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Original Article

Strained Identity: Cultural and Religious Rituals of a Musahar Community



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Abstract

This article portrays the Musahars, untouchable by tradition, as observing their cultural and religious rituals despite strains of change surrounding their identity. One of the diverse ethnic minorities of the Tarai plains of Nepal, the community exhibits a distinct set of characteristics, meriting ethnographic attention. Past studies have looked into their socio-economic situation but their cultural and religious practices, markers of their identity, are less studied. In that context, this paper has done the desk and field reviews of the cultural and religious traits seen in a small Musahar cluster of Province 1. The objectives were to describe the community's everyday practices, what its members eat and drink, how they observe their life-cycle rituals, their feast and festivals, dresses and ornaments in light of literature, field observation and intensive interviews. The primary and secondary data are used to describe the everyday practices and strains of change in the Musahar identity. Interviews were held with four participants sampled purposively from Ward 1 of Biratnagar Metropolis, in Morang. The findings of this paper are expected to be useful for researchers interested in this particular community as well as for planners and policymakers who seek to bring the downtrodden community into the mainstream of development.

Keywords: *Musahar; Dalit; Minority; Cultural practice; Identity*

Introduction

Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) defined 'minority' as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatments, who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. The

term 'minority' is applied to various groups who hold a few or no positions of power. In Nepal, numerically, minorities are Raute, Chepang, Kusunda, Thakali, Majhi, Duma, Lepcha, and so on. Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and Tharu also lack access to state privileges. Indigenous as well as women and Dalits are minorities from the perspective of access in the exercise of

power, position and opportunity of the state (Tamang, 2062 BS, p. 3). Musahars also belong to the Tarai Dalit minorities. They are low-caste groups and also fall in the untouchable category. They have the practice of killing and eating *musa* (mouse or rat) because of which they are called Musahars, the ‘rat eaters’.

The Hindu religion places people in four categories in descending order of their ascribed social status; the *Brahman*, *Chhetri*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the people from the group of Sudra, or the Kami, Sarki and Damai communities. These people are historically treated as untouchable by higher caste groups and are also known as the Dalit communities. Communities of Musahar, Jhangar, Dhobi, Gaine, Satar and Chamar also belong to the Dalit groups of people (Pokhrel, 2016). Nesfield (1888) suggests that Musahera (another variant of the term Musahar) derives from *masu* (flesh) and *hera* (seeker), possibly a more comprehensive term than ‘rat catcher’. Bista (1967), in the course of writing about Bahun, Rajput and other Tarai people, wrote that as a traditional occupation, Mallaha’s job is to do fishing, Koiri grows vegetables and sells them, Lohar makes *halo* and *phali* and Khatabe or Musahar is engaged in the

agricultural field basically as wage labour. By this, it is known that Musahars are also called Khatabe. Gyawali and Khanal (2062 BS) write about the situation of the hill Dalits, mainly, Kami, Damai, Sarki, Dhobi, etc. They say Terai Dalits, mainly, Mushahar, Satar, Chamar and Dom etc. are suffering discrimination. (Gyawali & Khanal, 2062 BS).

The Sanskritized Musahars claim a superior position in relation to the rest of the community (Kunnath, 2013). Musahars, one of the largest Mahadalit castes, is regarded as the lowest in the caste hierarchy (Kunnath, 2013). In India, Musahars are designated as a scheduled caste. They are found in abundant numbers in Purnea, Darbhanga and many other districts of northern Bihar. In Morang district, they are found in places like Rangeli and Amgachhi (Dahal, 1978). In Ramayana, Ma Sabari is mentioned as a devotee of Rama. The Musahars claim her as one of their ancestors (Kunnath, 2013). They are believed to have permanently settled in the region four centuries ago (Gautam & Thapa Magar, 1994).

In Nepal, the Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf established an ethnographic writing

tradition by way of his book (*The Sherpas of Nepal*, 1994). Likewise, Dor Bahadur Bista (1967) wrote a book *People of Nepal*, which is a rich ethnographic study of Nepal. Dahal (1985) has made a study of social change among Athpahariya Rais of Dhankuta. But these studies have focused on the socio-economic aspects more than the change in the cultural and religious identity of the communities concerned. The present study makes a case for looking into this research gap.

