



Family, caste and survival at the margins: A qualitative study of Musahar households in rural eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

This study explores the structure and functions of family among the Musahar community, one of the most marginalized Scheduled Caste groups in India, with particular reference to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Located within the sociological frameworks of caste, marginality and family, the study examines how Musahar households organize everyday life and sustain survival under conditions of persistent socio-economic deprivation and caste-based exclusion. Drawing on secondary demographic and socio-economic data from the Census of India and existing academic literature, the study situates Musahar families within broader patterns of landlessness, restricted occupational opportunities, low literacy and dependence on informal and exploitative labour arrangements. The study adopts a qualitative research design and is based on fieldwork conducted in Village Firozpur, District Ballia. Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with adult members of selected Musahar households, supplemented by informal discussions and observations. The analysis focuses on family structure, household composition, livelihood strategies, gender roles, educational participation, health practices and engagement with state welfare schemes. The findings indicate that Musahar families are predominantly nuclear in residential form, shaped primarily by structural constraints rather than by processes of modernization. The family functions as the central unit of economic survival through labour pooling, involving men, women and children. Educational exclusion of children, gendered burdens of labour, reliance on informal healthcare and the limited effectiveness of welfare interventions emerge as key patterns. Although families demonstrate adaptive strategies, these adaptations do not lead to upward mobility and instead contribute to the reproduction of intergenerational poverty. The study highlights the need for integrated, family-centered and caste-sensitive policy approaches to address the structural roots of marginalization experienced by Musahar households.

Keywords: Musahar community, caste and marginality, family structure, rural poverty, survival strategies

Introduction

Indian society has historically been structured through the institution of caste, which has functioned as a durable system of social stratification regulating access to resources, occupations, status, and social participation. Rooted in the ideology of purity and pollution, the caste system produced deeply hierarchical social relations that institutionalized inequality and exclusion over centuries. One of the most extreme manifestations of this system was the practice of untouchability, which relegated certain communities to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy and denied them basic social, economic and civic rights (Ghurye, 1957; Deshpande, 2000) [3, 5]. Despite constitutional abolition of untouchability and the introduction of affirmative action policies after independence, caste continues to shape life chances and social outcomes, particularly for historically marginalized Scheduled Caste communities. Within the broad category of Scheduled Castes, there exist significant internal hierarchies, with some communities experiencing multiple and cumulative forms of disadvantage. The Musahar community represents one such group and is often described in sociological literature as “Dalits among Dalits” due to their extreme marginalization, landlessness and social invisibility (Kumar, 2006; Sahay, 2019) [7, 11].

Musahar Community: An Overview

Historically associated with subsistence activities such as rat-catching, forest gathering and casual agricultural labour, Musahars were incorporated into the caste system at its

lowest level, where occupational stigma and social exclusion became entrenched features of their collective identity (Kumar, 2006) [7]. Secondary demographic data underline the severity and persistence of Musahar deprivation. Census-based analyses indicate that Musahars are overwhelmingly rural in residence and geographically concentrated in the eastern Gangetic belt, particularly in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Singh, 2016) [13]. According to Census of India data and subsequent scholarly analysis, Musahars exhibit very low levels of literacy, minimal asset ownership and near-universal landlessness. Singh's (2016) [13] longitudinal demographic study, based on Census data from 1961 to 2011, shows that more than 95 per cent of Musahars are engaged in manual wage labour, primarily as agricultural laborers or informal workers, while illiteracy rates remain significantly higher than the Scheduled Caste average. These patterns indicate that economic mobility among Musahars has remained extremely limited despite decades of state intervention. In Uttar Pradesh, Musahars are primarily concentrated in the eastern districts, including Kushinagar, Maharajganj, Deoria, Ghazipur, Jaunpur, Chandauli, Varanasi and Ballia (Singh, 2016) [13]. District-level Census data reveal that Ballia district, located in the easternmost part of Uttar Pradesh and bordering Bihar, is predominantly rural, with more than 90 per cent of its population residing in villages (Census of India, 2011) [1]. The district economy is largely agrarian, characterized by small landholdings, seasonal unemployment and labour migration. Within this rural

