

Bantar Community in India: An Anthropological Study of Social, Cultural, and Economic Transformation

Mukesh Kumar Sardar¹, Dr. Alok Pratap Singh²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor

¹Dr. R. M. L. S. College, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

²R.D.S. College, Muzaffarpur, Bihar

Abstract

The Bantar community is one of the marginalized Scheduled Caste groups in India associated primarily with northern-Bihar and has historically been concentrated in the region Mithila-Kosi. Though small in number this community offers an example of how caste, poverty, lack of education, job instability and social isolation shape life in eastern India. The Bihar caste survey released in 2023 provides the most recent and detailed demographic information regarding the Bantar community; according to it, the total population of the Bantar community is 187,951, which constitutes approximately 0.1438 per cent of Bihar's total population (130,725,310). Despite their significant population in certain areas, the Bantar community has received less and more intermittent anthropological attention than larger Dalit communities such as the Chamar, Dusadh, and Pasi. Historical census records associated this community with occupations such as Mat-Making, while subsequent anthropological and socio-economic studies reveal that they have engaged in a variety of occupations, including agricultural labor, agriculture, migration, and informal employment. The community's history also illustrates the changing nature of caste identities in the eastern regions, where occupational specialization, migration, agricultural relationships, and government classification have interacted over time.

This article studies the Bantar community from an anthropological perspective. It focuses on historical classification, traditional occupations, caste status, social organization, religious and cultural practices, relationship related to farming, education, economic mobility, and the mythological issues inherent in studying a small, marginalized community. The article urges that Bantar identity should not be understood simply as a fixed category of occupation or caste. Rather, it is constantly reshaped through interaction with local society, government institutions, economic changes, migration, and the community's strategies for social mobility.

Keywords: Bantar, Scheduled Castes, Mahadalits, Bihar, anthropology, social change, occupation, identity, agrarian relations.

1. Introduction

In eastern India, the nature of caste communities has historically been shaped by the interplay of occupation, geography, kinship, customs, and agrarian relations. The 'Bantar' community, found primarily

in Bihar and the Tarai regions of Nepal, is one of the less studied groups of this area. The Bantar community is significant for anthropological research, as it illustrates how a small caste group has navigated social marginalization, occupational shifts, and changes in government caste classifications. Across India, including Bihar, the Bantar community is legally classified as a Scheduled Caste; they were also included in the Scheduled Caste list for the entire state under earlier government classifications. Particularly in Bihar, the Bantar community is classified as a 'Mahadalit' sub-caste within the Scheduled Castes category. The district-wise list of the Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission includes the Bantar alongside communities such as the Bauri, Bhogta, Bhuiya, Musahar, Nat, and Pan.

According to the 2011 census, the Bantar population in Bihar is approximately 101,223, representing approximately 0.78% of the state's Scheduled Caste population. According to the Census of India, 2011, they are densely inhabited in some of the districts of Bihar, such as Supaul (64,000), Darbhanga (30,000), Madhepura (20,000), Samastipur (19,000), Araria (16,000), and others. A significant number of Bantars can also be found in some Bihar districts, such as Kishanganj (600), Purnia (800), Madhubani (2000), Muzaffarpur (50), Vaishali (1500), Katihar (50), etc. Fewer Bantars can be found in some districts of Jharkhand, such as Bokaro (40), Dhanbad (80), Koderma (30), Ranchi (60), Shahibganj (100), and Singhbhum East (50); in some districts of Uttar Pradesh state, such as Gautambuddh Nagar (70) and Ghaziabad (30); in some districts of west Bengal state, such as Hoogly (20), Murshidabad (50), North 24 Praganas (50); and in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan state (30). They are primarily found there as service providers or as people who are there on business, rather than as residents. The above table shows the maximum number of populations living in the Eastern Development region whereas the Western region has the nominal population of the country.

However, the recent Bihar Caste Survey report puts the number much higher at around 187,951 people or about 0.1438% of the total population of the state.

Thus, the Bantar community is an important source for understanding the anthropology of caste, migration, border societies and social change in the eastern Gangetic plains.

2. Sources of Data

This study is primarily based on secondary sources of data. Essential information about the Bantar community was collected from published and unpublished sources, including the Census of India reports, government publications, research articles, books, academic journals, reports of commissions and committees, and reliable institutional websites. Anthropological and sociological literature was studied to examine the community's social organization, kinship, marriage, customs, religion, cultural traditions, migration, education, gender relations, and socio-economic conditions. Previous ethnographic studies and scholarly publications provide important historical and comparative context for understanding the changing sociocultural life of the Bantar community.