A cursory review of the past studies shows that there is not much written about the change in cultural and religious practices of the Musahar people of the study area in Morang district. So the focus of this study is to delve into the pointers of cultural and religious identity of Musahars, who belong to the minorities of the nation as well as being identified as Dalit and untouchable. They also fall under the poverty line, as other studies have shown. However, even as they are economically poor, Musahars have their rich culture, custom and tradition. But the lack of knowledge about their culture and custom as well as their strained identity has placed them under the shadow of general inattention by researchers and policymakers. The law gives equal opportunity to all

citizens but the Musahars in the study area are still facing discriminatory behaviour from the high-caste people as well as from the state. After the restoration of democracy, people thought there would be the overall development of the nation but they were wrong and the conditions remained the same in general. It has also been seen that the change in their cultural and religious identity occurred under the influence of other caste and community over some time without any documentation as such. So, in this context, it was important to study about these Musahars and describe the strains of change in their cultural and religious identity even as it would only be a small effort towards addressing a big gap in the literature. In this modest effort, I have followed some theoretical perspectives as mentioned below.

Several anthropologists have studied different tribes, ethnic and caste groups, their cultures and cultural patterns and changes. Malinowski (1922) was the first anthropologist to conduct field work through the native language of the community under study. Mead's book *Cultural Pattern and Technological Change* (1955) deals with the changing aspects of Manus life. Robert Redfield wrote a book *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941). One of the

contemporary trends in cultural anthropology is studying native cultures from the native's point of view. Jane Collier and Milt Thomas combined the ethnography of communication and social construction to frame the properties of cultural identity. High-status individuals (or the perception of the higher status) influenced those of lower status (Berger et al., 1977). According to the unilinear evolutionist (Morgan, 1877; Tylor, 1871), culture evolves and develops in a unilinear way and from simple to complex. Using this perspective, I found that these Musahars developed from a tribal community to being settled as a village community. This idea resonates with collective identity. According to Hall (1996), "Collective identity is about how those notions of self- and other- 'grouping' are formed inside and outside of the individual and impact the formation of social categories of belonging" (as cited in Urrieta, 2018, p. 4).

Using this perspective, I have analysed the information about how these Musahars have introduced themselves through their own traditional, cultural and religious activities. The meaning of acculturation has varied over time, within and outside of cultural anthropology (Chun et al., 2003;

Rudmin, 2003), but at present, the term connotes the loss of the culture of a minority group and its replacement by the culture of the majority group. I have also applied this approach to examine the influence of high caste Hindus in the Musahar community of the study area and what kind of change has been seen in their original culture. The cultural change is an individual as well as a collective process; in contact with other cultures, individuals will survive and if individuals have recognized similarities between themselves and their original culture and the new culture (Richerson & Boyd, 2005, p. 107). I have also used this perspective to know the changing patterns of culture and religion of Musahars of the study area.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the Musahar community by their own cultural and religious activities while examining any change in their cultural and religious practices.

This first section introduces the research agenda and outlines its purpose. The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows. Methodology section highlights the approach and procedure followed while undertaking this study. In the section that follows, I have presented the research findings in

line with the description of food and drink, dress and ornaments, and rite and rituals of the community. This section also embeds my analysis and interpretation and intertwining of the field text with relevant literature. In the final section, I have summarized and concluded the study on the strained identity of the Musahars in Biratnagar Metropolis.

Methodology

Cultural anthropology studies culture, norms and values of any caste and community. In general, there are some anthropological data collection methods -- participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and textual analysis. I have only used participant observation and in-depth interviews to study this community of Biratnagar Metropolis. Moreover, as a sociological researcher, I have also applied reflective and systematic thinking (Dhakal, 2019) to understand the social world of Musahars.

The observation was schedule in the field and carried out in various steps. Its frequency differed over time during the fieldwork. Musahars from Ward One of Biratnagar in Morang District were

chosen as the participants for ease of access and of establishing rapport.

The duration of the fieldwork was 3 months, covering the period from June 1 to August 30, 2017. In the course of fieldwork, I frequently observed the rites and rituals, dress and ornament, food and drinks, religion, feasts and festivals, etc. of the community under study.

I conducted in-depth interviews with four participants from whom I collected their cultural narratives, with a special focus on one theme with each participant. All the selected respondents were above 30 and married people. They knew about their culture and religion. The first participant was Jhunu Kumari Sada, aged 35, housewife (5/6/2017), from whom I got focused narratives of birth ritual. Likewise, the second participant was Ghurmy Rishidev, aged 60 (10/7/2017) from whom, besides general cultural practices, I got detailed information about food and drink and death ritual and marriage ceremony. Similarly, my third participant was Kaluram Sada, aged 45, from whom I got information about the birth ritual and ceremony as well as about the feast and festival (5/8/2017). Another respondent was Syam Sada Dhami, aged 70, who provided me with information about a

religious folk song and its meaning. Adhering to “researcher integrity” and “duty of care” (Dhakal, 2016), pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity of my participants.

