

The Land and Tree Recognize the Musahar: Alternative Perspective of Nature-human Understanding among the Musahars

Madhu Giri¹

Abstract

Natural cosmology is the largest entity in which all nature including human beings and their recycle-continuity encompassed as Hindu-Buddhist idea of the immortal soul. The soul can enter in any form of the body (tree, animal, human, bird, fish, insect, and anything) and it can interchangeably communicate with any living thing. The activities of human beings are observed, evaluated, and controlled by non-humans and vice-versa. The binary categories of nature-culture, human-non-human, civilized-savage, and lived-dead are rejected in the understanding of the natural cosmology of the Musahars. In this article, I tried to explore intersubjective relations between natural phenomena and the cultural practices of the Musahar people. I employed participatory observation and key informant interview methods including long-term ethnographic fieldwork among the Musahars people in Siraha district, Nepal. The Musahars communicate with trees, stones, lands, water, animals, and birds around the settlement. They claimed that natural phenomena understood their language, emotions, crisis, and happiness. They considered themselves as a part of a larger natural cosmology. This paper explored how the Musahars transformed themselves into wild animal, tree, birds, fish, super human (like god) and again bounced back to human. The article explores alternative epistemology to understand nature's understanding of human behaviors. All non-human spirits could look the human and their activities through the lens of natural spirit. The concept and transformation of the Musahar people and natural phenomena or their inter-subjectivity are called Musahar's perspectivism in this article.

Keywords: Musahar, Perspectivism, Nature, Culture, Epistemology.

Introduction

Musahars! What does "Musahar" mean for them? Why do they think and practice differently? The name Musahar symbolized intersubjective connection between nature

1. Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu
madhu.giri@cda.tu.edu.np/madu.giri@gmail.com

Article history: Received on: Oct. 19, 2024; Accepted on: Dec. 19, 2024; Published on: Jan. 31, 2025
Peer Reviewed under the authority of THE ACADEMIA, journal of NUTAN, central committee, Kathmandu, Nepal, with ISSN 2350-8671 (Print).



and the people (Musahars). Those people who were familiar with *Musahars* had taken for granted about identity and perspective of the community. While going through the written documents of the *Musahars* of Nepal and India, colonial administrators noted that the etymological meaning of the word 'Musahar' was derived from *masa*, 'flesh, and, *hera*, 'seeker' (Crooke, 1896). Their dietary inclination to flesh and forest game or (Musa+ Har²) was root of their common name. Literature noted that the Musahar literally meant 'rat-taker' (from 'musa' which means rat and 'hera' means 'seeker') or even 'flesh-seeker' or 'hunter' ('masu' means flesh) (Risley, 1891; Nesfield, 1888). Similarly, J.C. Nesfield (1888) wrote that the name Mushera or Musahar has been supposed to be made up of two Hindi words signifying 'rat taker'. But rat catching or rat eating, is by no means the peculiar or even a prominent characteristics of the tribe (Nesfield, 1888, p.2). Nesfield argued that the name in upper India is pronounced by the natives of the country as Mushera, and not as Musahar (rat-taker or rat-eater). In an old folk-tale, he mentioned, the name is made to signify flesh-seeker or hunter, (being derived from Masu, flesh, and hera, seeker) and a legend is told as to the event which led to the tribe being driven to maintain to itself by hunting wild animals. This is more comprehensive name identity than rat-catcher or rat-eater. But post colonial writers, without detailed ethnographic study in India and Nepal, exoticized the name and people and continued to define the community as "rat-eater" (Jha, 1998; Kumar, 2006). They eat whatever edible material found in the nature.

When traced the origin, in 1891, Herbert Risley, a colonial official in India stated that '*Musahars* are an offshoot of the Bhuiya³ tribe of Chota Nagpur'. The name Bhuiyan denotes *Bhumi* (land). Though it shows close link to their occupation but they were landless. Amar Kumar stated that they began to migrate to the paddy-growing plains of Bihar probably since the 12th century and have been the single largest source of agricultural labour in the region ever since (Risley, 1891; Kumar, 2006). Whether they were Bhuiya tribe or Kol tribe, researchers agreed that they were tribal groups like many indigenous communities of India and Nepal. Amar Kumar argued that a good number of *Musahars* do eat rats, as do many other tribal groups. Having done hunting for centuries, the community has honed up its skill in catching rats like no other community. But eating rats is by no means confined to them (Kumar, 2006). What is important, however, is ideological and epistemic domination of the West while dehumanizing people of different worldviews. Rather than making private land ownership and saving for future, the community enjoyed natural phenomena

