



Tilaya Devi, a well-known Mushar woman activist in Bihar, India, 2003.

## *The Untouchable Present*

*Musahar*, a Scheduled Caste, are mostly located in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Their total population in these three States is more than three million.

In Bihar, *Musahars* are widely distributed in several districts—Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, Hazaribagh, Santal Pargana, Bhagalpur, Munger, Purnea and Gaya etc. In 1891, Risley wrote, '*Musahar* are an offshoot of the Bhuiya tribe of Chota Nagpur.' Deriving meaning from the word *Musahar*, some say they signify flesh seekers or hunters (*masu* meaning flesh and *hera* meaning secker), while others understand them as rat-takers or rat-eaters (*musa* meaning rat).

*Musahars* are mainly landless agricultural labourers. Very few are cultivators or work in industries and offices. According to the census, out of their total population in Bihar, 46.7 per cent are workers and among them, 95.34 per cent are agricultural labourers. Only 2.52 per cent are involved in cultivation and the remaining 2.14 per cent are in other services. In Uttar Pradesh, 42.68 per cent of their total population is termed as workers. Of them, 62.04 per cent are agricultural labourers, 13 per cent are in cultivation, 15.79 per cent are in the household industry, 4.64 per cent are in other-than-household industries and the remaining 4.53 per cent are in services. In West Bengal, 57.38 per cent of the total population is termed as workers. Of them, 44.85 per cent are cultivators, 9.56 per cent are agricultural labourers and 42.67 per cent are in other-than-household industries.

*Musahars* have largely remained on the peripheries, and have mostly gone unnoticed so far. But this situation is changing. At

present in North Bihar, the *Lok Shakti Sangathan* is organising *Musahars*, where they are themselves coming to the forefront and raising their issues. Thus writes K. S. Singh in *The Scheduled Castes*, 'The expansion of capitalist agrarian relations and continuing population pressures helped to dissolve traditional patron-client relationships. With this background, there arose stirrings of discontent among the *Musahar* sharecroppers and labourers in Bihar which led to autonomous protest movements under the leadership and organisation of militants drawn from their own community.'

### No Way to Employment

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

'We are two in one—*Musahars* and *Mitti* (soil). Digging soil is like a physical exercise for us, much better than sitting or lying. When we don't do it, then we feel tired,' says Asharfi Sadai, sitting idle in his village Sirpur Musahari, 6 km east of Jhanjharpur town in north Bihar.

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

But now he gets less work related with soil. Since he, like many others, has no land and most of his life has passed working with soil, his choices are very limited. However, always enterprising and not afraid of learning new things, Asharfi has now started weaving baskets. But the going is tough. Says he, 'Bamboo trees are not mine; they are somebody else's. The market for baskets is

not certain. If somebody gives me the bamboo, I weave them for him.' Otherwise, Asharfi looks here and there for soil work.

Asharfi goes to cities like Darbangha, Samastipur, Muzaffarpur and sometimes even to Patna the capital of the State. What he has been experiencing there is less and less demand for labour like his, in spite of various on-going construction activities. 'I see that for an activity like assessment and measurement, we are no longer required. Further, the digging in big project work is being done by the machines,' he explains.

There is less work, as well as lower wages in the available construction jobs. 'When we get work in house construction activities in towns, the wages are Rs. 30 to 40, which is less than the prescribed government wages,' he complains.

*Musahars* traditional job market has been squeezed by some other hidden ways, especially in recent years. In village level developmental work, under the *Jawahar Rozgar Yojana* or other schemes, there is some work which is somewhere related to digging and carrying of soil. All this work was being done by *Musahars* earlier, but not now.

Harhar Sadai, of Sirpur Musahari village says, 'We do the digging. But that is all. The loading, unloading and carrying of the soil is now being done by trucks and tractors, contractors and their labourers. Here commission rules the game.' Surya Narayan Sadai of village Bheja in Madhapur Block complains of similar incidents, 'Trolleys and contractors have taken over the scenario, leaving very less space for us.'

*Musahars* have always been living here without land, without cattle. But they have been surviving as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers. Even women have been sharing this work. Bhola remembers, 'Initially in the 1970s and 1980s, various family members worked together here. They could also save. More labourers were required. This is no longer the case now.'

Worsening situation with floods, shifting courses of rivers, adverse fallout of drainage congestions, embankments and water loggings, have had a serious impact on the rural agricultural scene of the region since the early 1970s. Sonai Sada, a villager

in Bakunia Engineer village of Saharsa district, has no hesitation in referring to embankments as 'the dreaded killer of our agriculture and land.'

In the recent past, the dispossession of *Musahars* from rural land and employment is taking new turns. Since the last four-five years, in Bakunia itself, landlords have purchased three tractors. They now hire tractors from outside as well. One landlord rents it to another for ploughing, at the rate of Rs. 150-170 per *bigha*. 'It has become easier for landlords, as now they do not require labour, cattle or plough for a major part of their farming,' says Tithar Sadai.

Thus now there is work available locally only for three-four months and that too primarily for womenfolk. Bindo Sadai, another *Musahar* labourer in the village, confirms, 'Sowing and harvesting, and in between, some other work related to standing crops, are barely enough for the womenfolk. *Musahar* men are becoming more and more unemployed. The new landlords, the Yadavs, do not want us anymore on a long time basis.'

*Musahar* men and women work from 6 in the morning to 1 in the afternoon. They get a breakfast of two *rotis* at 8-9 am and their daily wages are 2-3 kg of maize or wheat, which costs approximately Rs. 12-13.

