable of thinking for herself on contemporary concerns and come up with strategies for social action.”

Other ingenious programmes were also conducted. In December 2010, three three-day legal camps were organised by the MVM in several blocks



of East Champaran to develop awareness of the laws on land rights, caste atrocities and women's rights. The following October, a women's caravan, comprising six articulate local women, travelled across 11 blocks, speaking on issues like equal wages for equal work and the need to promote girls' education.

Similarly, in Kushinagar, a Dalit Mahila Maha Sannam was held in March 2012, in which over two thousand women participated. A few months later, a capacity building workshop for adolescent girls was arranged which emphasised the value of education.

The issue of violence against women inevitably emerged as a major concern at such gatherings. Seeing the ubiquitous nature of such attacks, women in both the MVM and MVP made it a point to observe International Women's Day and join the global 'Campaign to End Violence against Women & Girls' (VAWG) that was held every year from November 25 to December 10. The awareness raising did have positive impacts. The sexual violence against Musahar women by the upper castes, that was once the dominant reality, declined with the emergence of strong women from within the community who knew their rights.

Domestic violence, however, proved more difficult to address and continues to remain an unresolved issue. Part of the problem was that it was linked to high levels of alcohol consumption within the community. Several women leaders did take up the issue, including the legendary Girija Devi from the village of Bhirkia-Chhapaulia in East Champaran district, who came to be known, not just in India but internationally, for her attempts to organise local women and get them to flatten liquor vends, break toddy pots and shame alcoholics into giving up liquor.

Girija Devi herself has passed away but other women have taken up her cause. Observed Anita Devi, who had served as district president of the MVM for three years from 2005, to us, "Men of our community get drunk from the morning itself. That is why, once the MVM was set up, we took alcoholism very seriously and put restrictions on all

Anita Devi, who had served as district president of the MVM, "We made every member pledge that they would not make, sell or drink liquor"



members by making them pledge that they would not make, sell or drink liquor.”

This, however, was not easy, as Anita Devi herself admitted. Her words came back to us when we visited the Musahar tola of Ajarwa in Mehsi block of East Champaran. It was only 11 am, but several men in the group that had assembled before us already appeared to be under the influence of liquor. The women, when asked about this problem, were at first hesitant to reveal too much, until one woman blurted out, “Sab pita hain (every man in this tola drinks).” Hearing her, an elderly man then shouted back, “I work and it is my right to drink.”

The adverse impact, both in terms of health and household spending, of the overconsumption of liquor can well be imagined. One bottle of the local brew costs anywhere between Rs 15 to 20, and, according to local calculations, addicts can easily consume a couple of bottles every day. Liquor is not just a lifestyle choice in this region, it is a livelihood option – a lot of money is made out of the liquor brewed locally. It was not for nothing that Girija Devi had always maintained that liquor was one of the root causes behind women’s suffering in this region.



Political Presence

Despite these disturbing realities, the one heartening development has been the emergence of women leaders everywhere, some of whom have even been encouraged to take part in panchayat elections. In a community that has historically been deprived a voice and political presence, these women emerged as harbingers of change. Take Anita Devi herself. When she was appointed the MVM district president in 2005, she was too shy to stand up and talk before strangers. Within a short span of time all those inhibitions disappeared. “I got used to public speaking and spoke in many parts of India, including Delhi and Andhra Pradesh,” she revealed.

Younger women like 23-year-old Chanda Kumari – presently the secretary of the MVM district



committee – and Durga, gender coordinator, MVP, have also emerged as symbols of empowerment and are able to hold their own and speak about their community's concerns eloquently. Chanda (see box), like many of her contemporaries, had got married early, dropped out of high school and would have been living the life of a faceless village woman if she had not been exposed to MVM's activism.

All this testified to a new political awareness within the community. This too was significant. "In earlier days, we would visit Musahar villages on election day and see people playing cards. When we asked them why they were not voting, they would shrug their shoulders and say, the 'malik' will vote on our behalf. Today, Musahars are among the first to arrive at the polling booths!" remarked Hasan Imam of the SSEVK. The community has a sense of their political presence, underlined by the fact that politicians come to their tolas now to elicit votes, something that did not happen earlier.

Today, there are nine MLAs from Musahar backgrounds in the Bihar assembly and at least two of them had been associated with MVM's work. Participation at the panchayat level has also yielded results. In the 2011 panchayat elections, the MVM

nominated 77 Musahar candidates to take part – 40 managed to win seats at various levels. This process helped to build self-confidence and bring home to the community the different aspects of political participation, whether it was holding mass meetings, bringing out manifestos or disseminating information.