-
2. The word 'har' is 'a man' in the Santali language and alternative name for 'Kol'. The word Munda is a Sanskrit derivative meaning a head, and, as stated by Risley, is the common term employed by the Kols for the headman of a village, hence it has been adopted as an honorific title for the tribe.
 3. One of the Scheduled tribes of India. The Bhuiyas were bonded labour during 19th century in Bihar (Parkash 1990).

and collective existence of nature and humans. Their close resemblance in physical appearance with Bhil and Munda tribes and cultural proximity with Tharu indicate their tribal propinquity. The Bengal Census of 1872, page 166, identifies them with Tharus, on the proof that "there is a Tharu sub-tribe or clan which calls itself Musahar" as well (Nesfield, 1888:2).

The *Musahars*, the second largest Tarai Dalit caste group living in central-east Tarai of Nepal, were mostly *Haruwa-Charuwa*⁴ labour before 1990 (Dhakal, 2007). They are populated heavily in Central-East Tarai-Nepal, Bihar, and UP. Historically, their livelihood has been closely attached with land and labour (soil cutting and agricultural manual labor) but ironically 96.67% of *Musahars* were landless (CEDA, 2007). Their adult literacy rate (21.9%) (CBS, 2011), life expectancy, and position on human development indices are the lowest (Dahal 2010). In spite of significant population size, their presence in local and national political landscape, bureaucracy, security and any other government services is almost null.

Other caste/ethnic groups (particularly non-Dalits) portrayed the Musahar as an alien, half-human, and uncivilized community based on typical socio-economic behaviors (Giri, 2018). Non-Musahars said many derogatory anecdotes about the Musahars. Because of their landless status and locally established degraded allegation of property killer, they were deprived of earning social and economic capitals both in formal and community organizations. Musahars denied all these allegations and claimed that the derogatory narratives were made to perpetuate domination and exploitation over Musahars by dominant caste/ethnic groups.

Though there is no historical record of their arrival in Nepal, but it is said that large number of *Musahars* entered Nepal during Rana regime to fall trees for timber needed for the expansion of Indian railway as well as to cultivate new arable land in the Tarai (Jha, 1998, NNDSWO, 2006). They have adopted multiple resource tapings strategies for their survival. Earth work, agricultural labour, hunting gathering, wood cutting and digging ponds were considered their traditional livelihood occupations. But most of these traditional occupations were discontinued. Fishing, earth work, firewood selling, animal husbandry (cows, goats, ducks), brick factory labour, transportation labour, *Haruwa-Charuwa*, seasonal migration were livelihood strategies among

4. The Government of Nepal promulgated the Haruwa-Charuwa Labor Prohibition Act 2001 to free and rehabilitate bonded agricultural laborers under the System. The Haruwa-Charuwa system as a whole is an outcome of historically framed patron-client relationship for generations. It is a special case of dyadic ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of a lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron.

them (NNSDWO, 2006). Sharma (1999) and Dhakal (2007) analyzed patron-client (*Haruwa-Charuwa*) ties which were institutionalized as interdependency based on unequal exchange among Dalits communities in *Bihar* and *Madhes* respectively.

What was often encountered as a flippant query from curious observers had become a burning question that the community posed to themselves. In social interactions, *Musahars* find that they are categories of previous untouchable groups. Within the category, each of the group claimed superior and segregated rest of other groups of the category. The *Musahars* claimed that they were tribal (Musahar means hunter) and made untouchable in course of *Haruwa-Charuwa*. But there was not detailed study of the Musahar socio-economic and cultural transformation in both countries. When I asked what made Musahar themselves, the answers nearly always pointed to the story of *Dina-Bhadri* and *Haruwa-Charuwa*, broadly defined. The point on which most scholars agree, why they did not conduct further research with the Musahar, is that they are an extremely poor group with little permanent settlement and culture: no unique traditions or costumes, nothing distinctive beyond the lowest common denominator features of plain origin people in Tarai and North India. Another reason for this ethnographic absence of the Musahar in Nepal is that they are essentialized with North Indian people and culture.