context, Musahar households remain among the most deprived groups, typically residing in spatially segregated hamlets at the margins of villages and relying on informal, low-paid and seasonal forms of labour for survival. Livelihood patterns documented in secondary literature closely align with the empirical realities observed in the study area. Numerous studies and official reports have highlighted the presence of exploitative labour arrangements among Musahar and similarly marginalized communities, particularly in brick-kiln work, construction and casual agricultural labour (Mishra, 2007; Singh, 2013) ^[8]. Brick-kiln labour (Patheri), in particular, is characterized by seasonal migration, advance-based recruitment and the involvement of entire families, including women and children. Such labour practices not only generate economic insecurity and indebtedness, but also disrupt access to education, healthcare and social protection, thereby reinforcing intergenerational poverty. Health and human development indicators further illustrate the structural deprivation of Musahar families. Empirical studies focusing on Musahar populations in India and neighboring Nepal consistently report high levels of undernutrition, poor maternal and child health outcomes, early marriage and limited utilization of public health services (Shah et al., 2016; Gautam & Subedi, 2020) ^[4, 12]. These conditions are closely linked to poverty, food insecurity and limited access to institutional healthcare. The dependency on informal healthcare providers and local dispensaries, as documented in several studies, reflects both economic constraints and experiences of exclusion from formal health systems.

Family System among Musahar Community

In this context of structural deprivation, the family emerges as a crucial mediating institution through which survival is organized and managed. Classical sociological theorists recognize the family as a universal and fundamental social institution responsible for reproduction, socialization, economic cooperation, and care (Murdock, 1949; Parsons & Bales, 1956) ^[9, 10]. In the Indian context, family structure and functions are deeply shaped by caste association, land ownership and economic resources, resulting in significant variation across social groups (Kapadia, 1955; Sooryamoorthy, 2012) ^[6, 14]. For communities such as the Musahars, where access to land, education and secure employment is severely constrained, the family plays an important agency as the primary unit of labour pooling, risk-sharing and social support. Existing research suggests that Musahar families are predominantly nuclear in residential form, not as a consequence of modernization or individual choice, but due to landlessness, housing scarcity and economic compulsion (Singh, 2016; Sahay, 2019) ^[11, 13]. Family members men, women and children collectively contribute to household survival through wage labour, seasonal migration and informal economic activities. Women's labour participation is central to household management; besides, they participate in seasonal agricultural labor also. Children too, are often withdrawn from schooling to supplement family income. Such arrangements enable short-term survival but simultaneously reproduce long-term deprivation by limiting educational attainment and skill development. Despite a growing body of literature on Musahar marginalization, there remains a significant gap in micro level sociological research that

places family and household dynamics at the center of analysis, particularly in rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Much of the existing work relies on macro-level demographic data or focuses on specific sectors such as health or labour, without examining how caste-based exclusion is experienced and negotiated within everyday family life. There is limited qualitative research that explores how Musahar families structure their households, perform economic and social functions and interact with welfare institutions in their immediate rural contexts.

Problem under the Study

The present study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a qualitative examination of Musahar households in a village of Ballia district, Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Using literature-review and in-depth case studies, it analyses family structure, livelihood strategies, gender relations, educational exclusion, health practices, and engagement with state welfare schemes. By situating household-level experiences within broader socio-economic and caste structures, the study aims to contribute to sociological debates on caste, family and marginality. The significance of this study lies in its explicit focus on the family as an analytical lens for understanding caste-based marginalization. It contributes empirically to the sociology of family and caste by demonstrating how family structures and functions are shaped by structural deprivation rather than cultural choice. The study also holds policy relevance by highlighting the limitations of existing welfare interventions and the need for integrated, household centered and caste inclusive development strategies. In doing so, it offers valuable insights for scholars, policymakers and practitioners concerned with social inclusion, rural development and the empowerment of India's most marginalized communities.

Review of Literature

The review of literature is organized thematically to situate the present study within existing sociological scholarship on caste, marginality, family, and survival strategies, with particular reference to the Musahar community and similarly marginalized groups.