All the collected data had been managed manually (including transcribing, translating, categorizing) and analysed thematically. Suitable photographs were taken during the field visits with due permission from the participants for illustration, reinforcement and evaluation of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

First of all, I have tried to make sense of the cultural aspects of the Musahar community of the study area. The general cultural characteristics of these Musahar people are food and drink, dress and ornament, life cycle etc. The first classic definition of culture was given by E. B. Tylor, in his book entitled *‘Primitive culture’*. He defined ‘culture as that complex whole which includes custom, tradition, belief, art, moral, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871, p. 1). Cultural symbols consist of “tools, implements, utensils, clothing, ornaments, customs, institutions, beliefs, rituals, art, language, etc.” (White, 1959,

p. 3). Going by these definitions of culture, the author of this article has discussed the main cultural aspects of the Musahars of the study area below.

Food and Drink

Food is the most essential thing for human beings. Every society has its own food habits. Similarly, the participants in the study area have certain food habits. Their main food is rice but they also take other types of food like wheat, corn, etc., although rare. A participant said:

We do not take rice, pulse, and vegetable at one go. If we cook pulse, we do not cook the vegetable.
(Ghurmy Rishidev, July 10, 2017)

When I asked about the causes, he told me that they had no time for ‘preparing so many things at one go’. They might have chosen to do so also because of their poor economic condition. They cook a lot of rice at one time and keep it for another time. The lunch of children is prepared or cooked in the evening of the previous day. In this community, both men and women smoke bidi, a local unrefined tobacco product, and they sometimes smoke cigarettes, which cost more. Generally, they cannot afford for cigarettes and smoke ‘*bidi*’ and local ‘*choor*’ (unrefined tobacco). They drink

alcohol. It is said that the main reason for their poor economic condition is the popularity of alcohol in their society. Generally, these Musahars are non-vegetarian but some who call themselves ‘VAISNAB’ by religion are vegetarians. It is surprising that even though they are Dalits they do not take food and water touched by other castes. They follow the Vaisnab rules according to the Hindu religion. Vaishnav Musahars wear *kanthi* (garland made of basil plant) around their neck. They thought themselves to be pure and did not eat any kind of meat. But the Hindu caste system has placed them in the Untouchable Dalit caste category.

Dress and Ornament

Dresses and ornaments are very important aspects of the cultural identity of a caste or community. In the course of my observation, I have found that the Musahars of the study area have their own kind of dress and ornament. Most Musahars, being flatland dwellers are seen dressing themselves in a way which is somewhat similar to that of the other inhabitants in the Tarai plains. Like most of the Tarai people, the Musahar males wear *dhoti* and *kurtha* while females wear *phariya* and *cholo*. But according to their social customs, a woman should

not wear the *cholo* after she gives birth to a child. She only wears *phariya* (saree) by which she covers her chest also. The other Tarai communities like Tharu, Danuwar etc. are also found to be wearing somewhat similar dresses except for some fine distinctions that their different cultures and customs demanded. But nowadays most of the married Musahar women have also begun to wear *cholo* after giving birth to a child. This may be because of the influence of other high caste cultures of the area. Because of their poor economic conditions, Musahars are not wearing ornaments, particularly of gold. But some can be seen wearing ornaments of silver and small pieces of wooden and bamboo artwork. The married Musahar women are decorated with the art of ‘tattooing’ called *kodha* and *godha*.

Figure 1: A participant showing her tattoo.



Tattooing is done in their different parts of the body like arms, wrists, chests and above the ankles, which includes the drawing of birds, money (paisa) and trees etc. Traditionally it is done by the skilled, aged and experienced ladies of Musahar, Tharu and Danuwar communities. In these communities, tattooing is the main trait which distinguishes a married woman from an unmarried girl.

Rites and Rituals

Rites and rituals are typically socio-cultural dynamics that shape the lifeworld of a particular community. Rites are the cultural celebration of changes (e.g. birth, death, etc.). Ritual is the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition, it is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies (Penner, 2016). Therefore, by ritual, I understand specific cultural or traditional practices observed by different communities. In my research context, it refers to the specific ways of being, doing and experiencing different life-events by the Musahar community.

Birth and death are universal rites for all beings. But human beings have so many rites and rituals in their life period. In

Hindu culture, there are 16 types of ritual performed at various stages of life, such as birth, *mundan*, *pasni*, marriage and death. Most castes and communities of Nepal, however, have their own ways of observing these rituals. Musahars also have their own distinct ways to mark important rites and rituals such as birth, naming, marriage, and death.