Before the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in 2012, the MVP organised a 13-day campaign in 50 villages across Kushinagar district, to highlight what voters from the community expect from their MLAs. The Mayawati factor also played a role in raising political awareness here. Having ruled the state as its chief minister between 2007 and 2012, this daughter of a Dalit helped to create a new sense of political relevance among the Musahars and stirred their own political ambitions. Today, MVP has, through its activities, ensured that there are now four Musahar pradhans, 68 gram panchayat members and 12 village development committee members.

In Kushinagar, we met up with Uma Shankar Prasad, 29. As a teenager he had joined an MVP training programme in Lucknow in 2007 and taken part in local activities as a community volunteer. He got a job laying pipelines for Reliance in Jamnagar,



Gujarat, after he completed his education and it brought him a handsome salary of Rs 18,000 a month. But his interest was in doing community work and he gave up the Jamnagar assignment to take part in panchayat elections in his village. These days Prasad is a block development councillor and has ambitions of becoming a pradhan. As he put it, “Musahars in Kushinagar should understand that there can really be no end to this effort – they should keep asking for their rights. I, for one, am ready to work for the community.”

Force Multipliers

Empowering the Musahars has been a long, hard and often lonely struggle but both the MVP and the MVM have benefitted from strategies and individuals that have acted as force multipliers. The MVP, for example, has tried to build synergies with the district administration.

Explained Arvind Kumar, “We made it a point to work with the administration, especially in the early years. We found that this approach had many benefits. While it gives the community a feeling of self-confidence just knowing that the administration was interested in their issues; administrators, on their part, were educated about a

community that had figured nowhere in their plans and programmes.” Hopefully these bridges built with the administration would stand the community in good stead long after the AA initiative ended.

The MVP was fortunate to have worked with district magistrates who were sensitive to its cause. In 2008, when corruption surfaced in the IAY, DM Amrita Soni was contacted and action was taken. She also sent out a message across the district to give priority to the Musahar community.

In 2009, another district collector, S.V.S. Ranga Rao circulated a letter on the need to distribute surplus land to the community. The present incumbent, Rigzian Sampheal, had been extremely empathetic to Musahars, as the role he played in expediting land distribution in Kudwa Dilip Nagar demonstrated.

As Sampheal revealed to us, he himself had no idea about the existence of the community and that it was only through ActionAid that he had come know about their situation. The first thing that struck him was the lack of data on the Musahars in government records and he tried to remedy the lacuna. Today, the administration estimates that there are around





Said Rigzian Sampheal, DM, Kushinagar, “NGOs bring a different perspective to the table, so they should literally steal time from the district administrators, because often officials are so busy they have no way of understanding the reality in a holistic way”

30,000 Musahars in Kushinagar district, and now have them on its radar.

Sampheal also believed that it was important for civil society organisations to keep prodding the administration, “NGOs bring a different perspective to the table, so they should literally steal time from the district administrators because often officials are so busy they have no way of understanding the reality on the ground in a holistic way.” In East Champaran, too, a sympathetic administration made all the difference, as the story of Dilho proved.

Partnerships with other organisations working on similar issues at the national, state and district levels also acted as force multipliers. Both the MVP and the MVM had sent representatives to



the all-India dharna organised in April 2010 at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on the issue of right to food security and livelihood. A charter of demands was presented by the participants to Montek Singh Ahluwalia, the vice president of Planning Commission, after the dharna. Taking part in such programmes was educative and revealed the national character of many concerns that had thus far been perceived as local ones.

Also useful, in a different way, were inter-state meetings of people's organisations. Kushinagar has

seen several meetings of this kind in which there has been participation not just of the MVM and the MVP, but organisations such as the Dalit Adhikar Manch, Gopalganj, and the Bharatiya Adiwasi-Banwasi Samiti, Banaras. Coming together helped them compare strategies and evolve future plans.

As for large intra-state events, like the cycle rally and foot march to Patna for land rights, they helped to aggregate Musahar presence, and demonstrate the community's political potential.

Changing Times

In the end, we need to remember the question with which these projects began: How can a project reach the last person – the 'antim vyakti' – within a community that inhabited the lowest layer of society, people who had never been counted as citizens? It could not merely be about development but about the transformative potential of that development. It could not just be about rights but about the impact of the exercise of those rights. How can a people who believed that divine providence meant them to be outcasts come to

understand the social practices, societal dynamics and entrenched hierarchies that had gone into undermining their status?

There is, of course, a lot of anecdotal information of the changes ushered in over this decade of engagement in the districts of Kushinagar and East Champaran, respectively. The ravaging hunger of the old days has been stemmed, and grain from PDS outlets is now reaching the community. A killer disease like kala-azar has been controlled. Many



have been able to access MGNREGA work and the levels of distress migration that had marked the old days have fallen. Above all, the community now understands its rights and will not hesitate to access its entitlements. Those who once did not speak out now raise slogans like 'jo zamin sarkari hai woh zamin hamari hai' (the land that belongs to the government, is land that belongs to us).