Historical Background and Traditional Occupation:

The Bantar community has historically been concentrated in Bihar, especially in district such as Supaul, Araria, Darbhanga, Madhubani, Saharsa, Madhepura, and Purnia. The Bantar community should not be confined to the boundaries of the current state. Historically, their largest populations have been in Bihar and the eastern Gangetic region, but related Bantar populations are also found in the Terai region of Nepal.

The India-Nepal border in this region has historically been open in terms of movement of people, marriage networks, language, and economic activities. The people of India: national Series describes the Bantar community as predominantly rural and identifies Maithili as their main home language, while Hindi is widely used for conversation.

The name 'Bantar' of this community is deeply linked to their traditional occupations and geographical settlement patterns. It is believed that the name 'Bantar' is derived from the Hindi word Bans (meaning bamboo). This name is associated with their traditional craftsmanship involving bamboo work, basket weaving, thatching roofs, and fishing. Oral traditions and folktales from the region suggest another theory that the name originates from the word 'Banatar', where 'Bana' signifies a forest and 'Tar' signifies the sage. Because, they lived near the jungle, they were called 'Banatar' and later it was converted into 'Bantar'. This points to their historical settlement in the dense, marshy, and forested tracts near the Kosi River basin, where they used to gather 'Typha' grass (locally known as 'Pater') for mat-weaving. Their previous residences and places of employment serve as the basis for the majority of Bantar's subcastes. For example, they were initially referred to as Bantar because they resided in forests and worshipped the monkey deity Bandar. Afterward, certain individuals began to serve as doorkeepers at the palace, and they are referred to as "Dhoke." Also, some people were put in charge of the group and were called "Sardar." A small number of individuals were employed as witch doctors and were granted the title of "Dhami." Some were renovated by Ranas and were referred to as 'Rajbantar', while others engaged in fishing for a livelihood and were called 'Manjhi'.

The castes and sub-castes of the Bantar are also named after the professions they practiced. Regardless of the specific castes or sub-caste, the community is collectively referred to as 'Bantar'. The Bantar castes and sub-castes include- 1. Sardar, 2. Rajbantar, 3. Rajdhami, 4. Dhoke, 5. Manjhi, etc.

The Bantar community does not have distinct or rigidly defined sub-castes. They primarily function as a single, cohesive, and endogamous ethnic group. In everyday social and regional contexts, people of this community often use 'Bantar' or 'Sardar' or 'Manjhi' as their surname. Traditional Vedic gotras are either absent or not observed in the Bantar community. Instead of adhering to Brahminical lineage systems, their clan affiliations and marriage norms are determined by local lineage identities, ancestral villages, and family lineage (Kul). While they practice community endogamy (marrying within the group), they strictly observe exogamous rules at the family level to avoid marriage between close blood relatives.

3. Caste Status and Social position

The current social status of the Bantar community in Bihar-and across India- is closely linked to their classification as a scheduled caste. This classification is not merely an administrative label; it reflects the historical identity of communities that endured caste-based exclusion and social disadvantage, thereby becoming entitled to constitutional safeguard and affirmative action. Although the Bantar population is smaller in number compare to major scheduled caste communities in Bihar-such as the Chamar, Dusadh, and Musahar-they constitute a distinct Scheduled Caste community. From an anthropological perspective, the Bantar's small demographic size is significant; smaller communities often have limited representation in political institution and public discourse, even when they possess strong local social networks. In Nepal, the classification of the Bantar differs slightly in administrative terminology but remains similar in terms

of social positioning. Nepal's health survey classification categorizes the Bantar as a Dalit group within the Terai region, alongside communities such as the Chamar, Musahar, Dusadh/Paswan, Tatma, Khatwe, and Dom.

A community's status is determined not only by local perceptions but also by the state, census data, the legal system, and political representation.

4. Traditional occupation and Economic life

Historically, the profession of traditional craftsmanship has been a vital part of the Bantar community's identity. Information regarding Indian artisans identifies the Bantar community of Bihar as 'makers of bamboo goods.' Similarly, historical and anthropological literature associates this community with basket weaving and thatching. Bamboo craftsmanship has traditionally held great significance in the rural economy. Bamboo baskets, storage containers, agricultural tools, mats and other household items were integral to village life. Consequently, this artisan-based economy linked Bantar families with farming communities and local markets.