Earlier, there was a variety of other work available in the village vicinity: making paper packets, knitting ropes, weaving baskets, stitching leaf plates, husking rice and preparing eatables from it. But such work has virtually died down today.

'Rice mills have opened both in the village and at the block level. Their owners are not *Musahars* or other poor. So landlords prefer to go to these mills, rather than calling *Musahars* to their houses, or giving gear to them for manual processing,' says Surya Narayan Sadai in Bheja village. Similarly, Ashrafi talks about the problems of basket making and marketing.

There are a number of individual responses in the region among the *Musahars*. They are rickshaw pullers in large numbers in Jhanjharpur, Madhubani and other places. Some have turned to vending here and there and sell on piece rate basis whatever they can get from shop owners and retailers, etc. In Kheri village

of Lakhnaur block, Mahakant has been running a cycle/rickshaw repair shop since 1994. 'I was a sharecropper before. But that was not working well,' he says. Similarly, in Bakunia Bichali village, Pulakit Mandal is a tailor today with a sewing machine of his own. Says he, 'In 1988-89, I first went to Punjab and continued to do so for some years. But it was proving to be really difficult. Somehow I managed to purchase a sewing machine in 1993 and since then, this is my work. Normally I get work for 10-12 days a month and am able to earn Rs. 800-900. Some others have also started doing tailoring. It is not easy to get work and earn some cash. But I do not want to go to Punjab.'

Since land did not belong to them, as such the *Musahars* did not own soil. However, their talent to work with the soil, as a skill and as an equipment, was their very own. And this inter-relationship was an integral part of the use of land here. This phase is witnessing not only a replacement of that equipment by a new ones, like trollies and tractors, but even the control of these is not in their hands. These new equipments do not require the skills of those who worked on the land for generations. This could also be opening up new hazards for land here.

### The New Course of Migration

*Large-scale migration of Musahars has a recent history, starting largely from the early 1990s. Villages are now found totally deserted of young male members during most of the agricultural season. This enables Musahars to survive, but it makes moneylenders more accumulative and exploitative. It also releases Musahars' sense of deep humiliation and reflects the changes that are taking place between high-middle caste landowners and Scheduled Caste agricultural labourers.*

In May 1998, there is one sight strikingly common in all *Musahar* villages. You see women, young and old, children of all ages and old men, but young/middle aged men are hardly to be seen. Those visible, can be counted instantly by the villagers. The

unseen ones, everybody knows, are somewhere in Gurdaspur, Batala, Pathankoth, Chandigarh, Panipat, Sonipat, Deenanagar in Punjab and Haryana States.

Bakunia Bichali is a *Musahar* village of 60 homes, in Navahatha block of Saharsa district. The journey off the embankment to Bakunia is difficult, as it comes between the two embankments on Kosi river. No transport reaches these villages for several kms, even during the dry season. Only country boats can be used for four-five months in the rainy season to move to and from the village. And one has to wade through knee-deep mud within the village. There are two-three families of father and sons, living in one house. But presently there are only five young men in the village. Nearby is Bakunia Purabi, a village of 42 *Musahar* homes, where the counting of young/middle aged men goes till a maximum of ten.

'*Dukhia Punjab Khatihe* (those who are in pain, labour in Punjab) is a local saying,' says Sitia, whose three sons are now labouring somewhere in Punjab. 'But it is also true that if we don't go out for labour, we will turn into street beggars,' she adds in the same breath.

Every year, in December-January, they start moving out to Punjab, Haryana or Uttar Pradesh. They do wheat harvesting and rice sowing there. By June end, they come back and go again in September. Then they do rice harvesting. They get wages at the rate of Rs. 40 to 50 per day. Thus they work primarily as agricultural labourers for six-seven months in a year. But some of them like Domi Sadai of village Partaha, work in the rice mills of Chandigarh. He also takes some villagers with him for working in the same mills. Then there is Hari, who works as a night watchman in a farm in Gurdaspur.

They go in much larger numbers now, which was not the case a few years ago. Mallu Sadai, Rameshwar Sadai and others in Bakunia Bichali village recollect that some 10-12 years ago only three or four men from the village went to Punjab for labour and the rest were doing labour in and around the village. But now, only a few remain in the village here in the working season.

Old Subodh Sadai of Bakunia Purabi village is a father of five sons. His three adult sons have been working in Punjab since the last seven years. He says, 'They used to work here as agricultural labourers or sharecroppers before. Now they come, stay for a few months and go back again. They send us money from there through cheques or bank drafts. Their families are our responsibility. In place of them, their wives now work in the fields for some months.'

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

Mohan Ram lives in Barhara village of Navahatha block. Since the last eight-nine years, he has been going off and on to villages in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, 'I go out for four to five months in a year depending on changing circumstances. If I get some land for sharecropping, I first complete my farming and then move on to Punjab. Whenever one goes during the season, one is always able to get work in the fields. The work lasts from 8 am to 5 pm, with a cup of tea in the morning. After work, you cook, eat and sleep. Sometimes, some enjoy a little liquor, as there is hardly any other outlet or interaction outside the work place,' he says.

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

This large-scale migration helps in meeting basic survival needs, but it is not enough to counter the blood-sucking moneylenders, who have an overpowering presence in the area. Whenever they go, they normally have to take loans from the local landowners, turned moneylenders, at the rate of 10 to 12 per cent per 100 per month. Mohan Ram takes a loan of Rs. 600 every time he has to go. If he pays back this amount within three



months, he pays an interest of 10 per cent. If he does not, then the interest amount gets integrated into the main amount and he pays interest on that main. 'No, we have never had any savings. We are always forced to take loans for our movements,' says Mohan.

