Patterns of Exclusion in Education System

A Case Study of Musahar Children in Bihar

Priti Gupta*

Abstract

Musahar children come from extremely marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, shaped by chronic poverty, caste-based exclusion, and limited access to education. Their cultural context — — rooted in generations of landlessness and manual labour — deeply influences their daily struggles, including the inability to access basic necessities such as food, clothing, and school materials. These challenges severely affect their participation in school. At the Musahar Toil School, most teachers belong to more privileged caste and class backgrounds. As a result, they often lack the sensitivity or awareness to understand the specific needs and barriers faced by Musahar children. This disconnects leads to exclusion in three significant ways. First, teachers exhibit indifference toward the children's irregular attendance, failing to explore the socio-economic reasons behind it. Second, they rely on conventional teaching methods that are not suited to first-generation learners. Third, the use of mixed or inconsistent teaching approaches often ignores the children's cultural context, making learning disengaging and inaccessible. These factors collectively contribute to a growing disinterest in education among Musahar children, resulting in high dropout rates. This paper uses a case study approach to examine how teacher behaviour and classroom practices shape the educational experiences of Musahar children and perpetuate patterns of exclusion.

Keywords: Musahar Community Children, Caste-class, Exclusion, Teacher Behaviour, TLM (Teachers using Teaching–Learning Materials)

Introduction

Ambedkar considered education a tool for bringing about the desired transformation in society and a prerequisite for launching any organised social movement (Chengte, 2016). He believed that education initiates change in the social,

*Post-doc Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

political, economic, and cultural life of individuals. Ambedkar viewed education as a power that shapes a new society and fosters new consciousness. Moreover, through education, individuals become aware of their identity, truth, and freedom (Mandal, Bikram; 2023). For this reason, he argued, "Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone" (Narake, 2005). He strongly advocated for free and compulsory primary education in one's own language. Unfortunately, caste-based discrimination continues to be prevalent from primary school to higher education, affecting not only academic learning but also students' overall educational experiences.

Caste-based discrimination in schools is often manifested through subtle actions by teachers, such as neglect, repeated blaming, and labeling Dalit students as underperformers, all of which lead to social exclusion. The consequences include irregular attendance, lack of concentration, low participation in school activities, poor academic performance, and eventual dropout (Karamala Areesh Kumar and Edberg D. Cheeran, 2019). Furthermore, "a large variation in the cost of schooling was found among different social groups like Muslims, Hindus, and others. The average cost of schooling among SCs is higher than that of STs and lower than that of the general population across various government development schemes" (Charnjeet Kaur and Prem Mehta, 2013).

Phule also regarded education as essential for the Shudratishudra community to recognise their self-worth. He writes, "...they still remain ignorant and captive in the mental slavery which the Brahmans have perpetuated through their books" (Gulamgiri, p. 45). Students from lower castes face discrimination in both academic and non-academic areas of life. Caste ideology remains hegemonic in Indian society, and Dalit students often face various forms of social exclusion, caught between inclusion and exclusion (Neelkhandhan, Sanil, 2012). According to Anand and Timberg, caste is closely tied to class in agrarian society, influencing infrastructure like schools, colleges, hospitals, transportation, and social relations throughout Bihar.

For children of the Musahar community, these realities manifest in their daily lives. Due to the caste-based discrimination, many teachers do not attend school regularly. In some instances, teachers have informal agreements to alternate attendance among themselves. This kind of social discrimination affects multiple areas. On one hand, the poor economic conditions of the Musahar community limit their children's access to basic educational facilities. On the other, government school teachers often practice untouchability and harbour the belief that Musahar children will not benefit from education. Such prejudices lead to a lack of seriousness toward the students' education, negatively impacting their academic

performance. Consequently, Musahar children frequently fail to attend school regularly, and even when they do, many eventually withdraw.

In Kuaria village, Bihar, several government programmes have been implemented for Musahar children, but these initiatives have not yielded results at the grassroots level. Additionally, neglect by local teachers further worsens the problem. This paper aims to examine teacher behaviour in primary schools in Bihar, with a specific focus on Musahar children. The research is significant because, while many studies have explored Dalit communities broadly, there is a lack of focused work on the exclusion patterns faced by Musahar children in Bihar's primary schools.