One day, when I went to collect the data in my field study, I found no respondent I had selected for my interview. After some time, I came to know that they had gone to their relative's home for a birth ritual. I also went there to find that Jhun Kumari Sada, one of the respondents, had given birth to a baby girl six days ago. She was wearing a new sari and was getting ready for worship, with a lota (water pot), and dubo (a type of grass), in her hands. So, I waited for her to be free for the interview for half an hour. When she had finished the ritual, I asked her why she had to do it. She told me: 'It's our birth ritual for purifying me and my child from the birth pollution.'

To my other question as to why she was giving birth to a baby girl although she already had two

daughters, she replied: 'The baby girl is a god's gift for me so, how can I ignore her?'

For Musahars like her, the birth of the child means the blessing of the god, no matter whether it is a girl or a boy. They hardly seem gender-biased. This indeed is a good practice in this community. Sadly, however, they are deprived of hospital facilities in most cases. Usually, the community is found living in farms, away from city centres. Provided they have transport, a few pregnant mothers are taken to hospitals for delivery. But normally it is the rural midwives who attend to women during their delivery at home itself once they know for sure that a child is being born around a certain date. These midwives belong to the *Chamar* community. The same *sudini* (midwife) provides the mother and new baby with the pre-and-post-delivery care such as removing the umbilical cord, cleaning the baby and the mother, washing their clothes and bathing them.

According to respondent Kaluram Sada, they observe the birth practices 'for six days, in some cases, for 12 days, and for yet others, for a month. But all observe a ritual in which the mother of the newborn baby keeps a *lota* (a water pot) with green paddy and ale plants along

with *dubo* (a type of grass) and turmeric plant in five places at the sources of water, such as wells and taps. Worship is offered in all five places and the *lota* is emptied at the main source. 'We believe that the process until the mother empties the pot should not be seen by others.'

Whatever the reason, this ritual allows mothers to fetch water and give it to others for drinking-meaning that the mother is completely free of the birth pollution after the ritual.

Musahars also name their babies-but on the sixth day itself. Names are often derived from the name of the day the baby is born or the month or so on. Although there is not much to be done during the naming of a Musahar child, the mother and the newborn are bathed and dressed in new robes. A delicacy made by mixing different items (like maize, wheat, rice, barley, beans, etc.) and cereals is then distributed to relatives. The mother and the child are also given to eat the sweet food known as *satanja* in Musahar culture.

The *chhyawar* (another ritual) offers a boy his membership into manhood. Many cultures observe the ceremony for boys in somewhat similar ways. Musahars also observe this for the same

reasons but only a few complete the ritual. After the boy is old enough (that could be 6 or 7 years or more) his head gets a clean shave amidst some rituals like worshipping the Musahar's tantric deities along with other deities. The boy is kept on his mother's lap and the barber begins to cut his hair. The belief is that the hair should not fall on the ground. The mother, therefore, spreads her *sari*, collects all hair and if possible, takes it to a river to be washed away. If there is no river nearby, the hair is taken to such places as bamboo bushes where it is not easily seen. In doing so, Musahars believe, the boy's hair will keep on growing as long as the river flows or the bamboo grows. On this occasion, they organize small feasts to feed their relatives. This way the ritual ends like in many other communities.

Marriage is "a more or less durable connection between male and female members lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring" (Bhushan & Sachdeva, 2003, p. 74). Marriage has its own importance and is indispensable for procreation. Each race, society and community has its own type of marriage and associated culture to complete it. So, Musahars have their own ways of marriage. It normally takes seven days, which begins

with a proposal and ends with the coming of the girl into the boy's home. For the generally poor Musahars, the 7-day marriage looks rather odd economically (Gautam & Thapa Magar, 1994).

About the steps of the marriage ceremony. Ghurmy Rishidev, one of the respondents, explained to me that, in their community, first of all, the girl's father goes to a prospective groom's house with friends and makes a proposal with the groom's guardians or parents. There they are given food before they return. Later, after both sides acquire information and like each other's family and home, a team of four to five people go to the girl's house to see the girl. The prospective groom also accompanies. Provided that the boy, from his side, likes the girl, a symbolic feast takes place where foods are served and both sides exchange clothes and some money. Before the boy's group returns, a day is fixed for the second step. While fixing the date, the difference in generations between the families of the girl and the boy is found out and details are sought to avoid blood relations. Although their tradition, myths and tales say marriage between two families within nine familial generations has to be prevented that has not been practical to adhere to.