Research Questions and Objectives

The *Musahars* were mostly blamed that they were poor because of their own perspective of material and nature. Other caste/ethnic people believed that Musahars did not keep any resource ownership for long. Similarly, dominant storyteller argued that their semi-nomadic and almost bonded livelihood pushed them not only into economic pauperization but also treated them a people without culture and history (Giri, 2018). It was frequently told that they did not have food, they did not have permanent home, they did not have land, they did not have history, myth and they did not have culture (Giri, 2024). In many cases, they were not even regarded as members of the society. When I expressed my interest to study their history, and relations with nature many non-Musahar elites in the study area made fun of me. They told me, "The *Musahars* are not '*Manchhe*' (Human), they are '*Banmanchhe*' (forest man or people who live in forest). They asked me why didn't you study '*Manchhe*' (human)?". Some of them made fun of my disciplinary orientation. Though I shared to them that anthropology studies holistic aspects of human (*Manchhe*) culture, their main question was why I chose "*Banmanchhe*". They rhetorically asked me, "Do the *Banmanchhes*(*jungle human*) have history and culture?". Logical answer of the series of questions about "*Banmanchhe*" by applying Musahar perspective is main objective of the paper. These two depictions: the people without history, culture and

the *Banmanchhe* metaphors further strengthened my determination to do a detailed research on their ontological position. What are understanding of *Musahars* about nature and other non-Musahar people? Do the *Banmanchhes* have history and cultural perspective? If yes, how do they understand natural cosmology? The article aims to explore intersubjective relations between natural phenomena and the cultural perspectivism of the Musahar people.

Research Methodology

As a non-Musahar and university trained researcher engaged relatively long period (from 2010 to 2022) to understand their perspective of nature and spiritual cosmology. I employed ethnographic observation and interviews in different contexts to collect data. Initially, my attempts to be an insider were limited by my subjectivity, culture and linguistic gravity. Ontologically, my idea of the existence of multiple narratives in the Musahar community could be unacceptable for the positivist idea of dominant story. I employed ontological turn to value Musahars cosmology and perspectives of nature. My ontology position is similar to the understanding of the Musahars' worldview. I believe that worldview is constructed through interpersonal, and intersubjective interactions. I extended intersubjective approach beyond human and living things. It covered larger natural cosmology and spiritual world of the Musahars. Holbraad and Pedersen aptly note various employments of ontology in anthropological investigation. They argue that Ontology is the methodological injunction to keep constitutively open the question of what any given object of ethnographic investigation might be and, therefore, how existing concepts and theories have to be modulated in order to better articulate it (Holbrad & Pedersen, 2017, p. x). Besides my PhD research, two Musahar settlements were selected for this research at Golbazar Municipality of Siraha district. I have conducted fieldwork in 2022 AD. Stories were collected from knowledgeable Musahars in different age, ritual experts and gender. Structural level analysis was attempted to compare with the dominant western and materialistic worldview and the South Asian plural as well spiritual worldviews.

Musahar's Perspectivism of Myth and History

The people of each caste/ethnic group typically hold to an origin myth that tells of their descent from noble or divine ancestors, or from some of each kind. These accounts not only reflect the common self-image, they also serve to justify effort to regain one's noble and rightful heritage. These mythic stories were culturally produced history and awareness of the past among marginalized communities (Vansina, 1965). James Fisher (1987) shows intermix of mythical origin stories and culturally mixed ancestry which is historically involved in the history of Budha, Rokaya and Gharti clans out of 'Kaikhe'

Magar. He notes how 'Kaika' speaking angle mother and Nepali speaking Thakuri father got married and their three sons form different clan by marrying girls from three different communities (Fisher, 1987, p. 35-42). Fisher argues, "The specific social relationships of the mythical past cannot be reconstructed any more than those of the historical rajadoms can be, but the empirical study of contemporary Tarangpur confirms the cultural miscegenation of those myths" (Fisher, 1987, p. 42). Similarly, the *Musahars* cherished different myths of their origin and name of "*Musahars*" but they shared common myth of descent from Dina-Bhadri. Somana Sada heard that human beings came out of earth like other soil creatures. Soil is everything from beginning of life to death for them. He added, "We worship soil, eat soil, live in soil and use soil as medicine. Therefore, soil is God, food, shelter, medicine". They argued that when living thing died, all decomposed as soil. Soil gives life including humans. He gave example of the origin of Sita (daughter of the King Janak of Mithila) who was found on the soil as per the Hindu epic. He prompted me to remind the blurred boundary between myth and history in Hindu epic in which Janak was considered historical king of Mithila whereas Sita had mythic origin. Myth and history are not clearly separated in South Asian societies. Romila Thapar (1996) clearly stated that myths generally narrated cosmological primordial events; atemporal moments which constituted sacred time and differed from the profane time of daily routines. She added that mixture of sacred and profane, temporal and atemporal events were intermixed in south Asian histories. The construction of genealogical narratives was immense and after hundreds of generations such genealogical records could have been hardly an authentic record. She put stress on mythic time because earlier generations can be stretched back into the remote past or claims to heroic ancestry can be telescoped so as to be placed closer to the claimant (Thapar, 1996, p.29). Because of the different concept of time, myths and histories were not clearly separated in eastern societies. Similar intermixing was found in the history of the Musahar community.