This study identifies three specific forms of exclusion practiced by teachers in the classroom—first, irregular attendance by teachers; second, the non-use of Teaching-Learning Materials (TLM); and third, the improper application of mixed teaching methods. This research also analyses how the socio-economic conditions of Musahar children affect their learning capacity and explores the tools of exploitation employed by teachers in the education process.

Literature Survey

One important paper is written by Vikram Singh, titled "Patterns and Determinants of Social Exclusion in School Among Children of the Scavenger Community." The author addresses the educational status of the scavenger community, arguing that they face double exploitation—first, by caste—being from the scavenger community — and second, by class — being from a lower socio-economic background. As a result, they are excluded both socially and within schools, where children are often forced to perform cleaning and dusting tasks (Singh, 2014).

Another significant article, "The Exclusion of School Children," by Yuvraj Singh, explores the link between educational policy and the reproduction of caste-based inequality, with a specific focus on the National Education Policy 2020. The article presents a coherent study of caste-based exclusion among Bahujan school-going children. It is divided into two parts: the first maps out educational inequality as an internal process within schooling, and the second explores the complex relationship between education and power (Singh, Yuvraj, 2023).

Diwan Rashmi (2015) reviews the status of small primary schools (Grades 1 to 5) in rural India, by drawing a national overview, supported by field observations in villages of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The article examines the realities of how small schools operate in different contexts and recommends acknowledging their widespread presence and the need to support rather than abandon them (Diwan, 2015).

A theoretical discussion is offered in the article "Discipline or Punish?"

which draws on Foucault's ideas of punishment to explore discipline as praxis and its transformative possibilities. The study advocates for democratic discipline within schools, distinguishing between humanised and mechanised forms of work. It also explores exclusionary practices faced by Dalit students in professional elite institutions at multiple levels — admissions, pedagogy, classroom ecology, and learning approaches. Unfortunately, such institutions often reinforce caste divides and restrict Dalit student entry. While the pedagogy may unconsciously perpetuate exclusion, it also holds the potential to reduce caste inequality. The study suggests that Indian elite institutions need to develop democratic and innovative classroom environments. However, the prevailing teacher or student centric approaches tend to reproduce caste hegemony (Yung, K. Wayne, 2009).

Several studies have also revealed that due to a lack of proper human and material resources, the dropout rate among Dalit students remains high. Although they are motivated to pursue education, the lack of infrastructure, facilities, and peer learning environments often pushes them out of the system (Kujur, Ajay Samir and Ekka, Aradhana, 2019; Kahri, Deepak, 2021).

Another important article emphasises that education is deeply embedded in the social structure and cultural belief systems. These structural and ideological factors play a vital role in producing social inequality and educational exclusion. The article aims to uncover the complex relationship between social exclusion and education from a policy perspective, in the quest for achieving educational equality (Das, Pankaj, 2010).

In contrast, some studies highlight the positive role of government schemes. Shaharei B. Virendra (2016) argues that understanding the issues and problems related to inclusive development for Dalits is essential. A holistic, rights-based, social justice, and equity-oriented approach is needed. Conscious administrative action is required to address Dalit exclusion, and the government must play a proactive role in promoting inclusive development.

Other affirmative works have shown that various governmental development schemes and public services — such as Anganwadi centers, public health centers, and schools — play a vital role in improving education, health, and nutrition in rural areas. The government's monitoring and reporting systems must ensure that Anganwadi workers and other service providers function effectively and without discrimination.

In this context, a significant contribution was made by a research team that conducted a study in Jamui district, Bihar, using the case study method to evaluate the RBC (Residential Bridge Course) program.

The researchers concluded that the RBC program has the potential to transform the lives of hundreds of deprived children by providing access to education that would otherwise be unavailable to them. This program is seen as a long-term initiative toward social inclusion through education (Banerjee, Chattawal, Momin and Prakash, 2008). Despite these contributions, very few studies have focused specifically on the Musahar community of Bihar.

Methodology

The sociological examination of political economy, traditionally focuses on the intersection of political and economic structures. In this study, the emphasis shifts toward understanding how the socio-economic challenges faced by Musahar children, severely impact their access to the quality education. Despite this shift, the central focus of political economy remains deeply relevant to the sociological inquiry.