So Musahar marriages are found taking place if the two sides are as far as four generations away while ensuring that no marriage takes place within three generations. After considering the family and generation factors, the two families are regarded bound in marital ties. Both sides exchange gifts again, work on the date of marriage and discuss how it would take place.

Singing and dancing mark the first day, songs highlight love and wish a happy conjugal life. On the second day, a lotion of turmeric, *pina* (a by-product of mustard oil) and oil is prepared in each house. The lotion is applied to both the bride and the groom in a process which Musahars call *aptan*. Sisters and sisters-in-law handle the job, as well as bathing the bride and groom in their respective homes. It is usually the elder sister in the girl's home doing so. On the third day, the boy goes to the nearby source of water with a mixture of gram, fine grains of rice (the *aruwa* variety), oil and vermilion powder. The girl does the same in her home. Both take bath and get ready to offer worship in their respective places. They create a mound of the mixture for worshipping in a process called *mitkor*, when other women join in and sing dedicational and devotional songs. The revelry takes place with the

boy and the girl in their respective places surrounded by singing women before they return home from the water source. The fourth day is the actual day of marriage. It is also called *jantijane din*, the day of taking out the marriage procession. Accompanied by friends, the boy and the girl go from door to door in their respective villages where they are offered gifts of things like rice and money. As the boy arrives, along with his team, he keeps the presents for the girl including ornaments, foods and spices in the middle of the courtyard at the girl's home. Villagers offer the boy rice, money and other things in the gift. Perhaps, this is meant for villagers to see the girl's match in a process called *dura lagaune*. Later the girl's side gives the boy ornaments, shoes, umbrella, dhoti, shirt, and so on in the form of what is known as *tilak*. Most items are those already promised by the girl's side. The exchange takes place in the *jagge* (or, *mandap* – the place where the marriage takes place), which looks like a small hutment, built in a specific way. Some *jaggas* are made of bamboo wickers while others use the whole round bamboo itself. Paddy stalks and straws are also used to surround the *mandap* in a few instances. Inside the *mandap*, the girl puts on dresses presented by the boy based on 'from up' principle. What is

known as *okhal* is brought in the *mandap* to carry on the rest of the ritual.

Fathers of both the bride and groom take out five grains each of rice and paddy from the *okhal* to be tied to the end of their respective children's clothes. Interestingly, everyone looks on as to who finishes first. *Mandap's* work goes on. A branch of a mango tree is brought along with its leaves, a thin thread is used to measure the height of the bride and the thread is wound around the branch in the belief that it would help maintain unity in the Musahar community. Then two leaves are taken out. Names of fathers and forefathers, up to three generations, are written down separate leaves on behalf of the bride and the groom. The leaf bearing the names on the girl's side is tied in the boy's wrist and the other one is tied in the girl's. Next, the actual ceremony of putting vermilion powder follows in the auspicious time worked out according to religion. Five of girl's relatives put above the girl's head a 2-meter long white cloth without the girl seeing it. Right then, the girl and the boy are given a bowl each of yoghurt, along with some *dubo*, paddy and turmeric. Five people from the boy's side snatch the bowl and sprinkle its content on the boy and those from the girl's side also take away the bowl from him and

sprinkle the contents over the girl. Then oil is applied on to the girl's hair to be combed clean leaving the partition called *siundo* necessary for vermilion powder. The groom takes the powder in his left hand and uses a wooden spoon with his right hand to apply the vermilion. What worries him is the fear that some of it might fall on the ground which is against the belief. But as a caution, a wooden bowl is kept beneath the girl's head while the boy puts the powder on the girl's head for five times.

The next is the barber's turn. He is brought in the *mandap* where he cuts, instead of hair, a little rash from the small fingers of both the bride and the groom. The blood that comes out is allowed to drop on betel leaves, banana leaves and rice pudding. The groom has to eat the ones with his bride's blood and the bride with her groom's in a process called *li-chu*. After that, the girl's side presents to the boy a new set of clothes to replace the one he is wearing. The barber is given the replaced set. With that, the work at the *mandap* is over and the actual marriage is almost over too.

But the *jantis* (the people of groom's side) sing and dance as they stay at the girl's house for three more days as guests. They give betel and nuts in gifts

to the women who sing and dance from the girl's side. The relatives of the girl also present nuts to the guests, who along with the groom, then return with the bride to the groom's house. The bride is made to stand at the gate with a *tokari* (a wicker basket), in her front. There in the basket is burnt a crab's bone. The heat of the fire is received by those near it and the hot hands placed on the bride's cheeks. Five balls of rice pudding are made and thrown in various five directions. The newly-wed is now permitted into her husband's home but she has a hurdle to cross. Groom's sisters and others are there to slam the doors for her until the bride gives them gifts. Once happy, they take the bride and the groom, by washing their feet into the room where they have to offer worship to their deities. With that, the entire marriage ends.