The caste system has been extensively examined as a foundational structure of social inequality in India. Classical sociological studies conceptualize caste as a rigid system of social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, occupational fixation and ritual hierarchy (Ghurye, 1957) ^[5]. Over time, caste-based exclusion became institutionalized through practices of untouchability, restricting access of certain communities to land, education and social participation. Deshpande (2000) ^[3] argues that caste continues to shape life chances in contemporary India, even as its expressions have transformed in response to economic and political changes. Within the Scheduled Castes, scholars have highlighted internal hierarchies and differential access to resources. Some caste groups remain disproportionately marginalized due to historical stigma and persistent exclusion from economic and political power (Thorat & Newman, 2009) ^[15]. The Musahars are frequently identified as occupying one of the lowest positions within this internal hierarchy, facing extreme poverty and social invisibility (Kumar, 2006; Sahay, 2019) ^[7, 11].

Early ethnographic and administrative accounts identified Musahars as a landless and occupationally stigmatized

community dependent on subsistence activities and casual labour (Crooke, 1975 [orig. 1896])^[2]. Contemporary studies reinforce these observations, showing that Musahars remain among the poorest Scheduled Castes in India. Kumar (2006)^[7] documents how occupational stigma and lack of cultural capital have constrained development initiatives aimed at the community. Using Census data from 1961 to 2011^[1], Singh (2016)^[13] demonstrates that Musahars are overwhelmingly rural, poorly educated and concentrated in eastern India, particularly Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Despite affirmative action policies, their socio-economic indicators have shown minimal improvement over decades. Sahay (2019)^[11], through ethnographic analysis, further argues that Musahar marginalization is sustained through structural violence, whereby deprivation becomes normalized and politically invisible. A significant body of literature examines the livelihood patterns of marginalized caste groups, highlighting their dependence on informal and exploitative labour markets. Studies focusing on Musahars and similar communities show heavy reliance on agricultural wage labour, brick-kiln work and construction, often under conditions resembling bonded labour (Mishra, 2007; Singh, 2013)^[8]. Ethnographic research by Singh (2013) illustrates how indebtedness, landlessness and labour bondage form an interconnected system that sustains Musahar exploitation. Brick-kiln labour, in particular, is characterized by family-based recruitment, seasonal migration and the involvement of women and children. Such labour practices disrupt schooling, healthcare access and family stability, reinforcing intergenerational poverty. The family has long been recognized as a fundamental social institution performing reproductive, economic, socialization and caregiving functions (Murdock, 1949; Parsons & Bales, 1956)^[9, 10]. In the Indian context, family structure and functions are deeply influenced by caste, land ownership and economic conditions (Kapadia, 1955)^[6]. Studies on marginalized communities indicate that nuclear family structures often emerge not from modernization but from economic compulsion, housing scarcity and landlessness (Sooryamoorthy, 2012)^[14]. For communities such as the Musahars, the family functions as a critical unit of labour pooling and risk management. Children's early incorporation into labour and women's extensive participation in income generating activities are common adaptive strategies under conditions of extreme poverty (Singh, 2016)^[13]. Gender relations within marginalized caste households have received increasing scholarly attention. Feminist and sociological studies highlight that women in Dalit and landless communities bear a disproportionate burden of both productive and reproductive labour (Kapadia, 1955; Sooryamoorthy, 2012)^[6, 14]. Among Musahars, women's labour participation is central to household survival, yet remains undervalued and poorly remunerated (Shah et al., 2016)^[12]. Women have also been reported to be participating in seasonal agricultural labour works. Widowhood and old age further exacerbate women's vulnerability in the absence of social security. Studies indicate that welfare schemes targeting women often fail to translate into meaningful empowerment due to affordability constraints and administrative barriers (Sahay, 2019)^[11]. Educational exclusion among Musahar children is widely documented. Singh (2016)^[13] reports persistently high illiteracy rates among Musahars, reflecting early withdrawal