We have adopted a political economy approach to investigate how political and economic factors influence primary school education, particularly in marginalised communities. This approach examines how institutional and structural inequalities — especially caste and class-based discrimination — affect educational access and outcomes. Prejudices held by teachers pose significant barriers to student learning. As a result, Musahar children often become disengaged from education or turn to non-educational activities, leading to a high dropout rate. Additionally, this study explores how dominant caste-class structures intersect with education, to produce exclusion in the everyday lives of the Musahar community.

Description of the Musahartoli School in Kuaria Village, Bihar

The Musahartoli (hamlet), in Kuaria village, is situated alongside other castes, including Bhumihar, Rajput, Brahmin, Yadav, and Dalit groups such as Paswan, Dhobi, and Nat. However, in this village, each toli's school is divided along caste lines, and children from those specific castes study only in their respective tolis. In the Musahartoli's school, all students belong to the Musahar community.

The entire toli has only one school, serving approximately 500 Musahar households and offering classes from Lower Kindergarten (LKG) to Grade 5. The school employs a mixed teaching method, but students from Grades 1 to 5 are taught in just two rooms. A new school building is currently under construction.

According to school records, 400 students are enrolled; however, only about half attend the school regularly. Some students leave school after the midday meal. Many lack proper uniforms, stationery, and other basic essentials. The school is centrally located among dominant caste groups and is commonly referred to as the "Musahartoli School" or "Musahari Toli School."

The principal, Rampravesh Paswan, belongs to the Scheduled

Caste (SC) community. There are three other teachers: one female teacher from the Brahmin caste and two male teachers from the Other Backward Classes (OBC). Aside from the principal, the other teachers attend school only irregularly, usually three or four days a week.

The school suffers from limited infrastructure. Only one hand pump provides water, and there are no separate toilets for boys and girls. While the school provides midday meals, the prescribed food menu is not followed. Although the government has supplied various teaching and learning materials, these are either taken home by the teachers or left unused. The school rarely organises events on national holidays such as Independence Day, Republic Day, Gandhi Jayanti, or Ambedkar Jayanti.

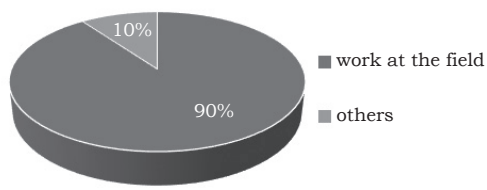
Time Framework

During research, the author visited this place twice. During the first visit, they familiarised themselves with the demographic structure, accessibility of the field, and number of respondents, staying for a week. In the second phase, the author spent two months in the field, from February to March 2019, during which they completed 120 questionnaires and conducted several focus group discussions. This research is based on both qualitative and quantitative data, gathered through scheduled interviews and focus group discussions with school teachers and members of the Musahar community.

Findings

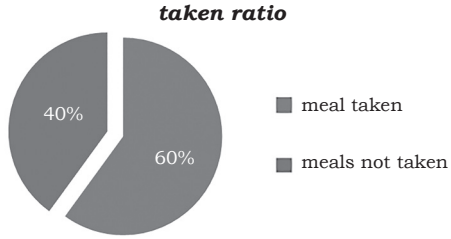
- This research uncovered several important facts about the Musahartoli School in Bihar.
- 90 per cent of Musahar children attending the school have parents who work either in agricultural fields or factories. These children are typically cared for by their grandparents or older siblings in the absence of their parents.

Musahar community parents working in the field



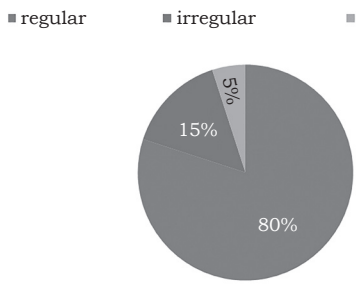
- 60 per cent of the children from the Musahartoli School rely on the school's midday meal, as Musahar women leave for work in the fields around 6:00–7:00 a.m. after preparing food and other essentials.