The very fact that a young female agricultural worker like Shanti Devi of Phulwa Patti village in Kushinagar can now say that she is no longer prepared to do "forced work" ("zabardasti kaam") at the bidding of the landlord, that she will first find out the terms and conditions of the work on offer before agreeing to undertake it, indicated how far the community had travelled since the days when, as they put it, "their tongues did not work."

The very fact that a people who had once bowed down and cowered before an unjust force do not hesitate to claim and assert their rights is a major transformation. Even their cultural expressions underlined this. Songs composed by the community and sung at public occasions express sentiments of resistance eloquently.

Each change of this kind, however small, is significant given the ground realities. It is not just that Musahars have had to exist outside the periphery of mainstream society without voice or presence, but that the region they inhabited has been historically marked by a strong feudal order, which has seen the continuing nexus between the landowning classes, the politicians and the criminal justice system.

Finally, therefore, such an initiative was about changing power relations and caste hegemonies, something that cannot be achieved overnight. But the unqualified commitment that ActionAid and its partners had to the community in its unequal battle against those who repressed them has had a cascading effect on all aspects of their lives – from schooling to political representation. Together this constituted a direct and unprecedented challenge to the hegemony of the landowning elite.

As Amar of the SSEVK pointed out, "The extreme forms of untouchability have disappeared, women are taking leadership positions, and the message that the Musahar is a citizen of the country like anybody else, has reached every corner of the project region and the state at large."



This would not have been possible without the conscientisation of a significant section of the community that was achieved through a complementarity of interventions initiated by ActionAid, the SSEVK, and community based groups like the MVP and the MVM. The programmes ranged from trainings and capacity building to events designed for information sharing on rights, entitlements and political structures. Practical suggestions on how to file a First Information Report with the police, for instance, or make an RTI application, were also part of the effort.

But what happens after the project ends? Amar was cautious in his response when he said, “This is a jan andolan, a people’s movement, but we cannot state that in 10 years this work will still be carrying on.” But he added, “What we can say is that if the community is convinced that this approach has yielded benefits, they will put in the required effort to keep it going.”

Have community based organisations and strong leaders, capable of displaying independent initiative, emerged? There was a decided gap here, which was noticed by Kushinagar District

Magistrate Rigzian Sampheal himself when he observed, “The lack of leadership from the community struck me as stark. I kept urging the Musahar families of Kudawa Dalip Nagar to occupy the land that we had allotted to them and told them we were with them, but they were too afraid to do so. Leadership has to come from the community if change has to take place at the ground level.”

Certainly, articulate young men like Laloo Manjhi, district president of the MVM (see box) or Uma Shankar Prasad, indicate the arrival of a new generation committed to the community, but are there enough leaders like them, and do they have the resilience it takes? That is a question only the future can answer.

Another related and reinforcing factor is the community’s continued inability to influence government policy and programmes in any significant way. While ActionAid’s interventions have helped Musahars to become far more visible on the social landscape, they continue to be overlooked and neglected in the corridors of power. Government officials by and large are still apathetic to their situation and panchayati raj representatives often openly adopt hostile and casteist positions.



In the scramble for political power, more politically mobile groups, even among the larger dalit community, tend to elbow their way on to the centrestage, leaving the others behind.



It is truly poignant to see, in Musahar tola after tola, these the poorest of the poor hold up dog-eared certificates of ownership, even while any prospect of their cultivating their land remains as distant as ever

On development parameters, too, the picture was a mixed one. Data gathered by both organisations revealed a plethora of concerns. Health delivery everywhere continued to be both inadequate and expensive. Malnutrition levels among Musahar children were high and entitlements like mid day meals at schools and anganwadi childcare were not adequately monitored. Everybody was aware that the legal age of marriage for girls is 18 years, yet child marriages – although fewer in number – continued to take place. Alcoholism and domestic violence remained unabated. While the caste atrocities of the old days may no longer occur as frequently as they once did, the landowning class remained as politically and socially well-connected as ever and the threat of violence that it sometimes exerts on the powerless remained. What is more, the bargaining power of this section was only likely to grow as time goes by – given the increasing mechanisation of farm operations and the fact that it was less likely to be dependent on the labour power of the poorer sections and lower castes.

When it came to land ownership, while in some pockets small successes have been achieved, everywhere – whether in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh – there were signs that the pattas/parchas of



ownership handed over to the community in land redistribution drives had not enabled people to take possession of their land. It was truly poignant to see, in Musahar tola after tola, these the poorest of the poor hold up dog-eared certificates of ownership, even while any prospect of their cultivating their land remained as distant as ever.

Some Musahars have even argued that in the old days, although the landlord would beat them, he would at least allow them to settle on his land. Today, in contrast, they may technically be freer but don't have a foothold anywhere and find themselves even more vulnerable. So what good is their supposed freedom, they asked. This is a desperate and disturbing question but reflected the local reality eloquently.