Domi Sadai has more bitter experiences to narrate, 'In early 1997, I had taken a loan of Rs.11,000 from the local landowner, because I had to take 20 villagers along with me. Till date I have paid back Rs.30,000. But the landowner is asking for Rs.12,000 more to clear off the loan. I will have to pay. Otherwise how will we be able to approach the moneylender again and then how will we go to Punjab?' Even after five-seven years of working in Punjab and other States, Domi and the others with him have not been able to earn enough to enable them to save some money, so that they can travel on their own, or for their families to sustain themselves during lean days. *Jo kamana, so khana, kya fayda?* (Whatever we earn, is barely enough to eat. Is all this worth it?) is the dominant feeling prevalent in the area.

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

This new course of migration among *Musahars* is going to continue. Hari Narayan Harsh, a known activist of the area characterises this trend as one with contradictory implications. 'On the one hand it involves tremendous pain which is almost like a running sore—of constant separation, of increasing burden on women, of new exploitative mechanisms. On the other, it provides *Musahars* with some bargaining power, gives them

sustenance to their families and has led to changing relations in the village, where they are relatively able to escape the constant work humiliation inflicted on them locally. Degradation is there as well, but it is outside their society, which cannot be "seen".

### The Sweated Labour

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

'Musahar agricultural labourers of this village faced the wrath of total boycott by the landowners for almost a year in 1994-95. We were getting only 1.5 kg paddy husk for day-long work. But when we organised ourselves, demanded a little more and called for a *bandh*, the landowners retaliated like this,' says Rameshwar Sadai, an agricultural labourer of Hashauli village in Madhapu block of Madhubani district, revealing a new, unfolding situation in various villages. Not only Hashauli, but other villages in the same block like Nandanvan, Navlakha, Vindeshwar, Musahari, Kheri, Khashyam, Rahuwa Sagram and Bheja Fakirana are witnessing for the first time a major dispute over payment of minimum wages to agricultural labourers.

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

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

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

Kaushalya Devi and other women complain that they have been beaten up and humiliated a number of times by the landowners. The villagers allege that the landowners murdered one young Jhamalo Yadav, who tried to organise the *Musahars* and other backward communities in the 1980s.

The payment of minimum wages to agricultural workers is a burning issue in this region. The Bihar government has fixed the daily minimum wage of agricultural labourers at Rs. 24.50. But they used to get 1.5 kg of paddy husk, wheat or maize which came to only Rs. 5 to 8. The agricultural labourers and their organisations were not demanding the government wage rate and were only asking for a daily wage of 3 kg of paddy husk, wheat or maize. An activist says, 'The rationale for this demand

comes from the specific situation of the area. Every year floods destroy most of the crop. Thus the landowners are also suffering. In this situation, there should be a workable rate of minimum wage by which agricultural labourers can survive and landowners can also continue.'

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

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

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

The most significant development lay in the fact that the agricultural labourers from the nearby villages did not work in the fields of Bhagwanpur. In some cases, they actively joined the protest of *Musahar* labourers. Even the Yadav and Mallah agricultural labourers of Bhagwanpur village refused to work in the fields of

landowners. Kheli, *mukhia* of Bhagwanpur Mallaha toli and Dhryani Yadav, *mukhia* of Yadav toli, jointly asserted their solidarity.

The struggle ended with a sober gain when the landowners started giving 2.5 kg of grain, costing between Rs. 12 to 15. And the gain of one village became the gain of many other nearby villages in the area.

### A Contradictory Picture of Power and Powerlessness

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

Tilaya Devi and her Khairi village witnessed an armed attack in mid-1998, something they had never experienced in their lifetime on such a scale. Around 40-50 Yadavs of the same village came one day and after the attack left in an hour. But Tilaya Devi, even after a month of the incident, is unable to come back to her village. Her family members and other *Musahars* of the village look completely shocked and shattered.

Khairi, a village of 100 and 70 houses of Yadavs and *Musahar* respectively is barely 12 km away from Jhanjharpur town in Madhubani district. *Musahars* live in small thatched huts in one corner of the village. Tin roofs are an exception. These huts have been built on a stretch of land that appeared a few years ago from under the floodwaters. All around the houses of the *Musahars* are vast fields of rice that do not belong to them. 'It was around 8 am when Yadavs came with *pharsas*, sickles and spades and started beating everyone—women and children, young and old. They damaged our *kaccha* houses, utensils, and other items, spoiled the grain, took away all the valuables, even cows, oxen and buffaloes. They were vociferously threatening to kill each and every *Musahar*

of the village,' recount Vaidhyanath, Mahakant, Amolia, Lichia, Bachla Sadai, Marani Devi and many others of the village. Some of them show their injuries with bandages and plasters.

Yadavs were indiscriminate in their attack, but were specifically asking for Tilaya Devi. When they found out that she and her family members were out of the village, not only did they destroy her hut completely, they also took away a buffalo of hers. While leaving, they declared their intentions of giving further lessons to Tilaya if she continued to defy and agitate against them.

In the village Lichia asks in anger, 'Why do they want to kill us like this, when we are the ones who work in their fields? Other villages also have *Musahar* labourers and Yadav landowners, but why are the landowners here acting in this manner?' She further reveals that the Yadavs have boycotted their labour this year and thus they have been forced to go to other villages for work.