Musahar children's midday meal taken ratio



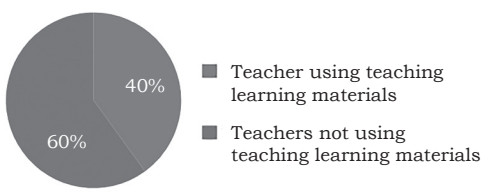
- The school register inaccurately reflects student attendance. Students who attend regularly are marked as having 100 per cent attendance, while those who attend infrequently are also marked present.

Musahar children's school going frequency



- At 80–90 per cent. Even those who rarely attend the classes, are listed as having 50 per cent attendance, meaning the actual situation is hidden in the school records.
- Only 40 per cent of the teaching-learning methods are applied effectively to help students learn new things at the Musahartoli school.
- All classes, from Grades 1 to 5, are conducted in just two rooms at the Musahartoli school.

Teachers' use TLMs in the classroom



- The teacher-student ratio is an overwhelming 1:90 in one classroom, indicating a large number of students per teacher at the Musahartoli School.

Discussion

Influx of Exclusion—Poverty, Caste, and Lack of Resources in Daily Life

Although the kamuti system—an exploitative form of bonded labor—has officially been abolished, its essence continues to persist in many rural areas of Bihar. The Musahar community, among the most marginalised Dalit groups, remains structurally dependent on dominant caste landlords. Many Musahar families continue to live on landlords' land and, as a result, feel obligated to offer unpaid labor in agricultural fields. This informal obligation functions as a modern form of bondage—refusal to work without pay can lead to eviction and denial of access to basic necessities, including government schemes, healthcare, education, sanitation, and water. The ongoing struggle for land rights intensifies their vulnerability and restricts their autonomy. Without secure land tenure or social capital, the Musahars remain trapped in a cycle of dependency that limits their upward mobility. The deep-rooted caste hierarchy not only determines their material condition, but also impacts the educational prospects of Musahar children, who face widespread discrimination in schools.

During fieldwork in Kuaria village, Bihar, Suwanti Devi, a Musahar woman, recounted how teachers at the local school were disinterested and irregular. "There are three to four teachers—one from the Dusad caste, and another Brahmin woman who only comes once a week. They don't teach; they're busy with other work," she said. Importantly, only one teacher, Rampravesh Paswan, belongs to a Dalit background. The rest come from backward or upper castes and carry casteist assumptions, often treating Musahar children as untouchables. They keep a distance, exhibit no emotional or pedagogical investment, and treat teaching merely as a job. This deeply entrenched caste mind-set is a key obstacle to the development of the Musahar community. Such indifference from state-appointed educators, who are supposed to act as instruments of social transformation, instead reinforces the community's exclusion. Suwanti further observed that such negligence is not universal—schools in dominant caste tolas function efficiently. Teachers there are regular and accountable. But in Musahar hamlets, complaints are often met with intimidation. Teachers know that Musahar children are unlikely to continue schooling and that their families lack the social capital to pursue legal redress. Most Musahars are illiterate, landless, and politically voiceless, which reinforces the teachers' sense of impunity. This caste-based educational neglect drives Musahar children into premature labour, where education becomes a luxury they cannot afford.

Hira Manjhi, the village Mukhia, shared another dimension of the problem: "If a Musahar child wants to study, they're lured into driving tractors or earning wages. Once they start earning, they get distracted—spending on alcohol and cigarettes, often influenced by their peers. This addiction cycle begins early." Any income they generates is either absorbed by household needs or addiction, leaving no scope for savings. As debts mount, families borrow from landlords at high interest, falling into an unbreakable cycle of dependency and labour. Dominant castes exploit this vulnerability, maintaining a 'reserve army of labour' for cheap agricultural work. Despite numerous government schemes meant for Musahar upliftment, their reach and impact remain superficial and fragmented. These schemes often do not address the core structural issues—such as landlessness, caste stigma, and educational neglect—but are instead framed as charity or welfare, thereby reinforcing paternalism rather than empowerment.

Teachers from dominant castes often believe that Musahar children are destined for manual labour and do not require education. If a child drops out, teachers rarely follow up unless compelled by official inspections. This lack of concern reflects systemic apathy and caste bias. Educational spaces that should

serve as instruments of emancipation, instead become sites of humiliation and exclusion.