Musahrs believe that there is the largest soul which is immortal. The natural environment encompassed diversity of souls including humans. Somana added that man was the wish of God because they believed that Musahar can be transformed into tiger, fish, eagle and again man through mantra. He argued, "Our ancestors were king of both jungle and human society through the mantra. They had power to understand heaven (Swarga), hell (narak), soil (mait), tree and varieties of souls. When they lost mantras or forgot those powerful tool, they became powerless and turned into dark tunnel of *Haruwa-Charuwa* labour"(L. Sada, personal communication, September 23, 2022). They believed that they could recharge themselves through cosmological power. He told me a mythic story of tiger God as mask of Musahar ancestor. He heard this story from his grandfather. The story of the tiger was:

A small group of *Musahars* had been living in the middle of the dense forest. They can communicate with trees, animals, birds and non-living spirits in the jungle. They made land for corn production. Half of the corn was consumed by birds, animals and spirits. The ancestors were happy to get chance to feed all creatures. They collected most of food items from the jungle. One day a new man and his wife came into the settlement. They pretended that their cattle were lost in the jungle. The *Musahars* gave them shelter and food. Next day they went to the jungle and came with a cattle. They made small hut at the end of Musahar settlement. The couple demarked private territory. Gradually, other people also came near the new comer. They started exploitation of forest and land. The new comers produced milk and curd. At the beginning, they gave free milk and curd to the *Musahars*. Our ancestors liked it and exchanged cultivated land with curd and milk. When the *Musahars* were almost displaced, last Musahar went to Dhami to know the cause of displacement. Dhami told him a *Mantra* to transform himself into a tiger. Then a Musahar turned into a tiger and destroyed the land, houses and cattle of the new comers. Then all new comers returned by leaving the settlement. The tiger ancestor turned into human again and called back all the relatives into the settlement. They have many similar stories of metamorphosis of the *Musahars* into fish, snake, eagle, dragon and super human (L. Sada, personal communication, September 24, 2022).

This story sounds like phoenix since the *Musahars* came out of the ashes of the mythic tiger-Musahar. They argued that their ancestors had power of resurrection of varieties of non-human and they could interact with them. Like Philippe Descola's (2013) presentation of Hindu-Buddhist philosophical argument of chain of being, the connection between souls and inter-subjective communication was possible between the *Musahars* and the tiger. The differences in physical dispositions did not constitute an obstacle to communication and were partly wiped out by the interpersonal relations that were established between terms that can be substituted for one another since they were positioned at the same level of the ontological scale. Somana added that tiger was still considered their ancestral God. He showed me a boy (about 11 years old) who was touched by *Baghiya* (tiger God). The boy made loud sound of animals and was dribbling saliva from mouth and tongue. They interpreted the case as anger of *Baghiya*. Their dhami can interact and satisfy the tiger. They told that the boy was half human and half tiger. This was continuation of their ancestral avatar. Similarly, they looked themselves as half cultural (human) and half natural, half time in society and half time in jungle. After few months' traditional medication, the boy bounced back to become a normal boy. They told a story of *Baghiya* infected Musahar destroyed property of the landlord at neighboring village. Different levels of intersubjective transformations,

from animal to human and vice versa provide Ameridian Perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998) of the *Musahars'* powerful existence. This tiger imagery of the ancestors indicates not only physical strength, but also natural cosmology which was also translated to *Dina Bhadri* mythic story. It was frequently told when a Musahar spirited by *Baghaiya* deity, then the Musahar behaved like tiger, destroyed enemies' property and cattle. The story reveals powerful soul as articulated in mythical and historical landscape of their settlement and resonance of their relationship with trans-human beings. Somana still believes that the Musahar would never ever become extinct from the area because their ancestor will come in a disguised form (either tiger, eagle, snake or *Dina Bhadri*) to protect them at ultimate crisis. The circular notion of -from death to rebirth, from animal to human and from powerful to powerless- transformation was clearly stated. His logic aptly matched with their everyday behaviors of carelessness on normative order and socio-economic expectation of the society in general. The *Musahars* believed that when they were about to become extinct their ancestors, the powerful soul would come to protect them. The same principle apply in case of other non-human beings in their cosmology. They gave example of wild animals. Some of them were about to disappare. They claimed that their soul entered into the body of human. Therefore, many human behave like animals.