According to a calculation made by Arvind Kumar, it cost a poor villager anything between

Rs 50,000 and 60,000 in personal money to gain possession of a small plot of land given to him by the government. Endless trips to the courts meant missing out on daily wages, and in addition there were transportation and legal costs to bear, all of which added up to a tidy sum. If the beneficiary is unfortunate enough to get a small holding in the middle of four fields belonging to four different people, these expenses could be quadrupled.

Once the land was legally transferred in the beneficiary's name, there was always the fear of attack. People got so intimidated by these hurdles that they preferred to give up their right to the land rather than face a lifetime of struggle. As for the landlord, even if he loses his case and was made to pay a sum of Rs 10,000 as a fine, he could well afford to try his luck in a higher court.



Moving Forward

For ActionAid the two projects in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, taken together, constituted in many ways one of its most ambitious social interventions. Not only did it involve a community that had been deprived of its constitutional rights, it involved the arduous and intractable struggle for land.

Remarked Vinay Ohdar, speaking about the East Champaran effort, “In terms of community mobilisation, this is one of our best projects. A community that had nothing has found its voice. If ActionAid had not intervened, change may still have come, but its pace would have been infinitely slower.”

The risk is that when an initiative, which saw the AA staff stand as one with the activists on the ground, ended the whole process could grind to a halt. Ohdar, however, did not believe that this would happen because the Musahar community had demonstrated the ability to sustain the change.

He also believed that processes like this have their own momentum. When one village perceived the benefits of programmes like those spearheaded by the MVM and the MVP in a neighbouring village, it too will seek ways to achieve them.

Having seen the evolution of the project in Kushinagar over the years, Arvind Kumar noted that there are several good practices that have emerged and which need to be institutionalised. “The methods employed to build women’s leadership, for instance, or the effort to promote direct interactions between the community and the district administration – these are major pluses. But ultimately, this struggle has to be waged by the community. As one Musahar woman told me during a training camp, “We have got 25 paise out of the one rupee that is due to us. Now we must get the other 75 paise too!” revealed Kumar.

Unlike in East Champaran, Kushinagar had seen ActionAid directly administer the programme. This demanded committed time and effort from AA’s regional office in Lucknow. But direct involvement also meant that AA could, through its network and contacts, help a community based organisation like the MVP to quickly establish a presence and draw on the synergy created by MVM in East Champaran in a parallel initiative.



There were many events that the two organisations staged together with AA acting as the bridging institution.

Structural change was a continuous process and took time especially in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where even something as simple as filing an FIR is fraught with challenges

For Dipali Sharma, senior manager, programmes, ActionAid India, these are all factors that need to be taken into account when assessing the achievements

of projects like these. As she put it, “The community must now take this process to the next level.

They must know those who govern them, and demand accountability from them. They must understand the dynamics between politics and developments on the ground and the various nexuses that exist between the landlords and panchayati raj representatives; between decision makers and traders in land.”

Sharma added that AA will continue to remain involved with the issue of the rights of the Musahars, even after the project had ended and will carry on extending any help it can.





Finally, after our travels through Kushinagar and East Champaran, we came to the Musahar tola in the village of Dhubaulia in Tetariya block. Like Musahar pockets everywhere, it was on the outskirts of the village, but this one looked different.

Surrounded by paddy fields, it lay proudly under the sun, its lanes clean and its houses in a state of good repair. Through their activism, the Musahars of this village had managed to get a road built in to their tola.

Bhikari Manjhi, a local activist, recounted the struggle, “Earlier, there was no approach road to our tola because of encroachments and life was very difficult for all of us. Our children had to walk long distances to even go to school. We have been able to put pressure on the Block Development Officer (BDO), use RTI to get old maps of

this area, and argue that at one point there had indeed been an approach road which had disappeared.” The effort bore fruit. In 2006-2007, the road was built and houses were allotted under the LAY. It changed life in this neighbourhood.

As he was speaking, a young girl emerged from the tola riding her bicycle confidently on the road that had changed the life of her community. She said that her name was Gudiya Kumari and that she was doing her last year of school.

Would Gudiya be continuing with her education even after doing her ‘Inter’, we asked. Her reply was prompt and revealing, “Of course. I will not give up my studies for anything. Education is everything these days.”





Case
Studies



Degrees of Change

Sometimes even the names parents give their newborns reflect the sense of self-worth of a community. What had always struck social activists working with Musahars were the often strange nomenclatures adopted. Arvind Singh of ActionAid, Lucknow, observed, “We have come across people named Baukh (dumb), Chedhi (hole), Ghura (thrash), Gobar (cow dung), Gheniya (round), Moos (rat), Jowar (coarse grain), Dukhani (one who creates sadness) and Kaur (stalks). But this is slowly changing and now names like Vikas, Nirmala and Satish are becoming common. Earlier, Bindeswari Manjhi, an elder in Ajarwa tola in East Champaran was called plain ‘Binder’, now he is referred to as ‘Tiwari Mama’. Similarly, 65-year-old Batkari Prasad was always called ‘Batkari’. Today, he is Batkari Prasad or ‘Batkaria Neta’.