This pattern is not unique to Bihar. Naresh, a 13-year-old Dalit boy from Gujarat, echoed similar experiences: "We had to sit at the back. Teachers gave us no attention. I was beaten for wrong answers and called names like 'Nirka' and 'Dedha.' We weren't allowed to participate in prayers or festivals." (Kumar, Karmala, and Edeberg, 2019, p. 16). The exclusion is compounded for Musahar girls and very few complete secondary education. Many are forced to leave school early to care for siblings or due to caste-based harassment, often leading to early marriage. For girls, education is often considered both risky and unnecessary, and societal pressures combined with patriarchal norms ensure that their academic journeys remain short-lived.

According to the 2001 and 2011 census data, Bihar has one of the lowest literacy rates in India, with the Musahar community showing the lowest female literacy rate—just 3.9 per cent. This staggering figure highlights not only state failure but also the enduring grip of caste and patriarchy on the lives of Musahar girls. Educational discrimination, compounded by poverty, early labour, and social neglect, perpetuates the cycle of marginalisation. Until caste-sensitive, community-based educational reforms are implemented—accompanied by land redistribution and accountability of local institutions—the developmental gap will remain unaddressed. The state must move beyond token gestures and engage with the everyday realities of caste and class oppression if it genuinely seeks to democratise education and dignity for the most marginalised.

Midday Meal: Dignity or Charity for Musahar Children

The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE), now known as PM Poshan, was launched in 1995 with a comprehensive set of objectives—to provide hot cooked meals to children in government and government-aided schools, enhance school enrollment and retention, improve child nutrition, and foster social integration and equality. For marginalised communities like the Musahars, the scheme is intended to serve not only as a safeguard against hunger, but as an enabling condition for accessing education. However, in practice, the program is often viewed by teachers and administrators through a deficit lens—where the presence of children from impoverished and Dalit communities is interpreted not as an act of learning, but of opportunism.

In one government school in Sonbhadra district, Uttar Pradesh, the principal candidly told Human Rights Watch that tribal students are a "big problem." She remarked, "Their main aim is to come and eat, not to study. Just look at how dirty

they are." Such statements are not isolated incidents—they reflect a deep-seated casteist and classist bias that permeates the public schooling system.

This report studies the combination of exclusion faced by marginalised children in the education system. Although several acts have been implemented—such as the Right to Education Act—to secure the educational rights of marginalised sections of society, these have largely failed in practice. The Act defines equity as not only equal opportunity but also the creation of conditions that support disadvantaged children. Yet in practice, these goals remain unmet. This report highlights several key concerns: First, it emphasises that the Indian government should take effective steps to implement the Right to Education Act, focusing not simply on enrolment, but on ensuring the retention of every child in school until at least age 14. Second, the government should develop clear indicators to better detect and respond to discrimination in schools. Third, the government should encourage children from marginalised communities to participate fully in school activities. Fourth, it should ensure more frequent collaboration and interaction between children of different castes, promoting innovative activities aimed at inclusion.

In the case of Musahar children in Bihar, teachers routinely fail to consider the structural conditions that push these children into classrooms without breakfast or basic hygiene. For children living in abject poverty, like those from the Musahar community, the midday meal is often the only substantial food they receive all day. Expecting academic focus without addressing their basic needs is not only unrealistic—it is unjust.

Despite its emancipatory potential, the midday meal scheme is increasingly reduced to a food relief mechanism, with schools functioning more like ration centres than sites of transformative education. During my field visit to a primary school in a Musahar hamlet, the headmaster openly admitted that although school hours officially run from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., most Musahar children arrive shortly before lunchtime and leave soon after eating. He acknowledged the issue but remained unbothered: "At least they are getting food," he said. This sentiment, while pragmatic on the surface, reflects a broader pedagogical apathy. The view that poor Dalit children come to school only for food devalues their agency and masks the structural violence that necessitates their reliance on the scheme in the first place.