However, traditional artisan communities have faced major economic shifts. Changes in rural economies during the twentieth century significantly impacted the livelihoods of the Bantar people. Industrial production diminished the economic importance of many traditional village crafts. Simultaneously, the commercialization of agriculture created new wage-labor opportunities but also increased the dependence of families with little land on wage labor. Research conducted in the Nepal terai offers particularly useful comparative evidence. Fraser Sugden's study on agricultural changes in the Terai categorizes the Bantar community among the small farmer ands and landless laborers of the region. Bantar families were also found in the medium and large farmer categories, indicating that the community should not be viewed as economically homogeneous. At present, while many individuals from the Bantar community in Bihar remain engaged in their traditional occupation, the majority have moved away from it to rely on agriculture, labor, small business, and salaried employment, making these their primary means of livelihood.

This result is significant from an anthropological perspective. It shows that caste and class cannot be considered the same thing.

Agrarian Relations

In India and Terai region of Nepal, land has historically been one of the most critical factors determining social power. For marginalized communities, access to land influence not only income but also social autonomy, bargaining power, and political influence. Various government statistics from India and Nepal indicates that Bantar families have historically constituted a significant portion of smallholder farmer and landless laborers. Studies have found that these smallholder families often relied on rented land, casual labor, and other forms of external employment; similar patterns are also observed in eastern India. Where land ownership is limited, families may rely on a range of activities; agricultural labor, seasonal migration, sharecropping or tenancy, construction work, and wage labor in the public or private sectors.

Therefore, the shift from traditional occupations to wage labor should not be viewed merely as 'modernization'. It can simultaneously create new opportunities and perpetuate economic vulnerability.

Religion and Folk traditions

India's Bantar community, primarily residing in Bihar and its surrounding regions, observes Hindu religious customs while simultaneously upholding its own distinct folk traditions. Their religious life is a blend of Hindu beliefs and local, village-level customs. Alongside the worship of Hindu deities, Bantar families traditionally worship household and ancestral deities to ensure protection, prosperity, and the well-being of the family.

A distinctive feature of the Bantar folk religion is the worship of village deities at sacred place known as 'Than'. These sites may feature sacred stones or other symbolic objects rather than formal idols. Community members gather at these locations during annual rituals and festivals. They also hold deep faith in nature worship, showing reverence for the sun, moon, rivers, forests, and other natural elements. In some areas, animal sacrifice has historically been part of community rituals, a practice that is now gradually declining. Festivals and religious rituals play a vital role in the cultural identity of the Bantar community. Festivals such as 'Chauthi Chan' (Chauth Chandra) and 'Jitiya' (Jivitputrika) involve fasting, prayers, offerings, and family-oriented rituals. Religious stories, songs, and rituals are passed down from one generation to the next. Thus, the religious practices of the Bantar community reflect a cultural synthesis, combining Hindu traditions with local folk beliefs, eco-centric practices, and communal rituals. These traditions strengthen social cohesion, family continuity, and a collective cultural identity. Historical accounts describe the Bantar community as having become substantially Hinduized.

Table-1
Religion of Bantar population

Religion	Estimated population
Hindu	99.93 %
Buddhism	0.01 %
Christianity	0.06 %
Jainism	0.00 %
Sikhism	0.00 %
Islam	0.00 %
Unknown	0.00 %

Source: Joshua project

Gender Relations

Gender relations within the Bantar community are shaped by traditional family structure, the division of labor, marriage practices, and evolving socio-economic conditions. Traditionally, men have generally been associated with income-generating activities and major household decisions, while women have borne the primary responsibility for domestic chores, childcare, and household management. Women also contribute significantly to agriculture, wage, labor, and other economic activities, although their work often receives less recognition. Women's participation in economic activities is crucial. Women's employment can increase household income and enhance their bargaining power within the family. However, engaging in low-paying informal work does not always lead to economic independence.

Therefore, education is crucial for women's empowerment. Retaining girls in secondary school, providing scholarships, improving sanitation and transportation facilities, preventing child marriage, and creating secure job opportunities can all lead to long-term improvements.