Transformation of the *Musahars* from the tiger is fictional and equally sounds opposite of western ontology. The Musahars argued that all humans were only manifestation of different souls in the cosmology. The soul can enter into any form of body. They believed that those who were earlier transformed from wild creature to human being created normative order of hierarchy. Those who came later were at the bottom of the caste/ethnic hierarchy. Categories of caste, ethnicity, gender, religion were made by human was not replicated in the cosmology. Somana claimed that the *Musahars* were transformed and the process of transformation was continued toward uncertain socio-cultural terrain. His opinion of the transformation of Musahar sounds like orthodox Hindu belief of the continuation of the human soul in different incarnations. He added that whenever they came on the earth there was no doubt they were one like other mobile tribes. When they came to contact with other groups, most of the higher position and ritual ranks were occupied. He meant that caste based hierarchical order was set up. Then, his group was ranked the lowest by the people of higher rank. His concept of the past sounds close to cultural evolutionist.

Intersubjectivity of Musahars

Somana and Jhoki, Musahar traditional leaders, frequently included me transient walks around the village farmland, forest, and settlement landscape, They told me about the history and migration of the Musahrs in this area. 'The land and trees around the village can tell better history of land and Musahar. Better ask to the land and tree

who are the Musahars' they said. By showing the traditional settlement, geographical and landscape, (for instance exercise sport of *Diana Bhadri*, river, trees, animals, land, jungle), they claimed that his great grandfathers can understand language of tree, river, and animals. Turning of tree leaves, the eyes of animals, sound of wind and river were symbolic language and only Musahars could understand. The animals, trees and water also recognized the Musahars. "The Musahar better understand soil and soil also recognizes the Musahar", they added. This intersubjective understanding of the Musahars and natural cosmology was similar to the tribes of Amazon forest (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). The natural spirit did not harm the Musahars. They were born in this place and interacted with soil and forest. He reiterated that the Musaharniya, the settlement of the Musahar but now Tamangs were the largest community in this settlement, was the first settlement of this village. He added that the *Musahars* were the first settlers in Jamdaha. He consolidated his argument by presenting mythical importance of the territory. They believed that their brave ancestor (Dina-Bhadri) practiced physical exercise in the jungle nearby Jamdaha. There were foot, knee and finger prints of the ancestor on the big stone. Other castes people also believed that these foot and finger prints belonged to *Musahars'* myth. The stone prints were not archaeologically tested but local stories and myths were made up and commonly shared by the people around there. The stone prints were taken as testimony of their belongingness with the place. Amar and Namsaran argued that there were not only stone prints, but also war exercise and hunting trail sports at the Chure forest. Several mythical landscapes from *Jogiya Jhajar*, *Kataiya Khap* to *Kamala River* were named and memorized during *Dina Bhadri* Puja. They claimed that mythical landscape and their acceptance among the people were acknowledgement of the Musahar historical attachment with the landscape.

Somana kept on interpreting about finger prints and movements of the *Dina Bhadri* around the Chure. He showed me finger prints on turned stone at the end of Jamdaha village. He was told that when *Dina Bhadri* exercised on the stone, they became so powerful that none of kings defeated them. When enemies knew the source of both physical and cosmological power from the stone, they secretly turned the stone down. Then, there was downfall of *Dina Bhadri* and the Musahar community again. The fall of the stone was the fall of the community. Somana was hopeful for the arrival of *Dina Bhadri* to turn the stone right side up again and bright future of all the community. They believed that their powerful ancestor (Dina Bhadri) was not dead, his soul will enter into the Musahar.