It is crucial to understand that the midday meal is not a form of charity—it is a right backed by constitutional and legal mandates, including the Supreme Court's directives in the Right to Food case (PUCL vs. Union of India, 2001). Teachers and school authorities must not treat it as a

concession but as an entitlement that supports the right to education. Rather than using the scheme to stigmatise children, educators should leverage it as a bridge to engage with parents, track dropouts, and address other learning barriers. Regular home visits, community meetings, and material support—such as the timely distribution of stationery, uniforms, and shoes—are essential components of a holistic educational approach.

Moreover, the nutritional standards prescribed under the scheme are often ignored. According to central government guidelines, schools must follow a weekly menu that includes rice, pulses, vegetables, eggs or milk, and occasional desserts. However, women from the Musahartoli reported that in reality, the school usually serves only dal and *chawal* (rice)—day after day. Eggs, fruits, or milk-based items are either absent or appear rarely, usually during official inspections. When the author asked headmaster Rampravesh Paswan about this discrepancy, he claimed that the menu was followed without fail. Yet multiple women insisted that teachers either misappropriate the food grains or falsely record quantities, aided by lax government monitoring. They also suggested that sometimes the supplies themselves were irregular—either delayed or reduced by the government's distribution chain.

This failure of implementation is not just a bureaucratic lapse—it is symptomatic of a deeper caste bias in how state welfare is delivered and perceived. While dominant caste children in better-off villages may receive full portions and proper supervision, Musahar children are often shortchanged—both nutritionally and pedagogically. The mistrust between the community and school staff stems from decades of marginalisation and unmet promises. Without strict monitoring mechanisms, participatory audits, and community oversight, schemes like PM Poshan risk reproducing the very exclusions they aim to counter.

If the state is serious about educational justice, it must stop treating food, schooling, and dignity as separate silos. Hunger is not just about food—it is about power, caste, and control. Until schools become spaces of respect and inclusion rather than pity and discipline, the midday meal scheme will remain a half-fulfilled promise for India's most oppressed children.

Tools of Exclusion in the School System

Teachers' Lack of Concern for Student Attendance

In one classroom scene at the Musahartoli school, a teacher sat talking on the phone for an extended time while students wandered between the classroom and balcony. Occasionally, she would glance at

them, but this had no effect. This indifference highlights how Musahar children are often treated.

Many Dalit children interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported prejudice from teachers and classmates. Priya, a Dalit girl from Bihar, said, "Other children don't let us sit with them. Some girls say, 'Yuck, you people are Dom [street sweepers]—a dirty caste....' The teachers never intervene, even when we complain."

While teachers complain that Musahar children lack hygiene, some parents claimed they send their children clean, but the children get dirty while at school. With both parents working, childcare is often left to older siblings or neighbors.

Teachers also complain that Musahar children run away after lunch and don't take studies seriously. However, this behaviour stems from the teachers' fixed mind-set—that Musahar children aren't capable or interested in studying. This belief reinforces their neglect.

All teachers are from nearby villages and bring with them caste-based prejudices. They assume Musahar children will become labourers, and this assumption shapes their treatment. Only one teacher, Rampravesh Paswan, shows any real concern. Others treat the job mechanically, failing to engage the children.

Teachers Apply Mixed Methods of Teaching

Most Musahar school teachers belong to middle or upper castes, creating a cultural gap. They teach while maintaining physical distance from Musahar children, afraid of being "polluted." I observed a Brahmin teacher who rarely attended school and always stood apart from the children. She was appointed through a powerful source, making her immune to local complaints.

There are several teaching methods, including the telling method, activity method, visual method, and mental method. However, teachers mainly use two methods: first, the telling method, and second, the visual method. In the telling method, teachers typically use discussion and storytelling. To some extent, Musahar children are motivated to study and are aware of basic hygiene. During my field visit, when I asked the students which teaching methods were effective, one replied that the principal was giving them some attention and narrating several legendary stories. Additionally, the principal tries to use visual aids from textbooks and demonstrates some pictures if the students have trouble understanding. As a result, some students have started to come to school regularly. Moreover, the principal appreciates those students who attend regularly and tries to solve any problems they face immediately.