Tilaya has taken shelter in the office of the *Lok Shakti Sangathan* and *Samajik Vikas Kendra* in Balbhadrapur village. Looking sad and pale, she prays for more rain and darkness, so that she can go to her village someday to see for herself the condition of her house. For months she had been fearing attacks from Yadavs. One day she even went to the local Lakhnaur police station, but the police neither recorded her statement, nor lodged any complaint. Instead, she was humiliated.

Small built and simply dressed in a sari, Tilaya calls herself a *Musahar* and names her husband as Nayal Sadai. She works continuously, sometimes as an agricultural labourer and sometimes as the maker and seller of leaf packets in the local market. She is also a well-known activist of *Musahars*. She has been working in the fields since her childhood. She got married at an early age and has never gone to a school. 'Nobody in the community was going to school, nobody was realising at my time the importance of education and also the rich and the powerful were not willing to impart education to us,' says she.

When for the first time *Musahars* tried to take control over some *gairmazarua* (ceiling surplus or public commons) land for their housing, the deep-rooted unwillingness of the rich to share

any resources with *Musahars* came to the fore and made Tilaya realise the threat of attacks from the landlords of the village. The whole land area surrounding Khairi, approximately 150-170 *bighas*, is owned by Lokpati Singh, alias *Babu Sahib* of Lakhanua. The land is of different kinds—ceiling, *bhoodani*, governmental—but he is the owner of all and the *Musahars* used to do sharecropping on this. We live in a small corner in the village and were finding it hard to accommodate our growing families there. Thus we decided to build our houses in a small plot of 13 *bighas*, which was *gairmazarua* land. A year ago, we built our houses there, and that entirely changed the attitude of landowners,' she analyses.

Everybody in the village listens to Tilaya, and follows her as their leader. She was the one who took the initiative in taking control of the land. She led the *Musahars* of her village. 'I have been working in the fields since long, but that was not the case with so many other *Musahar* women. Now more and more women work, because of increasing economic pressure and migration of the menfolk to Punjab and Haryana. We have to bear so many burdens now. We have to decide things for our houses,' says she regarding her involvement in the work of the organisation.

Tilaya's involvement in organisational work started a few years ago when the idea of a *Gram Kosh* came to the region. She started collecting five rupees per family, in spite of the resentment shown by the males. Once her husband beat her up mercilessly but women were very supportive, especially Pagia Bai. Slowly *Gram Kosh* became a success and it was the males who got the much-needed support from the *Kosh* at the time of their going to Punjab. Then Tilaya got acceptance among the male members. She started moving to other villages as well with *Sangathan* activists. The *Sangathan* became stronger and vibrant in Khairi and its annual conference took place there in May 1998. More than 2,000 *Musahars* of the region gathered there to give the organisation more strength.

With all these activities, Tilaya was getting confident about herself and about the strength of the organisation. When a few months

ago, landlords of Khairi village offered her some land as a bribe to keep herself quiet and aloof she not only refused but also thought of this as a vindication of her thinking. But now, the brutal attack and the threat on her life and family has pained her immensely and she silently asks many questions: Why has nothing happened to the aggressors in spite of the new-expressed strength of the *Musahars*? Why does she have to live in hiding? What will happen to her? Who will take care of her damaged house and lifted cattle, that was providing 6-7 litres of milk a day for sale? Will she be able to survive and the organisation able to withstand the pressure?

### Child Labour: Return and Exile

*The large presence of child labour, together with their dispersal across space, is not new in Musahar villages. What is new is that the now expanded informal sector outside the region employs new child labour from these villages as well as the child labour which has been withdrawn from the ill-famous carpet sector.*

Parthaha, a village of the Scheduled Caste community in the Navahatta block of Saharsa district in Bihar is known for child labourers. Only a few years ago, 24 children of the village were found working in the carpet factories in Bhadohi, Uttar Pradesh. Now, amongst them, only one works there, but the rest are also not in the village. They are all in Punjab.

Kamala, a middle-aged woman in the village, gets scared when one asks the name, age and work of her child. 'My son is in Punjab now and he is working in some farm along with the adults of the village. He was in Bhadohi before. But here there is no work, no food, no school,' she says in a hush-hush manner.

Similar is the case of 12-year-old Sikander Sadai. He too was going to Bhadohi, but since the last two years, he has been going to villages in Punjab to work in the rice and paddy fields for at least five-six months every year.

The village, it soon becomes clear, does not want to open its mouth much in this regard. Incidentally, we meet 12-year-old



Brahmadev, who had returned from Punjab only ten days ago. He went to school only for a few months at the age of 7-8 years. Unable to read and write, he has now learnt how to sign. Says he, 'I go either to Punjab or to Delhi, work in the rice mills where I lift sacks full of rice.'

There are many other villages like this one in a country which accounts for the largest number of child labourers in the world. According to the latest 1991 census, some 11.28 million of a total of 250 million children in the 5 to 14 years age group are engaged in child labour in India. However, other estimates of child labour in the country range from some 40 million to over 100 million.

As the problem continues to persist in multiple ways governments, trade unions, non-governmental sections and others try to find out fresh and effective ways for their campaigns and actions. Thus, for the first time, 16 UN Organisations active in the country came together recently to forge a consensus and a common approach for eradicating child labour.

Releasing their common 'UN System in India: Position Paper on Child Labour' and the 'Background Document to the UN System in India: Position Paper on Child Labour' in October 1998, UNDP, FAO, ILO, UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and others underlined, 'While the UN system has its limitations and does not have all the answers to the problem of child labour, a joint strategy enables it to play an important supporting and facilitating role in ongoing and future efforts by the government, local institutions and NGOs, the social partners and the community to combat child labour. Furthermore, a joint strategy on child labour enables it to realize a comprehensive view of the problem, make more effective use of the specialized but complementary nature of the agencies within the UN system in this regard, and ultimately have a greater impact on the problem.'