Equally striking is evidence of a new sense of enterprise within the community. In a meeting of community representatives at Kushinagar recently, Batkari Prasad recalled how his family had been given a patta 20 years ago, but they could only occupy the land until 2007, after a

lot of struggle. After the MVP was formed, the community got the courage to occupy the land allotted to them, and their first act of defiance was to cut the standing harvest and bring it into their homes. Batkari Prasad now rears 20 to 30 goats and does some trading of his own. This year, during the mango season, he along with two others, bought mangoes worth Rs 1 lakh and could sell them for double that amount. “If we have the confidence to stay together and demand our rights united we can change our lives,” Prasad insists.

Leaving home helped Musahar boy, Rajesh Prasad, 28, turn into the caterer he is today. Prasad said he first got the idea of being a cook when his brother’s wedding took place in 2005 and he saw how the man employed to cook the food got to make Rs 500 for his effort. He first worked as a kitchen help in a restaurant in the northeastern state of Assam. With the money he made he hired a place in the market. Soon he was catering for various functions in and around Kushinagar, including marriages. He said with great confidence that he could turn out anything, from everyday fare like roti-sabzi, to sweetmeats – “mithai mein poora items banana sikha

(I learnt to do all the sweetmeats that are on offer),” he interjected.

Prasad always makes it a point to get involved in MVP programmes and is called to cater for MVP functions as a proud member of the Musahar community. He travels on his own motorcycle and enjoys his profession. As he put it, “I feel good feeding people.”

Ram Vilas, now in his late 40s, is a programme coordinator with the MVP. He had a head start because of his grandfather. “My grandfather worked in Kolkata and, thanks to his savings, the family could invest in a buffalo. The earnings from

the buffalo helped me to complete my intermediate and then, with a great deal of hard work and effort, I got an MA in Hindi.”

The most recent example of academic success within the community is Shashi Bhushan. He had worked as a MVP volunteer in 2007, when he was on the verge of graduation. He went on to successfully get a Bachelor’s degree in Social Work. He couldn’t do his Masters in Social Work for a while but, in 2013, he got admission into the gender studies course at the reputed Tata Institute of Social Sciences.



Ending The Spectre Of Kala Azar

Few diseases target the poorest as kala-azar (visceral leishmaniasis) does. People who live in bamboo-and-thatch hovels, people who live close to stagnant pools of dirty water, people who are malnourished and lack resistance to infections are all susceptible to this dreaded disease caused by the humble sandfly. Extremely tiny, sandflies breed in organic matter and are not able to fly above three feet. So the bamboo walls of the dwellings and the waste heaps that surround them, make an extremely hospitable habitat for these killers.

Kala-azar was said to affect around 33 of Bihar's total 38 districts, but East Champaran was one of the worst affected. The period when ActionAid first started working there also happened to be the period when Bihar reported a spike in deaths caused by the disease. Officially around 200 had died of kala-azar in 2001-2002, but the actual numbers were higher.

"We would see cases in every village we visited in 2001, when a short term project was started by ActionAid," said Akhil Mishra. This was seconded

by Bindeswar Manji of the Musahar tola of Ajarwa village, who recalled that in the old days "kala-azar was so common that everybody in the community had some relative or the other who had died of it".

Revealed Dukhni Devi from the same tola, "Those who fell very ill would be taken on foot to the Motihari hospital in a bamboo basket. Hiring a tempo from the Bengalis could cost Rs 400 and we couldn't afford it."

Amar, President, SSEVK, estimated that around 981 families were directly affected by kala-azar when the project started in 2003-04. He noted, "We felt that we needed to adopt a different approach if we were to end this daily tragedy. So we sat with people to make them more aware of the disease. Also because they could not afford proper treatment, they would take to offering prayers and performing rituals. Indigenous healers would heat lotas (small pitchers) and place it over the distended spleen – one of the major symptoms of kala-azar. Patients would be fed alcohol mixed with harmful substances in the name of a cure."

The SSEVK concluded that given this situation, their first job was to ensure proper treatment for the sick. That is when it discovered that there were no medicines to treat this disease, even in the hospitals. With the help of AAI, they had volunteers equipped with Rk-39 rapid diagnostic kits, so that once the disease was confirmed the patient could be referred to a public hospital.

“We would then deliver sodium antimony gluconate (SAG) shots to those who tested positive. But the big problem we faced was under-staffed hospitals,” recalled P. N. Pandey, of the SSEVK.