Ghurmy Rishidev also told me that this applies only in case of proposed or arranged marriages among them. Love marriage, marriage by theft, widow marriage and child marriage are also found among them. Often marriages take place between girls of 12 to 15 and boys of 16 to 18. There is not much age gap between the bride and groom in this community. He himself was only 16

years old at his marriage and his wife was 14 years.

Jhunu Kumari, another participant, informed me that she had had a love marriage at the age of 15 when her would-be-husband was only 17 years.

Musahar marriages, called *sadhi*, in their language, seem slightly different from those of other castes and communities of the study area. The Musahars prefer arranged marriages to other types of marriage. In recent times, they may no longer be rigid about the type of marriage. For practical reasons, of difficulty and economy, they have reduced the genetic link conditions, from nine generations to three generations, where marriages are not permissible as well as bringing down the number of days they would need to complete their marriage ceremonies, from seven to within three or four days. Some Musahar families are found conducting marriage ceremonies in the traditional framework, while significant changes are also occurring side by side over the passage of time.

A strange sense of loss must have gripped everyone while seeing a member of the community suddenly become lifeless. It is for this reason that man has

taken death as a sad event which evokes some different type of feeling than the living world has in store, especially since the prehistoric and mid-stone ages. The tradition of observing certain rites at the death of a member of the community is believed to have started during this period. Hindu religious scriptures have made some rigorous recommendations, which are generally accepted by all castes and communities when one of their members dies. In Buddhist, Jain and other traditions, the rules could be different. For aboriginal communities, the rules may be more different than the rest, because they have their own cultures. But Musahars have more similarities with Hindus than with others in the way they mourn death. Musahars of the study area regard themselves as members of Hindu origin yet some minor cultural differences are there.

Their view about death is that it is a universal truth, that anyone can die any time if God so wishes, and that everyone has to die once he is born. However, as long as one is physically able, one of the respondents, Raghav says, 'One is not afraid of immediate death nor does one wish live to forever'.

Generally, the Musahars bury the dead if they are unable to buy the wood required

for burning the corpse. If they can afford, they cremate the body. As per Jhunu and Raghav, a large majority, almost around 80% burn the dead, whereas others bury the dead (Fieldwork, 2017).

According to the participants of the study area, first of all, the dead body is bathed and wrapped in a new (normally white) cloth. It is mounted on a stretcher-type structure of bamboo and taken to the river banks, in particular, for burial and cremation. A funeral pyre of wood is made to burn the corpse. If it is to be buried, the head is kept to the north of the grave and legs to the south.

A funeral procession is led by a man with a clay pot containing a five-paisa coin, oil, wheat, ale, basil plant etc. The pot is often carried by the one who puts fire in the funeral pyre. Normally it is the son who burns the dead. If not, it is the brother or nephew of the dead. At the time of burning the pyre, camphor and a silver coin or betel are kept in the mouth of the dead body and fire lighted at the end. The belief is that the physical body burns into ashes and the soul is freed to go to heaven or the world beyond. This means these people also believe in divine power like many others. The one who sets the pyre afire does so after taking three rounds of it and finally burning the

mouth of the dead body to end the process. When the body is to be buried, a grave is dug and five *paisa* each is kept in five directions. The clothes and other things carried along with the dead body are thrown near the grave. The people involved in the procession bathe themselves in the river and return home.

By the time the funeral procession returns, at home, women would have finished cleaning the home with water. A *karai* (a type of cooking pot) with burning coal, stones and chilli, kept clockwise five times each, awaits those returning after the funeral. Each of them has to eat some chili before entering the house. On the fourth day, all of them and the male relatives of the dead go to the place of the funeral. Musahar *Vaishnavs*, who wear the *kanthi*, plant basil at the mound and non-*Vaishnav* Musahars make a mound of soil and leave it there. This is called '*chortripalgarne*. On that day, they organize a feast to those who attended the procession with drinks at the home of the dead person.

On the seventh day *kriyaputri*, especially, son of the dead is taken to the river or well. Ale and fire, among other items, are carried in a banana leaf, five balls of the substances are created in

which he pours milk before throwing them into the river or the well. Then he returns home after taking a bath. *Shraddha*, the worship for the dead, is offered on the 12th day. On that day twelve masses called *pinda* are prepared and donations are made to the *marath*, their priest. On the 13th day, he can eat the prohibited terms such as wine and meat. The house is believed to be freed from death pollution from that day. Some of them, however, continue to abstain from the prohibited items even after 13 days until as long as a year. All this shows these Musahars have similar ways of mourning on the death, like any other Hindus, yet there is some influence of other cultures as well.