from schooling due to economic necessity. Studies argue that education is often sacrificed for immediate survival, leading to the reproduction of poverty across generations. Health related studies reveal high levels of undernutrition, poor maternal and child health outcomes and limited utilization of public healthcare services among Musahar populations (Shah et al., 2016; Gautam & Subedi, 2020)^[4, 12]. Dependency on informal healthcare providers is linked to poverty, discrimination and lack of institutional trust. Scholars have critically examined the reach and effectiveness of welfare interventions among marginalized caste groups. While housing, food security and health schemes have expanded in coverage, their impact remains uneven due to bureaucratic hurdles, digital exclusion and inadequate implementation (Thorat & Newman, 2009; Sahay, 2019)^[11, 15]. Mishra (2007)^[8] highlights that Musahars often lack political voice and organizational capacity to claim entitlements, resulting in persistent exclusion from development benefits. This gap between policy intent and lived experience underscores the need for caste sensitive and family centered interventions.

Research Gap

The existing literature provides substantial insights into the socio-economic deprivation, labour conditions and health vulnerabilities of the Musahar community. However, there is a notable gap in micro level qualitative studies that examine family structure and functions as central analytical categories, particularly in rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Most studies either adopt macro level demographic approaches or focus on specific sectors such as health or labour, leaving everyday family dynamics underexplored. The present study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding family and household experiences as mediating sites of caste-based marginality and survival.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the structure and composition of Musahar families in Village Firozpur.
2. To analyze the economic, social and cultural functions performed by Musahar households.
3. To understand the impact of caste marginalization and poverty on family life.

Methodology

This micro level study is qualitative and descriptive in nature. The selection of the research area and the specific community under investigation was guided by the researcher's academic interest as well as the feasibility of field access. The study utilizes both primary and secondary data. To gather primary data, a fieldwork was conducted on Musahar households in Village Firozpur of Ballia district in Uttar Pradesh. The case study method was employed to obtain in-depth data and nuanced insights into the everyday lives of Musahar families. Secondary data on Musahar was obtained from official sources such as Census, NFHS, Government websites and reports. Nonetheless, extensive review of relevant literature was rigorously employed. The Musahar hamlet known as Musahar Toli, in Village Firozpur comprised a total of twenty-one households, out of which fifteen families were purposively selected for inclusion in the study. However, at the time of data collection, only heads/adults of ten households provided

informed consent and agreed to participate in the research. Consequently, in-depth interviews were conducted with members of these ten Musahar families. A semi-structured interview schedule was administered to the heads or adult members of the respective households, and their responses were carefully recorded by the researcher. For ethical consideration, the names of the respondents were changed. The qualitative data generated through these methods were systematically organized and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and significant themes relevant to the objectives of the study.

Profile of the Universe

According to the Census of India (2011) ^[1], a total of 3,057,396 persons belonging to the Musahar community were reported across the country. This population constituted approximately 0.23 per cent of the total population of India and about 1.8 per cent of the total Scheduled Caste population. The Musahars are predominantly concentrated in the eastern regions of India, particularly in the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh, throughout Bihar and in the northern parts of West Bengal. Uttar Pradesh accounts for nearly 10 per cent of the total Musahar population in India, numbering approximately three lakh individuals. Within the state, the spatial distribution of the Musahar population is uneven, with a marked concentration in the eastern region of Uttar Pradesh. Census figures indicate that, in 2011, Jaunpur district recorded the highest Musahar population in the state (37,229), followed by districts such as Kushinagar, Ghazipur, Chandauli, and Varanasi. In contrast, the district of Ballia falls within the category of districts where the Musahar population is reported to be below ten thousand (Singh, 2016) ^[13]. District Ballia is situated at the easternmost part of Uttar Pradesh and shares its boundaries with several districts of the neighboring state of Bihar. The district is predominantly rural in character, with nearly 90 per cent of its population residing in rural areas. Village Firozpur, the site of the present study, is located in Ballia district at a distance of approximately 30 kilometers from the district headquarters. The village is primarily agrarian in nature, with multiple caste groups engaged in agriculture and related activities. The total population of the village is approximately 2,000 and it is connected to nearby towns and administrative centers through an all-weather pucca road, facilitating regular mobility and access.