Missing government doctors – many of whom had flourishing private practice – a shortage of nurses, and crowded wards meant that kala-azar patients would have to squat for hours on the floor awaiting medical attention. The SSEVK/AA

lobbied for a committed kala-azar ward, and one came up at Sardar Hospital, Motihari, with the central government sanctioning Rs 50 for each patient.

All this made a difference. “We were able to save 7,000 lives in this way,” Amar estimated. While kala-azar has not disappeared from the region, the community was largely saved from its ravages. Now the numbers of those affected by the disease could be counted in their tens, not in their thousands as was the case a decade earlier.

Concluded Amar, “Today, the Musahar community does not, by and large, suffer from this disease, although tuberculosis is still around. We have been able to motivate the TB-afflicted to go in for the DOTS programme and we also helped to hold DOTS camps. So this project has been able to make an impact in terms of health.”



Some Land Of Our Own

This is a story from Kolhua village, which falls in the Kasia block of Kushinagar district – a region where Lord Buddha preached his last sermon. Like most of the villages dotting Kushinagar, the hutments of the Musahar community are on its periphery, a metaphor for their marginalisation. Their homes with thatched roofs are invariably small, dark spaces walled by bamboo and clay. The only facility they have within that enclosed space are a couple of clay chulhas, which emit a great deal of smoke that never really departs from these dwellings and is ingested by everyone living within them, from newborn babies to the asthmatic elderly.

But what makes the Musahar neighbourhood of Kolhua so special is the fact that it was the site of a local, self driven campaign for land conducted largely by the women. These everyday heroines may drape their sari pallu demurely over their heads but they are driven by a fierce determination to access a modicum of government entitlements that exist in their name.

Explaining the conditions in which Musahars live in this village, Rampatiya Devi said, “We live huddled in our small huts with our animals and our children.” Her face did not reflect the tensions of her life, however. There was a certain air of calm determination about her, and she needed every bit of that determination during the unique struggle she and other Musahar women of the village launched to get 36 decimal of ‘banjar’ land, which was allocated to the community jointly. ‘Banjar’ land is excess land falling under the purview of the gram panchayat that the state may allocate to marginalised communities.

How did the Musahar residents of Kolhua get to know that there was such land in their neighbourhood? This is where the MVP, the committed activism of Vibhuti Chauhan and the overall support of AA made the difference. Said Rampatiya Devi, “Through MVP we learnt that we had a right to this land.”

The first move was to go to the SDM. This was early 2012. They came back from the meeting elated because he had assured them that he would issue an order on this soon and asked them to

return in eight days. But when they went back, he told them that the land had been allotted to a school. What he did not tell them was that the local Bhumihars, an upper caste, were dead set against the Musahars being given that piece of land.

Kushi Devi, one of the women from Kolhua who was involved in all the action, continued: “We already had two schools within a kilometre’s radius of this village so we told them that we did not need another school.” The women then decided to petition the state minister for home guards, Brahma Shankar Tripathi, who has a home in this village. His first response was of surprise – he did not know there were Musahars in Kolhua, recalled Chand Bali. He added, “If the minister himself had no knowledge about our existence, you can only imagine how helpless we constantly feel when upper castes gang up against us.”

After the Musahars argued that this land was theirs by right because they were the most marginalized, the minister finally agreed to explore the possibility of giving them the excess land after earmarking a plot for the school.

Days passed and nothing happened. They were shunted from office to office. Each time they had to hire a trolley after shelling out Rs 300, money

they could ill afford to spare, besides having to give up the day’s wages.

The administration then got back saying that they could be sanctioned a plot adjoining a jungle, about two kilometres away. Again the women stood firm. They made it clear that they did not want to give up their claim to land in their neighbourhood and cultivate a patch so far away. They were also clear that the land they got would be jointly owned by both the men and women of the community.

When the DM finally intervened and issued the order that 36 decimals of ‘banjar’ land in the Mushar neighbourhood be transferred to the community, there was great rejoicing. The transfer was instituted not through individual pattas but as a combined holding in the name of the community.

“This is our land – and we fought for it, all the way from the village to the district level. We have fought for it, even by going hungry. It will be under our safekeeping and we will cultivate it jointly,” remarked Rampatiya Devi quietly as she showed us that much fought for patch of land, now green with jowar.



Power Of One: 'Netaji' Vibhuti Chauhan

What made Vibhuti Chauhan find within him such a strong empathy for a community that was barely recognised as part of humanity that he waged a four-decade-long struggle for its rights? After all, neither were the Musahars politically significant, nor was he himself from the community. Perhaps it began with that first encounter with injustice in the raw, when wages due to some Musahars remained unpaid and Chauhan, as a young man inspired by social democratic principles, demonstrated for justice outside the SDM's office.

"The first thing that struck me about the Musahar community when I started interacting with them in the 1970s was that hardly anyone knew of its existence – certainly not the officials. As for the Musahars themselves, they did not know their rights, they did not even know the significance of Independence Day, or that a Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) existed. They lived in broken huts, with nobody bothering about them," recalled Chauhan, now in his mid-sixties.