The joint UN system strategy aims as its first priority to abolish the most exploitative and intolerable forms of child labour. These include child prostitution and trafficking, employment of very young children, child labour in hazardous occupations and

processes and any form of child labour under abusive and exploitative conditions. For this, it outlines its strategies in various sectors—education, working with the government, awareness generation, social sector, research and documentation and administration. An inter-agency working group would be set up to coordinate the joint strategy and this group would be led by ILO.

The joint UN system also asks the Indian government to move ahead quickly to a position where it can ratify ILO Convention 138, concerning minimum age for admission to employment adopted in 1973 and the proposed new ILO Convention on the most intolerable forms of child labour.

But the government is rambling and drifting on all the fronts. The nationwide child labour survey, conducted by the Government of India, seems to be the most hilarious exercise of 1997-98. The Supreme Court in its directive of 11 December 1996, asked the Union government to conduct a nationwide survey on child labour employed in hazardous occupations. As per the order, each State government had to submit a compliance report to the Supreme Court regarding the status of child labour.

The State governments came up with gross underestimations of child labour in their respective States. The Orissa government completed its survey within a month. The survey found only 23,761 children working in hazardous establishments. The survey in Rajasthan showed that there were only 8,000 child labourers in the State. Uttar Pradesh has put a figure of 32,000, of which 15,000 are shown as working in hazardous industries. Maharashtra reported only 15,000. West Bengal identified 16,046 child labourers in the State of which 254 were employed in hazardous occupations.

The Supreme Court had also ruled that an employer found employing child labour in contravention of the Child Labour Act, 1986, should pay Rs. 20,000 in respect of each child towards compensation, while the appropriate government was to deposit Rs. 5,000 for each child in case it failed to provide employment to an adult of the family. The total sum of Rs. 25,000 was to be deposited in a 'Child Labour Rehabilitation-cum-Welfare Fund'.

The income from this was to be used for the benefit of children released from employers engaging them in hazardous industries. But this scheme has not been implemented so far.

Children continue to work in many hazardous industries. Deepak Bharti, secretary, *Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Kendra*, a social organisation working in the villages of north Bihar, gives details of a survey conducted in November 1997 by his organisation on the status of child labour in Navahatta block of Saharsa district: 10-year-old Dukhi Sadai, son of Kamal Sadai of Bakunia Purabi village, was working in a carpet weaving unit of Allahabad. He died there, but his father does not know much regarding this. His second son, 13–14 year old Surindra Sadai, continues to work in a carpet-weaving unit at Bhati Baraut, Allahabad. Three more of his children—Bijali Sadai, Ramu Sadai and Ghuran Sadai—had gone to a village in Allahabad in early 1997 to work in the carpet sector and a middleman Suraj Yadav gave Rs. 1,500 as an advance to them.

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

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

In the Bakunia Bichali village, some cases of child labour who had gone to work in the carpet-weaving units of Allahabad district, but have been missing since the last few years come to light. Bindo Sadai is the father of 10-year-old Gugali. 'My son went to work in the Allahabad district in 1996, but now there is no information about him,' narrates the worried father. Another father Bhannu Sadai says the same thing. His 9-year-old son Manoj Kumar went to Bhadohi in 1994–95 but since then he has

lost touch with his son. The local middleman, through whom the children had been taken from the village, has disappeared and the parents don't know what to do in this situation.

From Bhadohi and other places of Uttar Pradesh, to villages in Punjab and Haryana, it seems the same hard life for hundreds of children of Scheduled Caste villages. They have been sent back from one place, to get exiled in another. Those who have not left yet are planning to leave soon. Twelve-year-old Chandra Mohan Kumar of Partaha village has made up his mind. Says he, 'I attended school till Class 4. Then I left. Now I will go to Punjab. What will I do otherwise? What will I eat?'

Even social activist Lakshmi Sadai finds it hard today to continue with her child's education. 'It is difficult. My child was going to school. But now he doesn't because I have no resources,' she says helplessly.

### **There is a Silver Lining even in Storm Clouds**

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

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

Mohan Ram has been going to Punjab for several years. Every year he had to seek the favour of landowners or moneylenders who

readily gave him the money but at exorbitant rates of interest, i.e. 10 to 12 per cent per month.

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

Heaving a sigh of relief, middle-aged widow Katoria of Partaha village, says, 'Thank God! My son is saved.' Emotion chokes her voice. Raising her folded arms, she expresses gratitude to the representative of *Gram Kosh*, seated near her in a commonplace of the village.

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

*Musahars'* debt crisis persists chronically, so much so that Badri Rajak of Barhara village had taken a loan of only Rs. 60. Ten years ago, he paid back Rs. 50 and then last year he had to give his only *bigha* of land as the final payment. Or Suli received a bank notice in the beginning of 1998 to pay back a loan of Rs. 5,000 taken for the purchase of a pump set, whereas he had neither applied nor taken any loan from the bank. Overall, the loan and the interest rates are a crushing burden for thousands of *Musahar* families.

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

situation, it is good to see that most of the *Gram Kosh*s are initiated and managed by women.

The story of *Gram Kosh* goes back to January 1992, when it was started in 20 *Musahar* dominated villages. Now it has spread to 400 villages. Every village has some saving from Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 12,000. A broad estimate says that together they now have a total saving of around Rs. 2 million.