Profile of the Cases

Case 1

Saroj (name changed) is a 35 years old married male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He is illiterate and lives with his wife, two sons and two daughters. In addition to his immediate family, his paternal aunt, who is a widow, also resides in the same household. The household has been allotted a single pucca room under a government housing scheme, which serves as the primary living space for the family. Saroj and his wife are engaged in seasonal wage labour at a brick kiln (locally referred to as Bhattha). They take advance loans (Dadni) from the kiln owners which the family is obliged to pay in labour i.e. Patheri. During the brick-baking (Patheri) season, the couple migrates temporarily to the brick kiln site along with their children. The children actively participate in brick making

activities and contribute to the household's labour, resulting in complete non-enrolment in formal schooling. None of the children in the household attend school. The paternal aunt, owing to her advanced age and lack of independent income, largely sustains herself through begging in nearby villages. Saroj's wife reported that her husband suffers from severe alcoholism, which has significant implications for household well-being, economic stability and interpersonal relations within the family. In matters related to health and medical care, the family does not access formal healthcare institutions. Instead, they primarily rely on local quacks and nearby medical dispensary shops for treatment, reflecting limited access to public healthcare services, financial constraints and low levels of health awareness.

Case 2

Phoolmati is a 65 years old widow residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. She has two sons. Approximately a decade ago, her husband passed away due to health complications associated with chronic alcoholism. Following his death, both of her sons entered into marriage and subsequently established separate households, each consisting of their respective nuclear families. A single pucca room has been allotted under a government housing scheme in Phoolmati's name, which serves as the primary dwelling structure for the family. In order to accommodate the separate households of her sons, the family has constructed adjacent huts and mud houses around the allotted pucca room. These structures collectively form the residential arrangement for the extended family. Both sons are illiterate and are engaged in seasonal wage labour at brick kilns (Bhattha), where they work along with their wives and children. During the brick baking season, the sons and their families migrate temporarily to the brick kiln sites for employment. During these periods of seasonal migration, Phoolmati is left behind in the village and sustains herself primarily through begging in nearby villages, highlighting her economic vulnerability, dependence and the absence of stable social security support.

Case 3

Mangar is a 50 years old male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur and is currently suffering from chronic respiratory complications. He was previously married; however, his wife passed away approximately five years ago due to an illness of unspecified nature. Mangar is the father of four children, comprising two sons and two daughters. In accordance with prevailing social norms and economic constraints within the community, Mangar arranged the marriage of his elder daughter at the age of sixteen to a member of the Musahar community residing in a nearby settlement. The household has been allotted a single pucca room under a government housing scheme, which constitutes the primary residential space for the family. Mangar sustains his household through irregular and low-paying forms of livelihood. He engages in various odd jobs whenever available and supplements his income by selling datun (neem branches) used for dental cleaning. In addition, he collects firewood and forest leaves from nearby areas and occasionally hunts small wild animals such as rodents and reptiles as part of subsistence practices. These livelihood activities reflect the deprived nature of his

economic condition and the continued dependence on informal and traditional survival strategies.

Case 4

Sunil is a 36 years old illiterate male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He lives with his wife and their three sons. None of the children in the household are enrolled in formal schooling, reflecting early involvement in subsistence activities and limited educational access. The family resides in a mud house along with an adjoining hut, which together constitute their living space. For their livelihood, Sunil and his wife engage in the collection of Paraas leaves, which are used to prepare leaf plates (pattal) that hold ritual significance in Hindu religious ceremonies. These leaf plates are sold locally and serve as an important supplementary source of income for the household. During the brick-baking season, the couple migrates temporarily to brick kilns (Bhattha) along with their children, where the entire family participates in brick making activities to earn seasonal wages. The household possesses an Antyodaya ration card and avails free and subsidized food grains provided by the government. While this welfare support offers minimal food security, it remains insufficient to address the broader economic vulnerabilities faced by the family.