The other aspect that became quickly apparent to him was the severe repression they faced, particularly from the upper castes and landowning sections. The initial empathy he felt for the Musahars now turned into something deeper: a commitment. Said Chauhan, "I began spending more time with the community, sleeping in their huts, eating their food, witnessing for myself the daily humiliation they faced. I decided at that point that this is the community for which I will work for the rest of my life."

The community responded to him with affection and trust. The fact that they began to call him 'Netaji', or leader, testified to their confidence in him. Said Ram Vilas, a Musahar who is also the programme coordinator of the Musahar Vikas Pahal, "Through Chauhan saab we came to realise many issues. He guided us throughout."

Land and dignity - these were what the community needed most of all. Chauhan assisted them in getting their loans written off and taught them how to petition the authorities for ownership of ceiling land. The process was slow and often accompanied by violence. Any attempt

at organising the Musahars or demanding justice for them was met almost immediately by aggression. Hamlets were flattened and houses set on fire, as landlords deployed their goons to unleash intimidation and terror. In this already unequal battle, the police often openly sided with the powerful. Chauhan has himself faced police firing and still carries the marks of these encounters on his body. But the traumas and tensions, notwithstanding, he remained steadfast in his purpose.

Chauhan described the coming of ActionAid into the region for the first time in 2001 as a “strong wind of change”. As the Musahar Vikas Pahal took shape in eastern Uttar Pradesh and began representing the Musahars, with Chauhan himself as one of anchors of the process, the critical issues were clear, and ranged from violations of Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and social recognition of the community, to land rights for the dispossessed.

However, there was a change of orientation to be made and Chauhan recognised this, “Once ActionAid came into the picture we had to understand the government system and learn to work within the constitutional framework. Earlier, we had perceived the administration

as our enemy. Now we had to learn to enlist its support and sometimes link our work with that of the government. Whereas earlier we would resort to taking up our lathis, we now had to ensure that the authorities took action. We had to understand the laws and how to make use of them.”

The central issues of land and dignity, however, remained. “With ActionAid’s close involvement, we worked with the community to strengthen their understanding of their own rights. We taught them how to speak as equals with officers and interact with them. We ensured that men and women could speak to a minister without fear. We were always there when they faced difficulties but they had to understand that it was their struggle.”

Today, according to Chauhan, the fear of the powerful that once haunted the mind of the Musahars has ebbed. “Of course, change doesn’t happen in a day. The process of gaining equality takes time. But now even women can speak to an SP on the phone. I, who have seen them before this process began, can clearly perceive the difference. But this process is far from over. Only in name have the rajas left us; it will take much longer to shake off their exploitative grip on the Musahar community.”

Youth Assume The Leadership Mantle

The future of any movement is vested in its young leaders and, by that measure, the MVM, in Bihar's Mehsi district, has reason to feel reassured. Its present district president, Laloo Manjhi, and its district secretary, Chanda Kumari, are from the community. Both are aware of the burning issues and, most important of all, are still in their twenties. Their respective trajectories, although very different, have common elements. Both had been exposed to the activities of the MVM very early, both had interrupted schooling, yet both managed to educate themselves against great odds.



Laloo comes from a poorer family. His father was an agricultural labourer earning about Rs 50 a day and his mother too was a wage labourer. As a young boy, still studying in

the Class Five, he remembered accompanying his parents to work in the field.

When his father got a contract to work as a mason in Agra, Laloo accompanied him as a mason's assistant. He was around 12 or 13 at that time and earned Rs 1,500 per month. Fortunately, despite having to leave school for long periods of time, the boy had the support of his school teachers. "My teachers would take extra classes for me without payment and that helped me clear the tenth board examination with 52 per cent in 2002 – I did well in all the subjects except in English!" he said.

But keeping the family going demanded that he continue to work and very next year Laloo left for Gurgaon, in the national capital region, to work as a painter in the highrises dotting the city. He was 16. It was around this time that the ActionAid/PACS flood rehabilitation programme was taking shape and Laloo was asked how he could contribute. "I told them that I would do anything, apart from using a gun or killing someone! I told them I would like to do 'samaj ka kaam', work for society. I was happy to come back home," smiled Laloo.

He was selected to be part of the programme as a field worker to conduct a survey supported by DFID on the Musahar community at a remuneration of Rs 2000 a month. That survey proved crucial in his evolution. It helped him to understand the exact conditions of his community.

Once the project came to an end, he enrolled for a degree at the MS College, Motihari. “During the day I would attend meetings, and at night I would study. I remember once running all the way to an exam hall because I had woken up late after a meeting the night before,” related the young man, who got his BA degree in 2008.