Women's participation in self-help groups and local organizations can also strengthen access to loans and government schemes. Such collective organizations can help families move beyond subsistence work and start small businesses. Factors such as education, urbanization, migration, and women's participation in paid employment are gradually influencing these traditional roles. Consequently, there is now greater female participation in decision-making and increased cooperation between men and women in Bantar families, although regional and socio-economic disparities persist.

Education and Social Mobility

Education has emerged as one of the most crucial avenues for social change among Scheduled Caste communities in India. For small communities like Bantar, education can create opportunities beyond traditional caste-based occupations. Government schools, scholarships, higher education, and job reservations have likely transformed the employment landscape for younger generation.

Historical census data highlights the severity of educational backwardness; the Bihar Economic Survey, utilizing 2001 census data, recorded a literacy rate of only 14.33% for the Bantar community, compared to an overall literacy rate of 22.08% for all scheduled Castes at the time. However, the 2023 state-level caste survey revealed significant disparities in education—only about 7% of Bihar's population were found to be graduates, while those reaching the postgraduate level constituted less than 1%.

Table 2
Educational status of the Bantar Community

Educational Indicator	Bantar Community
Total Bantar population	101,223
Literate	14,508
Illiterate	86,715
Overall literacy rate	14.33%
Male literacy rate	20.4%
Female literacy rate	3.7%

Source: Bihar Census, 2001

Migration

Migration among Bantar families can be understood as both an economic strategy and a social process. Migration from village to city or between districts, is often driven by limited agricultural opportunities, insecure employment, low household income, and the search for wage labor. Research on rural Bihar indicates that a strong link between migration and employment, with migration from marginalized caste and class groups predominantly involving men. Consequently, Bantar men migrate to town and cities for temporary periods, while other family members remain in village. Moving urban areas allows individuals to transcend the traditional occupations and social relations tied to their caste status in the village. Remittances sent back home help support household consumption, children's education, home improvements, and investments in livelihood activities. At the same time, migration can give rise to social

and economic vulnerabilities. Migrant workers may face insecure employment, poor living conditions, separation from family, and limited access to social security in their destinations.

Housing, Property, and Standard of Living:

Socioeconomic status cannot be measured solely by income. Land ownership, housing quality, electricity, sanitation, vehicles, and other productive assets provide a comprehensive picture of living standards. The Bihar Caste Survey collected information on housing and vehicle ownership, highlighting the importance of asset-based metrics in understanding inequality.

At the state level, approximately 95-96% of the population did not own a vehicle, indicating the limited mobility of families across Bihar.

For poor families, a lack of productive assets can increase their dependence on wage labor. A family with agricultural land, livestock, tools, a small business, or means of transportation has a greater income-earning capacity than a family with only labor.

Therefore, welfare policies should go beyond simply supporting consumption and focus on building assets.

Political and Constitutional transformation

The political and constitutional transformation of the Bantar community reflects its shift from traditional social discrimination to greater constitutional recognition and democratic participation. In Bihar, the Bantar are recognized as a scheduled Caste under the constitutional (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. This recognition provides access to constitutional safeguards, reservations in education and government jobs, political reservation, welfare programs, and legal protections against caste-based discrimination. Panchayati raj Institutions have also created opportunities for political participation and leadership at the grassroots level. However, constitutional recognition has not eliminated socio-economic inequalities. Education, employment, economic condition, political representation, and access to welfare remain crucial areas for assessing the community's ongoing social transformation.

Methodological issues in Bantar anthropology

Methodological studies of the Bantar community face several challenges, including limited ethnographic literature, differences in community identities, scattered settlements, and difficulties in obtaining reliable field information. Researchers should use multi-site sampling and combine household surveys with participant observation, interviews, life histories, genealogy, and focus-group discussions. Gender-sensitive methods are essential to accurately reflect women's experiences. Oral history should be cross-checked with census and historical records. Researchers should avoid stereotypes and distinguish traditional occupations from modern livelihoods. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative sources is essential to understand the Bantar's social organization, cultural practices, migration, education, changes in work, identity, and social-economic transformation.

Key Challenges:

The main challenges faced by the Bantar community can be outlined as follows:

1. **Educational Backwardness:** Literacy levels are low, and pursuing higher education remains difficult for families from poor backgrounds.
2. **Economic Insecurity:** Reliance on daily-wage and informal labor leads to unstable income.