Although religion and culture are inseparable, beliefs and practices are uniquely cultural. For example, religious rituals (one type of practice) unite believers in religion and separate nonbelievers. Simmel (1950) believed that religious and cultural beliefs develop from one another.

Religion, Feast and Festival

Every caste and community has its own religion, feast and festival which they perform according to their religious

rules. In Nepal, as elsewhere, festivals are celebrated in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of intensity depending upon the locality, economic and social status, education, religious and family background and personal inclination (Anderson, 2010).

Nepali people celebrate various types of feast and festival according to their culture and custom. They worship various gods and goddesses and they enjoy eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. Unlike the other ethnic groups of people, Musahars celebrate feast and festival that are not only related to merry-making and entertainment but also reflect their cultural and religious life. The Musahar celebrate all festivals, but their style of performing a few festivals are different from that of other castes. Musahars mostly celebrate Hindu festivals. The main festivals celebrated by them are Dashain in October, Tihar in November, Phagu in March, *Maghe Sankranti* in February and Krishna Ashtami in September, etc. Except for the females of a few households, they do not worship regularly at home. Although they are Hindus, they worship their own types of deities, such as their *kuldevata* (ancestral god) Dina Bhadri etc. At the same time, some of their worshipping

methods differ from those of other Hindus of Nepal.

These Musahars are found to be unable to trace their earliest ancestry. Some elders in the community claim that Musahars are the descendants of sage Balmiki (the author of the Hindu religious scripture Ramayana). Possibly, Musahars entered Nepal in the third century along with other communities that came from India. They must have settled in the Tarai, which still is their home, by cleaning the forest. Today they are found practising their religion where Musahars appear more inclined to the female deity than her male counterpart. They believe their goddess to be more powerful than the god. Their folk tales, songs and culture support this. Especially, Musahars have been worshipping *Luksiyar, Sursar, Giya, Goriya, Dina* and *Bhadri* as their gods and goddesses. Of them, *Dina Bhadr* is their ancestral deity which is regarded as the symbol of bravery in the community. Two types of deities are believed to be there for Musahars to worship at home and village. *Lusiyar, Sursar, Giya, Goriya* and other Hindu deities fall under what they call *Ghardevata* or home deities. Each Musahar family keeps the idols of these deities in a corner of a

room at home and worships them on a regular basis.

Dina Bhadri is regarded as *Gaundevata* (the village deity) which is placed in the middle of the village every year before villagers offer worship with a lot of jubilation. The village deity, they believe, is the protector of their race.

A Musahar worship is distinct in its processes. But the community is also found to invoke power in similar ways as other communities do by offering goats and pigs in sacrifice, a ready-to-chew betel nut holds special importance among the materials necessary for worship. The priest locally called *dhami* chants verses in a process they call *jhumar* during the *puja* (worship). Besides *dhami*, they have another priest called *marar* whose job is to conduct other social rituals.

Dina Bhadri worship needs a special mention in Musahar worship. First of all, a month of Asar or Magh or Mangsir is chosen for a particular year as per the convenience and consent of the community to offer the worship. In that particular month, villagers decide a particular day, by consent again, for *Dina Badri*. On the day of the worship, villagers take bath early in the morning

and go to the site where *Dina Bhadri* is installed. They clean the area. Sweets and pudding are special delicacies in the form of *prasad* for the day.

Dina Bhadri is surrounded by the villagers irrespective of whether they are young or old. Music of *madal* and *dholak* (drumming instruments) accompanies the verses chanted by the villagers amidst much fun and revelry. Three bamboo poles with red and white flags, put up as the symbol of three deities namely *Dina*, *Bhadri* and *Salahesh*, stand in the midst of all. They are replaced, with new ones only in the following year on the day of *Dina Bhadri*. Once the poles are replaced, villagers offer worship with flowers, incense and so on, that they have brought for the puja. Then verses rent the air as the villagers led by *dhami* (their priest) in front begins a journey to the jungles. In fact, they go to a certain place specified for the purpose and return all the while chanting the verses before the worship is declared finished. The verses, which obviously are long, rent the air throughout the day. A few lines read thus:

*se daiware jatara banlawai kataiya
janganl me
se daiware pitajika nam kalurama das*