Case 5

Sadhu is a 52 years old illiterate male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He is married and has three daughters, all of whom are currently married and living separately. Sadhu and his wife also engage in dadni practice as seasonal wage labour at brick kilns (Bhattha), where they temporarily reside during the brick-baking season in order to secure employment and income. During the off season, when brick kiln work is unavailable, Sadhu sustains himself by undertaking irregular and low-paying odd jobs as a construction laborer. The household has been allotted a single pucca room under a government housing scheme, which serves as their primary residence during non-migratory periods. The couple also holds a Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration card and regularly receives free and subsidized food grains provided by the government. In terms of healthcare access, both Sadhu and his wife received COVID-19 vaccinations at a government hospital, indicating limited but functional engagement with public health services. Earlier, Sadhu had been allotted a patta (a small agricultural landholding), by the Village Panchayat. However, this land was subsequently sold, most likely to meet the financial expenses associated with the marriages of his daughters, reflecting the pressures of social obligations and the fragility of asset retention among Musahar households.

Case 6

Kumari is a 42 years old illiterate female residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. She lives with her husband and their three children. None of the children in the household are enrolled in formal schooling, reflecting the household's dependence on child participation in subsistence and income-generating activities. The family has been allotted a single pucca room under a government housing scheme, which serves as their primary place of residence. The household holds a Below Poverty Line

(BPL) ration card issued in her name, through which they receive free and subsidized food grains from the government. The entire family is engaged in Patheri, or brick-baking work, at local brick kilns (Bhattha), which constitutes their principal source of livelihood. In addition to local wage labour, her husband occasionally migrates to metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Mumbai in search of supplementary income through informal sector employment. However, following the COVID-19 lockdown, these migration-based livelihood opportunities have become uncertain and irregular, leaving the family in a state of economic insecurity and ambiguity regarding future employment prospects.

Case 7

Daya is a 48 years old illiterate male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He lives with his wife and their six children. The household occupies a mud house along with an adjoining hut, which together serve as their living space under conditions of considerable overcrowding and material deprivation. Daya's wife possesses a Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration card; however, the family is currently unable to avail themselves of the government's free ration scheme due to technical difficulties related to biometric verification, as her digital fingerprints reportedly fail to match the records. This administrative exclusion has further intensified the household's food insecurity. Earlier, Daya earned his livelihood by operating a hand-pulled cart; however, due to the onset of physical illness, he was compelled to discontinue this occupation. At present, the entire family depends dadni in exchange of seasonal brick kiln labour (Patheri) at the Bhattha as their primary source of income. Although Daya was allotted a pucca room under a government housing scheme, the construction of the structure remains incomplete, leaving the family without the intended benefits of the scheme and highlighting gaps in welfare delivery.

Case 8

Rinku is a 36 years old married male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He is illiterate and lives with his wife, three sons and one daughter. The household occupies a pucca room along with an adjoining hut, which together constitute their residential arrangement. Rinku has migrated to Delhi in search of employment opportunities and engages in informal sector work outside the village. In his absence, his wife, along with their children, remains in the village and is engaged in brick kiln labour (Patheri) at the local Bhattha, contributing significantly to the household's subsistence. Rinku's wife was allotted a cooking gas connection under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, a central government scheme aimed at providing clean cooking fuel to economically disadvantaged households. However, due to financial constraints, she has been unable to afford the cost of refilling the gas cylinder and therefore continues to rely on traditional biomass fuels for cooking, indicating the limited practical utility of welfare interventions in the absence of sustained economic support.

Case 9

Guddu is a 50 years old illiterate male residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He is married and has

five children, comprising four daughters and one son. All of his daughters are married and living separately, while his son remains unmarried and resides with him. The household has been allotted a single pucca room under a government housing scheme, which serves as their primary residence. Guddu operates a small cycle-repairing and puncture shop set up in a wooden structure locally referred to as a goomti. This enterprise provides a modest and irregular source of income. In order to supplement household earnings, his wife and son are engaged in loans in exchange of brick kiln labour (Patheri) at the Bhattha, particularly during peak work seasons. Guddu reported that he had earlier attempted to establish a small tea stall as an alternative livelihood; however, the venture did not succeed. He attributed the poor performance of the tea shop to the limited number of customers, which he believed was influenced by the continued prevalence of notions of purity and pollution that discourage social interaction and economic exchange with members of the Musahar community. This experience underscores the role of caste-based discrimination in constraining entrepreneurial opportunities and economic mobility.