3. **Limited Asset Ownership:** A lack of land and productive assets acts as a major barrier to economic independence.
4. **Lack of Digital Access:** A shortage of computers and digital skills can limit access to modern education and employment opportunities.
5. **Gender Inequality:** Women may face a combination of challenges related to caste, poverty, and gender.
6. **Challenges Related to Migration:** While migration can boost income, it also exposes workers to risks such as insecure employment and poor living conditions.
7. **Small Population Size:** As the Bantar community constitutes only 0.14% of Bihar's total population, community-specific issues may get overshadowed within the aggregate data for Scheduled Castes.
8. **Data Limitations:** Although the 2023 public survey provides figures on the Bantar population, readily available Bantar-specific datasets do not contain comprehensive socio-economic information.

Policy Suggestions:

A comprehensive development strategy for Bantar should include the following measures.

- I. education should be prioritized. Scholarships should cover not only primary and secondary schooling, but also college, vocational education, and preparation for competitive exams.
- II. skills development should be community-centered. Training should be linked to real opportunities in the local and urban labor market, rather than simply awarding certificates.
- III. livelihood programs should encourage asset creation. Credit for livestock, small shops, tools, transportation equipment, and micro-enterprises can reduce dependence on daily wage labor.
- IV. women's economic participation should be strengthened. Self-help groups, vocational training, micro-credit, and market access can provide women with independent sources of income.
- V. Fifth, digital inclusion should be made a development goal. Community digital centers can provide internet access, online applications, educational resources, and digital skills training.
- VI. Sixth, support for migrants should be expanded. Migrant workers need information about portable welfare benefits, skills recognition, banking facilities, and employment rights.
- VII. Finally, better community-level data is crucial. Future surveys should publish anonymous socio-economic indicators for smaller Scheduled Caste communities, wherever statistically and ethically feasible. Without disaggregated data, policymakers cannot easily determine which communities are benefiting from welfare programs and which are being left out.

5. Conclusion

The Bantar community holds a significant yet understudied position within the anthropology of eastern India and the Nepal Terai. Historically associated with mat-making and menial labor, this community has undergone substantial socio-economic transformations. Today, their livelihood encompasses a diverse range of activities, including agriculture, daily-wage labor, migration, informal employment, and various other occupations. In Bihar, the Bantar hold the constitutional status of 'Mahadalit' (a category within the Scheduled Castes), whereas in Nepal, the Bantar/ Sardar are classified among the Terai Dalit groups. These classifications illustrate how state institutions and regional histories shape the community's identity.

The study reveals that the Bantar community should not be viewed merely as a caste defined by a specific occupation. Factors such as caste, class and social mobility-intertwined with education, migration, land ownership, urbanization, and shifting economic opportunities-are reshaping the community's life. While traditional religious rituals, kinship networks, and cultural practices sustain a collective identity, the younger generation is displaying new aspirations and pursuing different occupations. Future anthropological research should focus on women's experiences, education, migration, youth identity, political participation, and cultural change. Detailed ethnographic research could contribute significantly to a broader understanding of caste, Dalit identity, social mobility, and borderland societies in South Asia.

References:

1. Bihar Castes Survey, 2022/23
2. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011).
3. Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission. Mahadalit List—District Wise.
4. Government of Bihar, Finance Department. (2015)
5. Sahay, R. Substantially Present but Invisible, Excluded and Marginalized: A Study of Musahars in Bihar
6. Priyanandini. (2024). Caste, Gender and the Development Interface: A Study of Vikas Mitra Scheme Among Musahar Women in Bihar
7. Government of Bihar. (2015). Bihar Economic Survey 2014–15
8. Changing Lives of Dalits, the Musahar's Community in Madhepura, Bihar: Socio-economic Observation in Twenty-first Century
9. Roy, B., & Anand, S. (2026). Demographic Composition and Socio-Economic Divide: Evidence from Caste-Based Survey of Bihar
10. Satya Narayan Sardar (2011). Bantar Community in Nepal
11. Ghurye, G. S. (1969). Caste and Race in India. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
12. Mandelbaum, D. G. (1970). Society in India. Berkeley: University of California Press.
13. Shah, G. (Ed.). (2001). Dalit Identity and Politics. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
14. Sharma, A. N. (2005). Agrarian relations and socio-economic change in Bihar. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 40(10), 960–972.
15. Mukul. (1999). The untouchable present: Everyday life of Musahars in north Bihar. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 34(49), 3465–3470.
16. Singh, A., Kumar, K., & Singh, A. (2015). Exclusion within excluded: The economic divide between scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 50(42), 32–42.