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Kari, Bihar, India

Multidimensional Poverty Index Profile

Kari, forty-five, lives with her husband in Araria district's Bhargama Gram Panchayat, Bihar, India. She was born in this village and married when she was 13 years old. Like most of their co-villagers, they are Hindu. Like one quarter of the population in their wards, they belong to the Musahar caste, which faces discrimination. The name Musahars means 'rat diet'. Musahars are so poor that till a few years ago, their only source of food was the grain they would ferret out from rats' burrows.

Kari and her husband have a son and three daughters, who are now grown and have left their household. "Unlike our upper class neighbours, we never saw our three girls as liabilities, and were very happy when they were born. They grew up to be fine young women, who have made us proud. Our community treats them at par with boys because they are both the wheels that drive the vehicle of life," she says. However, they both regret that they could not educate any of them. It was just too difficult, they remember. "We needed all the hands on board, so they could hardly be spared to attend school."

During the agricultural season, Kari finds employment doing the different chores related to the cropping cycle. Over the years, her left hand has become partially paralysed, with the result that she can no longer do the chores she used to do earlier with as much ease. She still walks up to fifteen kilometres to the north, to work for farmers in Moujaha, Raghunathpur and Paikpar. Despite her 'handicap', she strives to work as much as she can. At the beginning of the two principal agricultural cycles, she sows the seeds. During the middle of the paddy-cropping season, she transplants the paddy crop. At other times during the agricultural season, she is employed by farmers in weeding, for which she is paid INR 25 a day, much less than the prevailing wage rate: her employers offer the excuse of her disability. Towards the end of both the seasons, she finds work harvesting the paddy and wheat crops: being seasonal, such work barely lasts for more than four weeks in a year. She is paid in kind and can keep one-ninth of the produce that she helps to harvest. Again, such work lasts no more than two months in a year, and does not guarantee daily employment.

Although Kari's husband misses his wife while he works half of the year in Punjab, they both support this decision because their earnings have increased. "Ten years ago, I wouldn't think of buying a *saree* to wear. But now, it is a common outfit amongst us." She could also look after her parents when they were ill and dying, something her parents could not have done for theirs- "they just didn't have that kind of money," she reasons.

Kari wakes at 5am every day. After washing at the side of the road, she sweeps the house, collects firewood to use as household fuel. She boils some black chai tea and eats a breakfast of plain boiled rice and watery lentil soup. She leaves for work by 8am and returns by 4pm. She

spends time gossiping with neighbours, chatting about important events in the community. She cooks chapattis and seasonal vegetables for dinner. Sometimes, she drinks country liquor, “when neighbours come along”, and retires for the night. Her husband joins her, “sometimes for the community discussions and always for the drinks,” Kari jokes.

Kari is also a member of the Mahila Jagran Kendra, a federation of four women’s self-help groups. The groups were facilitated in 2001, and today boast over a hundred members. The groups are known in the locality for confronting local officials and political leaders on a range of issues affecting the villages, ranging from non-provision of services, corruption, poor implementation of government schemes and lack of infrastructure such as roads.

Kari participated in rallies organized by the Mahila Jagran Kendra and the Communist Party of India to demand that the daily wage rate of INR 104/- be paid timely and completely, and that work conditions be made more secure. “The Government allocates so many resources for us-employment, housing, drinking water, etc. But the contractors, middlemen and bureaucrats swindle us of our rights.”

Kari realizes that she is living through interesting times. For years, women like her were stigmatized, and considered sub-human. Today, thanks to a series of affirmative action steps taken by the Bihar State Government, various welfare schemes are targeted to them at hugely subsidised rates and sometimes free of cost.

Kari’s household is poor according to the Indian Government’s Below Poverty Line survey instrument used by the State Government of Bihar, a proposed Below Poverty Line instrument recommended for use by the Indian Government’s Planning Commission and the MPI. The shaded boxes of the figure below show the deprivations that her household faces across the MPI.