Ever since, Laloo has been involved in “this ding-dong”, as he playfully terms his community activism. In 2011, members of the MVM elected him as their district level president. There was a lot to be done. The panchayat elections were taking place and many Musahars successfully contested it after attending ActionAid’s regular trainings on the Gram Vikas entitlements. “On October 2, 2011, we submitted a list of people entitled to homestead land and Indira Awaz Yojana and we were able to help 503 families get three decimal of homestead land, owned jointly by husband and wife, in 2012,” he revealed.

Given the generally low health and nutrition status of the community, Laloo also realised

the importance of holding regular health and nutrition camps. A nutrition rehabilitation centre for malnourished infants also came up. In partnership with the district administration, the MVM conducted a social audit on the ICDS in 2012, which was followed by a public hearing in which the local community participated with enthusiasm.

A great deal emerged out of that exercise. It was discovered, for instance, that in several blocks the material supplied was 50 per cent less than what was committed on paper. Seven sevikas were suspended as a result of this evidence. MVM’s monitoring of the schemes proved to be an eye-opener for Laloo. It showed the need for an organisation like the MVM that would protect the rights of a poor community.

In contrast to Laloo Manjhi, Chanda Kumari had the early advantage of having her father work for a social organisation. “I grew up listening to him talk about social issues. I was child then and of course remember only the fun things – like the bal mela the organisation would hold. Even then I always dreamt of visiting various places and talking about social issues when I grew up,” she said.

In 2003, the MVM was set up and her father joined it. When she turned 15, her family got



her married. This meant an end to her formal schooling. Fortunately, her husband's family lived in a village that fell within the ActionAid's project area, and a bridge course school was being run in the vicinity. Since she had missed out on some years of schooling, Chanda enrolled for the course. The school had many girls like

her. They were taught not just the regular school curriculum, but cooking, tailoring and even driving.

Said Chanda, "I also participated in the Reflect Circle process designed to break the culture of silence. We would discuss issues like alcoholism, sexual harassment, domestic violence. We decided

that if any girl we knew was getting attacked, we would get together to fight the violence."

The girls did face the test. As Akhil Mishra revealed, "When it came to the attention of her group that a Musahar child was facing discrimination in school, Chanda and her team confronted the teacher, who turned around and asked them, 'How do you Musahars have the gumption to come here?' and abused them. They then registered a case against the teacher under the SC/ST Atrocities Act. Attempts were made to pressurise the girls to take back the complaint -- the local MLA even sent someone to intimidate Chanda -- but the girls would not be deterred and the case is still going on."

Through the bridge school course, Chanda was able to appear for the matriculation exam and pass it with a second division in 2007. Today, this mother of a four-year-old son is glad that she has a chance as secretary of the MVP district committee, to work on issues of this kind. Said she, "I like working for the community and understand how important it is for us to rise after having been treated so badly for hundreds of years."

About the initiative

This story, the second in our series of “CRITICAL STORIES OF CHANGE”, is about ‘Musahars’, one of the most deprived and disadvantaged of the marginalised communities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Even the nomenclature that the community bears is a stereotype invested with stigma – ‘mus-ahar’, or ‘those who eat rats’ – rat meat being regarded as the sustenance of the untouchable.

Predominantly landless, the only source of livelihood for Musahar community has been agricultural labour on the fields of the powerful landed classes.

Absence of any alternative recourse through education or govt. intervention, have made them victims of caste based oppression and exploitation for so many generations that the idea of justice and human dignity themselves, became hazy in their minds.

ActionAid India decided to step in with long-term intervention in 2004, when reports of starvation deaths from the area revealed chronic hunger, apathy and neglect by the administration and the omnipresent terror of the small but powerful elite.

When we started our work, the only thing that bore the stamp of ‘government’ was the hand pump in the villages, and that too very likely broken down. There were no schools, no roads, no electricity or health centres.

With over a decade of intensive work with the communities, it has been very heartening to see emergence and establishment of the two strong community organisations Musahar Vikas Pahal (MVP), and Musahar Vikas Manch (MVM) that roughly translate as Musahar Development Platform and Musahar Development Initiative in the states of UP and Bihar respectively.

The biggest achievement has been to win over administrative and government support with the help of some earnest and dutiful officers, as much as with persistence and belief in the Human Rights Based Approach that meant citizen’s rights and entitlements being non-negotiable. MVP and MVM today work closely with the local administration and have been successful in achieving homestead and agriculture land rights, assets that they now see strongly attached to their sense of self worth and self confidence. Strong women and men community leaders have also been successful in linking the community to various schemes and entitlements like PDS, pension schemes, Indira Awas Yojna etc. The best and brightest indicator of change is to see Musahar children in neat uniforms in schools.

After a decade long work and various ups and downs notwithstanding, we feel vindicated in our belief, in our approach and in the power inherent in even the most oppressed people to make big changes.

We hope that this story will be as encouraging and inspiring for the readers, as it has been for us.

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