The concept of *Gram Kosh* is quite simple. In every village each family contributes 50 paise a day or 15 rupees a month. Two women in each village jointly take the responsibility of the fund and open an account in the nearby post office or bank. Then every family gets its own pass book. And when the need arises, any family can take a loan for one year, six or three months on a 2 per cent monthly interest rate. The message is spread simply: Change life by your own resources. Make your own organisation. Save 50 paise everyday.

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

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

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

Seeing the pass books of individual members of the *Kosh* in villages it becomes clear that families have taken loans for marriage, medicines, house construction and for train tickets to Panjab. They regularly deposit their contributions, mostly on a

monthly basis and also, in a majority of the cases, the rate of return is timely and there is not a single defaulter. Garvi Devi in Sirpur Musahari village even claims that she deposits more than the stipulated money and thus she is entitled to more benefits.

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

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

### **Namaskar Bhaijee!**

*During the past few years, there has been a noticeable growth of different forms of collective action among the Musahars. These developments are largely outside the mainstream institutions of politics and the State and they raise important questions about the distribution and legitimacy of power relations in many spheres. But they do more than this. They express grievances and uncertainties about everyday life as well as challenge the deep, but less visible power relationships crystallised in their shared conventions and sense of normalcy. This also shows the multiple ways in which movements contribute to greater expressions of individuals.*

*Namaskar Bhaijee* is the word of greeting one hears in several Dalit villages and *tolas* from all ages of people. They do not fold

their hands. They do not bend their bodies. They do not call anybody *Huzur*, *Sahib* or Sir. But they are very prompt with their newfound word so it keeps getting repeated in village after village and haunts the heart.

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

'*Musahars* and Mallahs not only say *Namaskar Bhaijee*. They now sit on chairs when they go to government officials to petition or meet them. They eat in the same utensils. This was not the case in the late 1980s and still is not the case where their organisations are not present. These are key words and key expressions, which by their use and spread mark the distinctive channellisation of their new energy, faith and thought. Such key words and expressions have symbolic values, which exert much influence on the nature and direction of *Musahars*' emancipation,' he explains further.

When *Lok Shakti Sangathan* was formed in Balbhadrapur village, Jhanjharpur, on 11 October 1992, the birthday of Jai Prakash Narayan, its initiator Deepak Bharti had very little idea about the issues which needed to be taken up, except his own experiences, as he had himself been subject to endless exploitation by the local moneylenders. Having taken only Rs. 70 from a Brahmin, he had to pay back hundreds of rupees for a number of years. All his income earned from selling tea and spices in a road corner was cornered in this. The 1974 students' movement that broke in Bihar had a deep impact on him in his young days. He also had exposure to several facets of exploitation of Dalits as



a journalist, working and writing in newspapers on issues related to them. Thus came the vision of *Gram Kosh*.

'The exploitation of Dalits has many dimensions, related with land, water, indebtedness, bonded work and gender. A lot of land exists, but they have none. The whole region is famous for a large number of tanks, but the poor have no right over them. There are various hidden forms of bonded labour existing in the region, where if you take a loan and don't pay it regularly, you are obliged to do some work free. Or the poor don't get loans unless they do some work free for the landlord. But the most severe form of exploitation is taking loans from moneylenders, when it takes generations to repay them,' explains Bharti.

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

'The government programmes and policies must be contested and reconstructed. They give goats and cattle, but where do Dalits have the land to feed their goats? Their goats and cattle are being taken into custody creating a source of permanent tension between the landowners and the landless. They give some relief at the time of drought and floods, but they hardly give any productive assets, or capital or resources, on which the Dalits can build their lives, without the fear of day-to-day survival,' says Deepak Bharti. Both he and the *Sangathan* have had many bitter experiences with the government and its machinery over all these years. Even this year when they rightfully claimed the ownership of *bhoodani* land in Khari village, the police and the local administration made Deepak Bharti, Tilaya Devi and other main activists of the organisation their target. Khari has suffered attacks from landowners continuously and these activists are facing charges/warrants in several cases lodged by the landowners. This

is a particularly bad time, when some of them have been absconding for fear of police repression and arrests.

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

### Deena-Bhadri's Sacrifice is Ours

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

In Moghlaha village of Madhubani district, Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Yadavs are in a majority; and Chamars, Mallahs, Doms and *Musahars* are few, around 30, in number. All Dalits are agricultural, migrant or construction labourers. At the same time, within the village, they have also been doing some work traditionally. Suppose a cattle dies in the village, it is the duty of a Chamar to lift the dead body and throw it away outside the village. If there is a feast at the time of a marriage or the last rites have to be performed the Doms clean up the mess after every shift of food.

An incident occurred a few years ago regarding this traditional work, a villager remembers. A Brahmin was constructing his house and he asked a Chamar to come for a day's work. That day the Chamar had to go to some other village to see his relatives and he expressed his inability. The Brahmin got furious and he called a meeting of all Brahmins of the village on the same day. The meeting took three decisions: Chamars will not be given

any work; their cattle will not be allowed in Brahmin fields; and their women will not be allowed to cut grass or to collect dry leaves in the fields and land of Brahmins.

Chamars got quite scared with this course of development. They were also facing several day-to-day difficulties. Incidentally, a Brahmin's buffalo died in the village. The Chamars then refused to throw it outside the village, and nobody else in the village was ready to perform the work. This was seen as a crisis among the village elders and thus a meeting of the villagers was called. By that time, the feeling that they would suffer immensely if they were scattered was gaining momentum among the Dalits, and in the meeting they all said in one voice that Brahmins' unilateral decision to boycott Chamars was unjust and the traditional ways of village living, where one person needs another, should be restored again. Whether the Brahmins got scared, or they had an urgent need, or some of them thought that the death of a buffalo was God's punishment for a wrong decision, the meeting decided to lift the boycott on Chamars.