Dina-Bhadri: The Immortal Soul

I was interested to know opinions regarding the natural and social landscape of *Dina Bhadri* and arrival of the community in Madhes. I met R. Sada (chairperson of

Nepal Risikul Saday kalian Samaj), C. Sada (chairperson of Nepal Rastriya Musahar Sangh) Namsaran Sada, (the founder of Sabari Sankalpa Samaj), M. Shah, (the Principal of Softech College at Lahan), Sufal Sada, (lecturer at Murarka campus), U. Sada (Musahar right activist) at Lahan and Golbazar to talk about the historical evidence of the community in Madhes. The intellectual community of the district agreed that *Dina Bhadri* was one of the popular narratives of the Madhes. They claimed that everyone could tell at least one story of *Dina Bhadri* in Madhes. Namsaran said that *Musahars* and *Dushadha* had tribal residence at the bottom of the Chure from *Kamala River* in the west to *Koshi River* in the east. The mythic dance of *Salhes* and mythic stories of *Dina Bhadri* were testimonies of their tribal property in the areas. Intellectuals agreed with *Musahars'* claim of indigenous identity and compared physical proximity with the *Jhagad* and *Munda* of Tarai and cultural proximity with the *Tharu* ethnic group of the region. Mahadev Sah said, "The *Musahars* are quietly similar to *Bhil* and *Munda* tribal groups. I have grown up with them and observed tribal physique and cultural practices." He added that "Etymological meaning of the word 'Musahar' was derived from their dietary inclination to mouse which is symbolically, as observed among African tribal groups and their dietary practice, cultural characteristics of tribal groups. They were Hinduized and made untouchable when they came as labour force of Jamindari system in India. The *Musahars* were recognized as untouchable before they entered Nepal." His argument was that they were neither Hindu nor Dalit, rather had tribal characteristics. They have natural friendly perspective. He paused for a while and added that the *Musahars* in Nepal were treated and categorized under Tarai Dalit on the basis of Indian government's Scheduled Caste list (Thapar,1996) and historical relationships between *Jamindars* and *Musahars* in Bihar and *Uttar Pradesh*. Kamsufal Sada has visited Bihar University to investigate information about the *Musahars*. He argued that without detailed study of the *Musahars'* cultural traits and indigenous food habits both the governments of India and Nepal categorized them under Dalit. His argument was that Indian government followed caste ethnic templates handed them by British Colonial government. Indian governments in post colonial context did not question the knowledge and categories of colonial construction of caste. He claimed that *Musahars* food habits and culture were close to *Tharu*, *Jhagad* and *Bhil* rather than *Chamar*, *Kami* and *Sharki*. Mahadev Sah claimed that there were observable physical changes besides socio-cultural changes among the *Musahars* of Siraha. He shared with the intellectuals that he had observed sported hair *Musahars* when he was a school boy. He has not seen those sported hair *Musahars* for last 40 years. He doubted that sported hair *Musahars* changed into silky hair. All of them agree that there were several memorial places of *Dina Bhadri* and their bravery.

According to Hareram Sada, *Musahars* were tribal group before Rana regime and/or at least Jamindari system in Nepal Tarai. Even now, they enjoyed hunting,

gathering, fishing and semi nomadic life. Unfortunately, the Chure forest and other natural resources were destroyed by later overflow of migration. Among the Parbatiya castes and *Madhesi* non-Dalit castes, the *Musahars* were considered *Banmanis*, semi-human, wild human and exotic human. I remembered the statement given by a man from Parbatiya community when I introduced my research project at very beginning of my field work. He said, "*Ya, ban manchhe khojna aaunu vayako ho? Hernus ban manchhe kasta chhan* (Ok, came to find jungle- man? look at jungle man, how are they ?). After a month stay in the Ghaletol Musahari, the same man again asked me, "*Hernuvayo ban manchheko chartikala?*" (Have you seen jungle men's activities?). These statements were highly loaded world view of the higher castes towards the Musahar community. I wondered, why they were called jungle human. Most of the Musahars said that they loved, cared and enjoyed natural phenomena and cosmology. They preferred hunting, wood collection and food collection in the jungle. Gurusaran Sada argued that the Musahars were called jungle human because they can interact and understand natural world better than any other community in Tarai. He added that the forest, water and wild animals also understand the Musahars because the Musahars did not harm them. They shared same ontological level of being as anthropologist pointed (Wagner, 2001; Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2012).

