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## Two chappatis per day

Freny Manecksha meets one of India's poorest tribes whose children make themselves ill by eating raw bhindi to keep their hunger at bay

**S**tarvation deaths are headline grabbers. But when an entire community lives on the brink of starvation through the year it rarely merits a mention. One such group, the Musahars in Uttar Pradesh light their *chula* once a day, in the evening, and live on one meal.

Last month, when I visited a Musahar *tola* (settlement) of some 25 families in Barrachawar Block of Ghazipur in eastern UP, the families were waiting for the males—the only earning members—to return with the daily wages. Rajmunna, one of the women explained, "We have no land. My family of eight is entirely dependent on daily wages of around Rs 10 to Rs 25. We eat two chappatis per head. A quarter kilo of dal must suffice for us all. Occasionally we get some vegetables like green peas that we make into a gravy"

Rajmunna describes her chronic hunger as a "burning pit in the abdomen". She is unable to walk any distance without getting breathless. Rinku, a teenager, is noticeably ill and has been diagnosed with TB of the bones. She has not received any treatment. The Musahars claim that a health worker makes the rounds but demands Rs 10 per injection.

Things get grimmer in August and September when there is low demand for agricultural labour. The *chula* is then lit once in two days. *Basi* (leftover) rotis are given to the children the next morning. "We have to give the children something to eat because if the hunger pangs get too much for them they run into the fields and gobble raw bhindi, which makes them ill," says an elder, Ram Prasad Vanbasi. A 2003 study by a student of the Indian Institute of Rural Management found that 90 per cent of the Musahar children below six suffer from malnutrition. Tuberculosis and rheumatic fever are common.

There is no electricity in the *tola*. It gets waterlogged every monsoon forcing the families to shelter in the Block Development Office premises. Shifting their possessions is easy—all they own are string *charpoy*s, kitchen utensils and a few tattered garments.

One of India's most marginalised communities, the Musahars live largely on the banks of the Gandak and its tributaries in eastern UP and Bihar. They are believed to be tribals evicted when the



**Some say that the Musahars, whom the British tagged as a criminal community, get their name from eating rats**

British cleared forest lands. Small plots given in compensation were usurped by powerful landlords. A project conducted under the Poorest Area Civil Society programme (a development programme for India's 100 poorest districts) found that 60 per cent of Musahars were landless. Others own waterlogged, infertile plots.

The origin of the community's name is interesting. Some Musahars claim it is because they ate rats. But Ram Prasad Vanbasi said the name was given because of the tribe's practice of ferreting out grain from rats' burrows. They are often stigmatised because of this association with rats. Without tribal status, they have no rights to access forest produce. They are *bhumeens* (landless). Mechanisation of agriculture has meant fewer jobs.

On the day I visited Barrachawar the men had gone to trawl the ponds of a nearby village for a fruit called Ramdana, which they sell for Rs 40 per kilo. This kind of work is very labour-intensive. The Musahars social and political isolation was heightened when the British tagged them as a criminal community. In independent India they have remained vul-

nerable targets with the police forcing them to do *begaar* or forced labour.

Kapil Deo Kesri, a Dalit activist, of the Purvanchal Rural Development & Training Institute recalls how in 1996 several members of the community had been rounded up by the police on trumped-up charges and he had to intervene to get them released. Consequently, Musahars have a great fear of authority. This is why they find it difficult to get Below Poverty Line cards. Forced to away from upper-caste villages, Musahar children who attend school are made to sit separately.

Many do not even have the necessary papers to vote. An important landmark took place in May this year when, before the UP elections, two voluntary bodies—the Musahar Vikas Pahal and Musahar Manch—organised a dialogue between the voiceless community and different parties. All the candidates acknowledged the necessity of speedy land reforms to enable Musahars to earn a decent livelihood. But it will take much more than that to help these 'dalits of the dalits' in a state ruled by a dalit chief minister.