But this was not the end. Some time after this episode came the elections. This time also, the Brahmins and Bhumihars started capturing polling booths. However, they were met with some resistance from a few of the rich among the Backward Castes. There were violent clashes, where both sides seemed prepared with arms and ammunition. The Brahmins and Bhumihars left the scene, but before leaving some of their youth blasted a bomb, though without any damage. The police came and the Brahmins lodged complaints against the Dalits, with the purpose of creating terror.

Some youth of the Backward Castes came forward in support of the Dalits. They assured the Dalits that the village would collectively fight for their cases. For this purpose, they even formed a *Nav Nirman Kalyan Samiti* for collection of funds. The *Samiti* collected funds and started taking up some other issues like installing tube wells for drinking water and hiring unemployed youth to impart education to village children, etc. The *Samiti* also started organising Hindu festivals and ceremonies.

The Brahmins and Bhumihars got restive on seeing the activities of the *Samiti* and decided on their part to construct a Hanuman temple. The construction began with a ceremony, but soon there was a dearth of funds. They approached the *Samiti* for collaborating in the building of the temple, with the promise that the name of the *Samiti* would be displayed in the temple. The *Samiti* accepted this and supported the construction.

The temple was built. The statue of Hanuman was installed. But the name of the *Samiti* was not displayed. The Dalits say that in spite of their repeated requests, the Brahmins always evaded this. They felt cheated and sharp differences surfaced within the *Samiti* regarding the future course of action. The *Samiti* also got defunct in this process.

Identities of various castes and communities are being negotiated in multiple ways in this village, depending on social and economic needs. 'Harijans have always been considered impure, and Brahmins would not like to be touched even by their shadows,' complains a local villager. But then I saw a Brahmin landowner touching the body of a Chamar while having a conversation with him in the same village. I asked the Brahmin, 'Have things changed here?' He replied, 'Now there is no labourer found in the village. Everybody goes out. If I behave like this, they get happy and only then do they come to work.'

A young Dalit of the same village says that he would never take up the job being done by his father, i.e. to lift and throw away the dead bodies of cattle. The old father contests him and says that he would have to do it after his death. Otherwise from where else would he get Rs. 150-200 for work like this? The son however shows his clear disapproval and emphasises that he would prefer to go to Patna or Muzzafarpur to pull a rickshaw than to lift dead cattle.

Khairi village under Lakhanaur police station stands shattered, as armed Yadav landlords attacked *Musahars*, ransacked their huts and took away whatever cattle and other belongings they had. *Musahars* and Yadavs, both lodged police complaints against each other, alleging provocation and attack by the other

The police did not take action in spite of *Musahars*' reported fears of being attacked. Now there is a police camp in the village, but they are arresting people from both sides and there has been no recovery of looted cattle or other goods.

One hears contradictory voices from the *Musahars*. Charitra Sadai, who was seriously injured in the attack, says in a disillusioned tone that it was the people of the *Lok Shakti Sangathan*, and not the police, who took the injured to Darbhanga hospital and arranged food and necessary things for them. At the same time, a local activist comments, 'Police came and they are now camping here. They have lodged our complaint. All this is happening because of Laloo Yadav's regime. Otherwise we would have got a worse deal, as was happening in the previous regimes.' He gets wide nods from other villagers gathered there.

Bakunia Bichali village is in Saharsa district and is far away from Khairi. But the *Musahars* in this village know about the Khairi incident and would certainly take part in the forthcoming protest programmes of *Musahars*. In one of their meetings organised in the village, they are sitting under two flags, hoisted on two long bamboos. The two flags symbolise their two Gods—Deena and Bhadri, who were brothers. The two *Musahar* brothers sacrificed their lives for the cause of their community in ancient times. 'Every year in June, we remember Deena-Bhadri. In small groups, we go from house-to-house, village-to-village to collect rice or paddy, so that their memory is kept alive. They are remembered because they suffered and sacrificed. They are our only Gods. Their sacrifice is ours. The suffering of Khairi is ours,' says Domi Sadai in a forthright manner.



## *A Dalit Organisation in the Making*

How long is 5 seconds? Long enough for a woman farm labourer of Khari village, in the Madhubani district of Bihar, to be beaten up so brutally that her broken head bleeds profusely. How long is 60 minutes? Long enough for a village of 60 families of landless farm labourers to be razed to the ground and their belongings destroyed in a daylight attack by armed groups. How long is 24 hours? Long enough for a displaced and terrorised village to know that the attackers would not be arrested, and the law and administration would not come forward to save them. How long is 7 days? Long enough for the landless farm labourers of Khari and of the whole district, to respond to the attack and to pursue the agenda set by their organisation, which we now know as the *Lok Shakti Sangathan*. How long is 9 months? Long enough to see that the destitute of this region can not only survive but also gain strength through the fervour and struggle of their organisation.

It was 4 July 2000 when the attack came. Since then, 15 long months have passed, but Khari, a village of Scheduled Caste landless labourers, still lives in those tortuous days. They were battered in minutes so that their journey of attempting to establish legal rights in land through their organisation could be halted. Various struggles intertwined at once: Those to ensure the survival of their lives; those to save the organisation and its activists; those to establish the legitimacy of a need for house and land; those to interpret how that need can continue to be satisfied against all odds and those to secure the gains of their struggles. Many questions had to be confronted: What are the micro-macro scenarios that a rural labour organisation has to contend with in its attempt to organise and to claim a piece of land? What forms

of organisation and struggle can help establish landless labourers effective command over the land? Is organisation at all possible in the face of brutal repression? How can a local and small organisation get support from outside? What would sustain and strengthen a rural labour organisation in its endeavour to bargain with the landowners, the local administration and the State?