Case 10

Chatthu is a 44 years old illiterate male and the younger brother of Guddu, residing in the Musahar hamlet of Village Firozpur. He is married and has three children, comprising one son and two daughters. His marriage took place within a distant kin relationship, following which he relocated to his in laws' residence along with his wife and children. As a result of this residential shift, Chatthu left behind a mud house in the village, which is currently being utilized by his brother's wife for the purpose of rearing pigs. This arrangement reflects the fluidity of residence and kin-based adjustments within the Musahar community, shaped by marital ties, economic necessity and limited housing options.

Analysis and Major Findings

The qualitative analysis of ten Musahar household case studies from Village Firozpur, District Ballia, reveals a consistent and interlinked pattern of caste-based marginalization, economic precarity, and constrained family life. Drawing upon in-depth interviews, observations, and case narratives, this section integrates analytical interpretation with empirical findings to demonstrate how family structure and functions operate as central mechanisms of survival under conditions of extreme deprivation. The findings are organized thematically in accordance with the objectives of the study.

Family Structure and Household Composition

The analysis shows that Musahar households in the study area are predominantly nuclear in their residential composition. Most households consist of married couples and their children, with limited co-residence of extended kin, as observed in Cases 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. However, this nuclearization does not reflect individual choice, autonomy, or a transition towards modern family forms. Rather, it is a structural outcome of landlessness, housing scarcity, and the absence of inheritable property. Despite separate residential arrangements, families maintain strong functional interdependence through kinship networks, shared labour,

and spatial proximity. Case 2 illustrates this clearly, where multiple nuclear households cluster around a single government-allotted pucca room, forming a functionally extended family system. Widowhood and single-parent households, as seen in Cases 2 and 3, further highlight the fragility of Musahar family structures. Elderly widows remain economically dependent on begging, indicating the absence of both familial and institutional social security.

Family as the Primary Economic Unit

Across all cases, the family emerges as the principal economic unit responsible for survival. Livelihood strategies are characterized by extreme informality, seasonal uncertainty, and dependence on exploitative labour relations. The respondents informed that during the rainy season when they have no money and work to survive, they go to Brick kiln owners for advance loans, locally referred as Dadni, which the family would pay by labour in brick making. The kiln owners have the monopoly in dictating the labour rates and the interest rates. This arrangement creates bonded labour like situation for the laborers. Brick-kiln labour (Bhattha work) dominates as the primary occupation in most households (Cases 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9). Entire families' men, women, and children are engaged in Patheri (brick baking), underscoring the collective nature of economic survival. This pattern indicates that individual earnings are insufficient to sustain households, making labour pooling a necessity rather than a choice. Attempts at livelihood diversification remain limited and largely unsuccessful. Guddu's failed tea shop (Case 9) demonstrates how caste stigma and social exclusion constrain entrepreneurial initiatives, reinforcing dependence on informal wage labour.

Gender Roles and Unequal Burden

Women's labour participation is indispensable across all households studied. Women engage in brick-kiln labour, leaf-plate making, begging and other informal activities, while simultaneously bearing responsibility for domestic work, childcare and caregiving. In most cases, women are the majorly responsible for household management. In Cases 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8, women's economic contribution is central to household survival, yet remains undervalued and largely invisible. Widowhood, as observed in Case 2, significantly intensifies vulnerability, particularly in the absence of pensions or stable income sources. Although some women are nominal beneficiaries of welfare schemes such as cooking gas connections (Case 8), they are unable to utilize these benefits due to financial constraints. Alcoholism among men, reported in Cases 1 and 2, further exacerbates women's economic and emotional burden.

Children, Education, and Generational Poverty

One of the most striking findings across the case studies is the complete exclusion of children from formal education. None of the sampled households reported regular school attendance among children. Children's participation in brick-kiln labour and other subsistence activities is viewed as economically necessary for household survival, rendering education incompatible with immediate livelihood needs. Early marriage, particularly of daughters (Case 3), further reinforces intergenerational deprivation by transferring economic responsibility prematurely and curtailing

opportunities for social mobility. The family thus becomes a site where poverty and illiteracy are reproduced across generations, not due to cultural neutrality to education, but due to structural constraints and lack of effective alternatives.