However, some teachers treat Musahar students as servants, ordering them to sweep, clean, fetch water, or carry personal items. These actions reflect entrenched caste hierarchies. They do not care about how much the students are learning. During the field visit, the author asked a student about other teachers' teaching methods. He replied that they simply use the lecture method. They teach any lesson and finish it without caring how much the students have understood. Seldom do they answer questions or engage in discussions. They are always busy on their phones. No one is interested in attending those teachers' classes.

International laws such as the ICCPR and ICESCR prohibit slavery and forced labour, yet Musahar children are subjected to a form of modern slavery in schools. Teachers often normalise these practices due to ignorance or prejudice.

Such behaviour undermines learning. Paulo Freire emphasised that education should be a two-way process, but hierarchical caste mind-sets prevent teachers from fostering inclusive learning.

Corporal punishment is also common. It was observed that teachers keep sticks on their desks and hit students, creating a fear-driven atmosphere that discourages attendance.

Lack of Effective Teaching–Learning Methods

Headmaster Rampravesh Paswan stated that TLMs (Teaching Learning Materials) are available, yet teachers rarely use them effectively. They rely on rote methods, ignoring creative or participatory techniques.

There are several challenges faced by teachers in ensuring effective learning. Teachers in Musahartolis have limited knowledge about how to use TLMs effectively. Another reason is the language barrier—while teachers teach in Hindi at school, children speak Bhojpuri at home, which prevents them from engaging with the teachers and restricts equal participation.

Moreover, creative teaching is an art that requires genuine interest. Without it, no one can use TLMs effectively or engage equally with Musahar children. Unfortunately, many teachers hold deep-seated prejudices, believing that these children "have no future in education." This prejudice is one of the main reasons why they do not encourage equal participation by Musahar students.

Of course, modern TLMs like projectors and other digital tools are not available at the school. However, some traditional TLMs are easily accessible, yet the teachers lack interest in updating or effectively using them with the children. As a result, students often lose

interest in school or attend only for the midday meal.

Jean Piaget emphasised two-way communication, and Paulo Freire promoted cooperation, dialogue, and cultural synthesis in education. These approaches are missing in Musahar schools.

Although the government supplies books, uniforms, toys, and posters, these are often left undistributed or misused. Annual school activities like sports and cultural programmes are rarely organised in Musahar schools, leaving children unmotivated.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The government must initiate comprehensive orientation programmes for teachers that focus on inclusive pedagogy, especially in the context of Dalit and Mahadalit children, with particular attention to the Musahar community. These programmes should go beyond technical training and engage educators in reflective practices on caste, social exclusion, and the importance of culturally responsive teaching. Teachers need to be equipped not only with content knowledge but also with the sensitivity to recognise the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of their students and the challenges they bring into the classroom.

Incorporating Paulo Freire's educational philosophy can be a transformative step in this direction. Freire's ideas of dialogical education and critical pedagogy stresses the need for education to be grounded in the lived experiences of learners. For Musahar children, who face systemic marginalisation both inside and outside the school, education must become a tool for consciousness-raising and social transformation. Freire emphasised that learners should not be treated as empty vessels but as active participants in their own learning. This principle is particularly relevant for Musahar children, whose voices and world views are often silenced in mainstream schooling.

To operationalise such pedagogy, Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs) play a crucial role. The use of visual aids like charts, diagrams, and culturally relevant illustrations can help make learning more accessible. Interactive tools such as storytelling, games, local case studies, and hands-on activities can be used to relate textbook knowledge to students' daily lives. For example, mathematical concepts can be introduced through measuring grains or budgeting for household expenses—activities familiar to many Musahar children. Language learning can be enriched by incorporating local dialects, folk tales, and everyday conversations.

These strategies help bridge the gap between the abstract nature of formal education and the concrete realities of marginalised learners. More importantly, they validate the cultural knowledge of Musahar children, allowing them to see themselves

reflected in the learning process. This not only increases engagement, but also builds self-esteem and a sense of belonging—key factors in retaining first-generation learners in school.

Such inclusive and contextualised pedagogy requires institutional support, regular monitoring, and community involvement. Education should not be limited to the classroom but must involve local actors—parents, community leaders, and grassroots organisations—who can provide insights into the children's social world. Only through a multi-stakeholder approach, rooted in empathy and justice, can the education system begin to dismantle the barriers that Musahar children continue to face.

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