Khari is a village of Musahars, Chamars and Yadavs. There are 60 houses of Musahars, five of Chamars and 100 of Yadavs. The houses of Musahars and Chamars are located in a corner of the village. Yadavs are the new landowners of this region and in the last decade or so they have either purchased or forcibly occupied a vast tract of agricultural land. Musahars and Chamars have been working as agricultural labourers or sharecroppers initially in the fields of Bhumihars and now in the fields of Yadav landowners. In recent years, however, there has been a visible change in their economic status in that they have lost whatever land they got under some governmental programmes, forcing them to migrate in large numbers to Punjab and Haryana.

Traditionally, the Musahars had not been organised in any mass organisation or trade union. However, with the formation of the *Lok Shakti Sangathan* in the late 1980s, they were mobilised to an extent over issues of iniquitous land holdings, money lending and social injustice, and things began to change. 'We are Musahars. People also say: You are Musahars. What can you speak about? Dig the soil, live in the soil and continue to sleep there. Whatever you get, you eat. Even if you don't get anything, you lie down silently. Give service to the world, but don't ever think that the world is going to give you anything in return. It is a sin to expect anything in life. But now our mistake is simply that we have refused to think like that and have started thinking in new ways. We have started saying to ourselves: We have been landless since generations, but why can we not build a house? Not a house of our dreams, but just a house of mud and thatched roof, where we can just sit and sleep reasonably well,' says Tilaya Devi, an activist of the village who was the main target of attack by the landowners. Fortunately she was out of the

village at that time attending a meeting of the *Sangathan* and so escaped.

There is land, and more land in and around Khari village. There is private land, ceiling, surplus or public common land and *bhoodani* land. Whatever be its status, the owners are few and can be counted on the fingers of one hand. But they own all the hundreds and thousands of acres of land. 'All this land belongs to a Lokpati Singh of Lakhnaur village; it is almost 1,300 *bighas*,' says a villager, pointing towards the vast land surrounding the village which stretches for as long as we can see, and beyond. Lokpati Singh has been able to keep all his surplus land by using fictitious names. He has given some land in *bhoodan*, but has never allowed the allotted person to come on it. There are others like him.

Not 1,300, but only 13 *bighas* of land has become the bone of contention between the landless and the landowners. Lokpati Singh's 13 *bighas* of *bhoodani* land had been under water for several years, but in the floods of 1987 it came up and became fit for cultivation. Though this plot of land was very close to the houses of Musahars and Chamars, two powerful Yadavs of Khari—Sukhi Yadav and Yogendra Yadav—captured it.

Musahars and their organisation decided to claim this land, which in any case had been due to them and in October 1997, all the 60 families came and built their houses on it. Why houses? 'Our families have expanded, but the houses have not. We did not have enough space to sleep in our old houses. We have no land anywhere else to build new houses. That is why we decided to use this land,' explains Bachla Sadai, who has a 12 member family of two sons living in a small house.

'This government is good for nothing and is unable to give us any land. Our representatives are totally oblivious to our "invisible" lives. The officials are so caught up in their world of power that they do not see our harsh realities. What does one do in such a situation? Why should we refrain from even the minimum assertion—to garner our strength and plough the land, raise our crops, build our houses and somehow "live". Those



responsible for giving us the legal papers should fulfil their duties and do so. How many doors will we knock on?' asks Deepak Bharti, Convener of *Lok Shakti Sangathan*.

There are other villages of Yadavs, Brahmins, Musahars and Chamars. But nowhere else have the labourers faced this type of brutal physical attack, nor have the landowners reacted in this extremely aggressive manner. Everyone present in the houses—women and children, young and old—were attacked. Their newly built houses, utensils and other items were damaged. Their valuable belongings, even cows, oxen and buffaloes were taken away. They were threatened with murder, if they and their organisation continued with the agitation and occupation of the land. Later, after the attack, all the main activists of the organisation—11 of them—were implicated in several cases under IPC 120, 147, 148, 323 and 384. However, when the Musahars went to the police station to lodge complaints against the attackers, only some minor cases were registered. The main attackers were not arrested, nor the forcibly taken away valuables of the poor recovered.

What has been recovered in these 15 months through a series of memorandums, demonstrations, rallies, *yatras* and hunger strikes in the district is that the Musahars have rebuilt their houses on the same land and it has remained in their occupation. The administration has now been forced to move to determine the legal status of these 13 *bighas*. The organisation is articulating many other legal demands of the rural poor of Khari, and of the other villages in the region: The land covered under the Ceiling Act and *bhoodan* should be distributed and actual possession should be established; the poor and landless should be given plots for housing; public common land and governmental land should be made free from the clutches of landowners and the embankments on Kamala river should be destroyed etc.

Even though it faces huge risks, this organisation of rural poor has been moving in several different arenas—the village, the region, the law and the State—and across the lines drawn by class, caste, culture and so on. What is also certain is that this

organisation is there to stay. 'How long and how much must we wait so that the flows of social justice or social cohesion may come to us one day? We have now decided not to wait. Nobody will take note of us on their own,' reads a pamphlet of the *Sangathan*, asserting that it will force others to listen to them.



Village Gramin Bank—An initiative by Musahars of Bihar, India, 2003.