Welfare Access, Housing Insufficiency and Administrative Marginalization

The study finds that while government welfare schemes such as housing, ration cards and vaccinations have reached Musahar households in form, their substantive impact remains limited. Most households possess single-room pucca dwellings that are overcrowded and inadequate for family needs. They adjust their living arrangement in attached mud houses or huts. In some cases, construction remains incomplete (Case 7), negating the intended benefits of housing schemes. Welfare access is frequently disrupted by administrative barriers. Biometric mismatches preventing access to ration entitlements (Case 7) illustrate how digital governance mechanisms exclude the poorest households. These gaps intensify food insecurity and reinforce dependence on informal survival strategies.

Caste, Stigma and Social Exclusion

Caste based discrimination continues to shape everyday social and economic interactions. Notions of purity and pollution restrict social mobility, limit market participation and reinforce spatial segregation of the Musahar hamlet. Guddu's inability to sustain a tea shop (Case 9) reflects how caste stigma constrains even minimal entrepreneurial efforts. Despite constitutional safeguards, Musahar families remain politically marginal and socially invisible, reinforcing their reliance on informal and exploitative labour arrangements.

Family Support and Structural Limits

Overall, the family functions simultaneously as a protective institution and a site of constraint. It provides emotional support, care and survival mechanisms through labour pooling, migration and kin-based adjustments. At the same time, it absorbs and reproduces structural inequalities, limiting possibilities for upward mobility.

Conclusion

The present study sets out to examine the interrelationship between family, caste and survival among Musahar households in rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh through an in-depth qualitative analysis of household case studies. The findings clearly demonstrate that family life among the Musahars is significantly shaped by structural deprivation, caste-based marginalization and limited access to economic and institutional resources. Rather than functioning as an autonomous or developmental unit, the family emerges as a central mechanism through which survival is organized and managed under conditions of persistent poverty. The study reveals that Musahar families are predominantly nuclear in residential form; however, this nuclearization is not indicative of modernization or individual choice. Instead, it reflects structural compulsions arising from landlessness, housing scarcity, and the absence of inheritable assets. Despite separate living arrangements, families remain functionally interdependent, relying on kinship networks and shared labour to cope with economic insecurity.

Widowhood and single parent households further expose the fragility of family structures in the absence of social security or institutional support. Economically, the family functions as the primary unit of survival. Livelihood strategies are characterized by informality, seasonality, and dependence on exploitative labour arrangements, particularly *dadni* and *Patheri* in brick kiln work. The mobilization of labour across all household members, including women and children, shows the inadequacy of individual earnings and the necessity of collective labour pooling. These survival strategies, while ensuring subsistence, simultaneously reinforce marginalization and limit opportunities for upward mobility. Gender and generational inequalities are central to the organization of Musahar family life. Women bear a disproportionate burden of both productive and reproductive labour, while children's systematic exclusion from education reflects the structural incompatibility between schooling and survival needs. Early marriage and child labour contribute to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and illiteracy, underscoring how deprivation is sustained within family settings. During the fieldwork, especially the women respondents complained about extreme alcoholism of their male members of the family. Key informants also validated this issue. Group discussion also disclosed that many women are also engaged in alcoholism, further complicating the household order. The study also highlights the limited effectiveness of state welfare interventions. Although schemes related to housing and food security have reached Musahar households in form, their impact remains constrained by administrative barriers, inadequate implementation, and economic instability. Caste based stigma further restricts social interaction and livelihood opportunities, reinforcing political invisibility and social exclusion.

In conclusion, the family among Musahars functions simultaneously as a site of coping mechanisms and creating structural constraints. While it provides essential mechanisms for survival, it also absorbs and reproduces structural inequalities rooted in caste and poverty. The study underscores the need for sociological approaches and policy interventions that recognize family as a critical site of caste-based marginality and address the structural conditions that limit meaningful social mobility among India's most marginalized rural communities.

Limitations

This study is limited by its small qualitative sample drawn from a single village, making the findings less suited for wider generalization. Additionally, the paper does not examine marriage practices or fertility behavior among Musahar families, which are important aspects of the family system.

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