The *Musahars* also preferred jungle for livelihood as well as freedom. They preferred to visit jungle for hunting and wood collection. There was still famous statement among the *Musahars* "*jungle hete to maus, sag naihete?*" (If there is jungle, how could you say there will be no meat and vegetables?). Rajlal challenged that the *Musahars* championed on hunting and gathering though very negligible food stuff were collected from the jungle these days. His challenge for other communities was that the Musahar surpassed knowledge and skill of forest survival. This confidence of the Musahars came from intersubjective understanding or knowledge of the Musahars and nature. I observed that they collected food stuff from jungle and paddy field. Crabs, *Doka-Ghugi*⁵, wild yams, wild boar, and wild green vegetable (locally called *Siranchi*) were common food during monsoon. They had long stories and interpretations of each varieties of food collected from Jungle. Somana told me long story of *Siranchi* and *Ghugi* when we were sharing dinner at his home. He claimed that the *Musahars* did not have eyesight problem because of sufficient consumption of green vegetable and *Ghugi*. By showing me method of eating *Ghugi*, he added that *Musahars* without *Ghugi* and *Siranchi* was not Musahar at all. Wherever I went in the Musahar settlement, they preferred to cook *Siranchi*, *Ghugi*, crab and rice instead of other common varieties of green vegetable and meat.

5. *Ghugi* is a kind of snail crab found in ponds and shallow water places. It has a hard spiral shell. It is boiled and outer shell is thrown. Some people make small hole on the shell and suck meat. Some people take out meat and fry it.

According to Chauthi Sada, an old Musahar, they were tribal group before Jamindari system in North India and Nepal Tarai. As they were told by former generation old men, they did not know anything about agriculture and animal husbandry. They were not scientists of crop farming rather they used to eat fruits, crabs and vegetable whatever found in the jungle. Kamsufal Sada believed that *Musahars* were descendants of Risikul or Risidev who had wandering life in the jungle. They still kept on moving from one place to another with family members. This was the cause they were isolated with other communities. They thought that they were different than other human beings. Because of mobile culture, they were different than rest of other communities in the society. They did not compare themselves with any other because they thought they were not comparable category. Their world view, their understanding of the material world, land, forest and other natural phenomena were completely different from other people in the Tarai.

Musahar's Perspectivism: Discussion

The material and cultural status of the Musahars were analyzed through the indicators of material possession they owned and the enhancement of western technological literacy. Classical anthropologists were heavily influenced by the politics of enlightenment philosophy, the western logics of nature culture hierarchy and human centric. Classical ethnographic monographs became dominant story of specific category of people. Because of reproduction of dominant scientific story, cultural diversity and plurality of stories, worldviews of the community were dehumanized and consequently deleted. During 1980s, post-structural anthropologists refuted legitimacy of universality, objectivity of human science and dominant narrative of the people. Intersubjective narratives were regarded equally valuable. The relations and continuation of natural cosmology and cultural practices of the Musahars can be better understood with different ontological base. Spiritual anthropology provided new lens to understand continuation of human-non-human spirits. Death is considered as physical transformation of beings and spirit never dies (Parsania, 2022). The two-ways communication, understanding and contextual support between the Musahars and natural cosmology including spirits is based on same level of underlying ontological locations. This typical worldview of the Musahars is regarded as Musaharian perspectivism.

The origin and their interaction with natural cosmology of the Banmanchhe (Musahars) articulate their ontological position with natural phenomena including cosmology. They believed that human beings are evaluated by the natural and cosmological beings. Forest, wildlife, soil, and spirit of Dina Bhadri not only evaluated but also punished human. Human and non-human souls share same level of ontological position. The nature people intersubjectivity was clearly observed on

their culture and orientation of livelihood. Their worldview and relation with natural and cosmological phenomena could be understood through the lens of spiritual anthropology and Amerindian perspectivism. Spiritual anthropology argued that human are not separated from the natural cosmology not is the natural world apart from human (Parsania, 2022). Musahars argued that their physical and spiritual being mingle in the larger natural cosmology. Their non-possessive behaviours were reflections of the worldview. They looked their ancestor spirit in the faces of tiger, tree, snake and the natural cosmology. They claimed that they can interact and understand the language of natural cosmology. The natural spirits also interact and understand language of humans. This type of intersubjective understanding between human and natural phenomena was extensively studied by a Brazalian anthropologist Viveiros De Castro (Viveiros de Castro, 2001). The way Musahars interact and tell the story of metamorphosis of their ancestors with natural cosmology is quite similar to Amerindian Perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism is based on 'spiritual unity and corporal diversity'(1998, p 470)- one culture, many natures. His oft-cited passage:

[H]umans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals and spirits see humans as animals to the same extent that animals see humans s spirit or as animals. By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture. (Viveiros de Castro, 1998:470).