*se daiware miya ki nam niraraso...
nitya din sikar kataiya me khelaichhe
jogiya nagarme...
kekro naithkjogiya nagarme
eksayaek kaisjan lanaksingh dhaniya
begar khataiwa dinaram bhadriaagan...*

Explaining briefly about this, Shyam Sada Dhami (one of the respondents) said that ‘Kaluram Das and Nirasu mentioned in the verses were the parents of Dina Bhadri and were their ancestors. They were the dwellers of Jogiya Nagar. They regularly went to the jungle of Kataiya for hunting except when they worked for someone else. The residents of Jogiya Nagar took the entire task of their security on their own. Youths used to be trained in duels (*mallyuddha*). One day enemies abruptly mounted an attack on Kataiya Khap. Jogiya Nagar dwellers fiercely fought against them and finally won the war. Unfortunately, however, while they were crossing a river to return to their village, revelling in their victory, their boat overturned in waves killing the boatman as well as *Dina Bhadri*. Villagers were grieved to hear the news. But they got the consolation to bear the tragedy when they remembered Dina Bhadri’s bravery to safeguard their ancestry. This folk tale shows that *Dina Bhadri* was a historic man and not divine power. But then as

centuries passed people took Dina Bhadri for a symbol of bravery from generation to generation and they began to remember him in a festival. This later assumed a religious dimension. The Musahar settlements are separate clusters and every Musahar settlement has one *thaan* (the symbol of their deity Dina Bhadri) where they keep three bamboo pillars with flags of different colors (Pokhrel, 2016). The *Thaan* is a sacred place where the Musahars people gather to worship their ancestral deities Dina Bhadri and Salahesh once a year.

Figure 2: The Thaan With Bamboo Pillars



When I asked why there is no monument or temple in honour of their revered Dina Bhadri, most respondents said, 'We have to cut our meal and collect pennies to worship our idol even once a year.' Even though they have so much of devotion for Dina Bhadri, they are unable to build a temple in their current situation. Talking about the temple, there is one, a large temple of *Dina Bhadri* at Ganapatanganj of India. Indian Musahars gather there to offer worship. 'But we cannot afford to make it to India for worship due to lack of money. So, we put up a symbolic Dina Bhadri and worship it in our own village.'

One cannot help appreciating the community for its desire to keep its culture and religious tradition alive despite the financial hardship they have been facing, so much so that they have not been able to put up a temple yet. So, economically they are very poor but culturally and religiously, they are rich. Due to their poor economic condition and changing priorities of the nation-state, this minority Dailit community has found it hard to keep the culture and religious activities alive and well today.

Conclusion

Culturally, Nepal can be divided into three parts: national, regional and local. The present study has focused on the local group known as Musahars and their cultural and religious activities in the face of forces creating strains for change in their identity. Literature relating to ethnographic ideas has been used generally in support of the findings of this study. Descriptive research design has been followed for drawing an ethnographic portrait of the community. Respondents were selected by using a purposive sampling method for the collection of information from the study area.

This article has analyzed the field data and discussed the findings in light of cursory desk reviews and frequent field works. Particularly, this article deals with the Musahars, their ethnohistory, cultural characteristics, dress and ornament, food and drink, life cycle ceremonies, feast and festival, religion, while the author also tried to document some strains of change in their way of life and identity. This study has not focused much on the social aspects of Musahars of the study area, as several studies before have undertaken to do so.

The name Musahar might have come from the traditional occupation of these people who are still famous for killing and eating Musa (mouse or rat). But the Musahar themselves do not agree with that, because their oral traditions and stories speak that they were the descendants of great sage Balmiki, who is believed to be the author of the Hindu religious epic Ramayana. Musahars are Hindu by religion, so, most of their cultural and religious activities are related to the Hindu culture and tradition. Although they are Hindus, they worship their own types of deities such as Dina Bhadri, their ancestral deity. Some of their worshipping methods differ from that of other communities of the study area. Their feast and festival are not only related to entertainment but also show their cultural and religious life.

Based on the findings, these Musahars of the study area, who belong to Dalit and minorities, are poor and that places strains on their preserving their cultural and religious practices, the markers of their identity, so, it seems necessary for the Government and other NGOs and INGOs involved in the welfare of Dalit and minority communities of the nation to bring forward and implement special programmes tailored to meet the needs of these Musahars. But before

implementing the programs certain precautions should be taken. No program can be successful and can give the desired result unless it respects the customs and culture of the targeted community. So, more studies are needed to know all cultural and religious aspects of this community's identity as well as the strains their changing conditions cause on the identity before such programs can work for their uplift.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that no potential conflict of interest exists.

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