Based on Amazonian peoples' study, he argued that the original common status of both humans and animals is not enmity rather humanity. He argued, "The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p 471). He claimed that humans spirits did not die rather transform into another humans or animals. The continuation of spirit was justified by relating animals are ex-humans. This worldview is quite similar to the Musahars of Tarai. Musahars claimed when human died, their spirit melt into the nature.

Conclusion

'The land and tree can tell better answer who are the Musahars' is the most powerful statement to conclude alternative epistemology of human-nature understanding. Homo-understanding and human interpretation of nature was the dominant worldview. Better to ask to the land and tree who we are, reminded my heydays with grandparents who communicated with livestock. The Musahars did

not accumulate land and any property because the land and property were also part of other humans, animals and natural beings. They believed that all human and non-human beings are part of the largest cosmological soul. Based on the perspectivism, it can be argued that life and death are considered metamorphosis of physical body. The soul is immortal but bodily manifestation of beings differ. As Viveiros de Castro argued, the Musahars also claimed that all non-human spirits could look the human and their activities through the lens of own. The alternative epistemic and ontological positions of the Musahar and their interaction with natural phenomena or their intersubjectivity is operationalized as Musahar's perspectivism. Like Amazonian tribal people, the Musahars have their perspective on understanding the transcendental forms of the human spirit as well as natural cosmology.

Acknowledgments

The article is developed based on the research carried out under the Faculty Grants Award no (FRG-78/79-H&S-06) of UGC Nepal. I am thankful to the financial support of the University Grants Commission, Nepal.

References

- CBS. (2011). *National population and housing census 2011*. Vol.1. CBS
- CEDA. (2007). *National living standard survey*. Compiled by Amar Kumar Lal Das. NLSS 2. CEDA T.U.
- Crooke, W. (1896). *The tribes and castes of the North-Western provinces and Oudh*. Vol iv. Bengal.
- Dahal, D. R. (2010). Hindu nationalism and untouchable reform: The status of Dalits in Nepali society. In D. R. Dahal & L. P. Uprety (Eds.). *SASON Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1, (pp-6-19). Kathmandu: SASON.
- Descola, P. (2013). *Beyond nature and culture*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
- Dhakai, S. (2007). Haruwa, the unfree agricultural laborer: A case study from eastern Tarai. in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 34 (2), pp. 277-301, CNAS/TU.
- Fisher, J.F. (1987). *Trans-himalayan traders: Economy, society, and culture in Northwest Nepal*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publisher PL.
- Giri, M. (2018). *Political-economic dimensions of marginalization: The case of Musahars of Eastern Tarai, Nepal*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] Tribhuvan University.

- Giri, M. (2024). Musahars' perspective on nature, culture and cosmology. *Journal of Nepalese Study*, vol.16 (1), 122-124.
- Holbraad, M & Pedersen, M.A. (2017). *The ontological turn: An anthropological exposition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jha, H. B. (1998). *Tarai Dalits: A case study of selected VDCs of Saptari District of Nepal* Kathmandu: Action Aid Nepal.
- Kumar, A. (2006). Culture, development and the cultural capital of farce: The Musahar community in Bihar. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 40.Oct. 7-13.
- Nesfield, J.C. (1888). The Musheras of Central and upper India. *The Calcutta Review*, no 171-January. Pp. 2-56.
- NNDSWO. (2006). *Ethnographic study of Tarai Dalits in Nepal*. Lalitpur: Nepal National Depressed Social Welfare Organization.
- Parsaina, H. (2022). *Existance and the fall: Spiritual anthropology of Islam*. ICAS Press.
- Risely, H. H. (1891). *The tribes and castes of Bengal*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
- Sharma, M. (1999). The untouchable present: Everyday life of *Musahars* in North Bihar. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No.49 (Dec. 4-10,).
- Thapar, R. (1996). *Time as metaphor of history*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Vansina, J. (1965). *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2004) . Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2 (1): 3 – 22 .
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (1998) . Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism . *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (3): 469– 88 .
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2012) . *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere* . Masterclass Series 1. Manchester : HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory
- Wagner, R. (2001). *An anthropology of subject: Holographic worldview in New Guinea and its meaning and significance for the world of Anthropology*. University of California Press.