

BONDED LABOUR SYSTEM IN NEPALESE AGRICULTURE: A STUDY ON HARUWA SYSTEM IN RUPENDEHI

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ABSTRACT

This article is the outcome of the field research carried out by the author in 1998. The survey was conducted covering all the Tharu households who were working as Haruwa in the study area-the Salijhundi VDC of Rupandehi district. The effort has been made to highlight and to explore the existing Haruwa system in this article. The system has been examined covering some its prominent features. Similarly, the article has also analysed the various causes of the system that should be considered as a form of bonded labour system. The analysis reveals that Haruwa system is very similar to the Kamaiya system due to its common features and causes behind it. The study concludes that such bonded types of labour systems are the social creation, which are yet practiced in rural area. They are the symbol of feudal mode of production and exploitative social and class relation.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is predominantly an agricultural country. Agriculture sector alone contributes more the 40 percent of its gross domestic product and provides employment to about 80 percent of the working population. Likewise, Nepal is one of the poorest countries of the world with per capita income of \$ 210. in 20 million population of Nepal, more than half falls below the absolute poverty line. Almost 95 percent of the poor live in rural areas and 82 percent of them are agriculture based. Almost all-agricultural land is privately held at household level. Holding are generally very small, however inequality in land ownership is extremely high. More than 10 percent households are landless, over, over 50 percent of the households possess only 6.6 percent of cultivable land whereas top 9 percent households control over 47 percent of the agricultural land (NESAC, 1998: CBS, 1997). Unjust control over the land resources, persistent inequality and no access to alternative mechanism has made the Nepalese poor vulnerable, insecure and backward. In Nepal, feudal structure, traditional farming system, unfavorable socio-cultural values and institutions, lack of sufficient infrastructure, urban biased and outward oriented development strategies of the government have been perceived as the major causes of slow pace of change in agriculture and consequently the improvement in rural leaving. Poverty is deeply rooted in rural areas and mostly concentrated to the lower caste and backward community. The rural community is divided one along lines of class, caste and

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gender. The prevailing socio-economic structure has led to division of the community

into landlord and serfs, high caste and low caste, exploiters and exploited (Seddon, 1979).

Agricultural labourers are mostly exploited and deprived segment of rural Nepal. Agriculture is not merely an occupation or a source of income to them, but it is a way of life. The living condition of agricultural labour is vulnerable, insecure and exploited. They are the real victims of underdevelopment and poverty. They are striving to obtain their minimum needs by selling their labour for sub standard wages. No effective social security insurance or minimum wage law eases their plight. Various forms of exploitative labour relation have been prevailing in agricultural sector in various names since long. In Farwestern and Mid-western Terai bonded labour system is common in the name of *Kamaiya*. The same system is known as *Haruwa* in western Terai, whereas, in hills and other parts of Nepal it is denoted by the term *Haliya*.

Only after the restoration of democracy in 1991, various NGOs have been exposing such inhuman and bonded type labour system specially, the *Kamaiya* system. Consequently, His Majesty Government of Nepal, now, has acknowledged this issue and also has made some effort to abolish such inhuman system. But the governmental and NGO's activities and efforts have been found concentrated to the limited area and to the *Kamaiya* issue only (INSEC, 1992; 1997; 1998). Similar types of practices have been prevailing in other forms throughout the country, which are not yet duly acknowledged. In this context, it would be relevant to highlight the *Haruwa* system as such.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This article is mainly based on the field survey carried out by the author in 1998. Besides, the related literatures on bonded labour have also been consulted to prepare the article in present shape. The main objective of the then research was to examine the socio-economic condition of *Haruwa* households in Rupandehi district. However, the objectives of the present article is to present the *Haruwa* labour system with its features and to analyse the causes behind this system.

Salijhundi VDC, one of the VDCs of Rupandehi district was selected for survey. All the *Haruwa* households found in the study area (48) were visited and surveyed. The household survey was conducted in May 1998. Personal interviews with the *Haruwa* labours were held using structured questionnaire. General discussions with employer were also been arranged for additional inquiry about the various aspects of the system. Observation schedules were also been used to have the explicit information. The relevant data and information acquired from that research have been adopted in this article.

Haruwa labour system prevailing in rural areas of Rupandehi is the main focus of this article along with its features and causes. Moreover, a brief description on some forms of bonded labour practices prevailing in Nepal has also been mentioned in its background to link the Haruwa system.

BONDED LABOUR SYSTEM IN NEPALESE AGRICULTURE

Bonded labour system, associated with long term permanent labour relation is widely prevailing in agriculture of rural Nepal. A research study currently states that more than 3 lakh workers are believed to be working in this category. Of the total permanent labour, 3.4 percent are in mountain regions, 30.5 percent in hills and 66.1 percent in Teria (Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998). Bonded labour is a problem common throughout the South Asian region. Law banning such labour now exists in India and Pakistan. Although Nepal has signed the United Nations convention on Abolition of Slavery, the Trade and Institution and Practices Similar to Survey, it has not yet introduced the legislation to ban the practices.

According to UN convention (1956) "the condition or status of a tenant, who is by law, custom, or agreement bonded to live and labour on land belonging to another person and to render some determinate service to such other person whether for reward or not and it not free to change his status" is defined as bonded labour (Robertson and Mishra, 1997).

This definition clearly indicates that various forms of Nepalese permanent labour system fall under the category of bonded labour system. Under Kamaiya, Hali and Haruwa systems the laboures have been working in bondage. The labourers under these systems are found bonded not by law but by custom or agreement. They are bonded to live and labour to others land for a specified time interval, usually for a year. They are not free to change their status within the interval due to the agreement that has made between labour and landlord. Similarly the laboures are found bonded by the debt in such labouring system. Thus, it is in this way different forms of bonded labour system have been in existence throughout the country. However, across regions the system slightly differs. Let us discuss some prominent forms of them.

Kamaiya: It is a form of bonded labour practiced in mid and far western Terai, especially in Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur. It is basically associated with indigenous Tharu culture. It is mostly publicized, the best researched and directly addressed form of labour by government and NGOs. It is the system that allows for the virtual buying and selling of laboures by landlords. Majority of the Kamaiya has been working in debt bondage. They are contracted usually for a year and contract is made during mid-January (known as

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Maghi). They receive very low wage and paid in kind. Kamaiyas are kept basically to plough the field of high caste landlord. However, they have to perform the entire household venture. The system is found inherited and passed down from father to son until the loan (*Sauki*) is completely cleared.

Haliya or Hali: It is another form of bonded labour widely practiced in hill belt of rural Nepal. This system is most closely associated with the debt bondage in caste-based communities. Traditionally, since the Brahmin and Chhetri caste do not plough they made contract with low-caste poor people for ploughing. Labourers are contracted by debt and they have to be in bondage until the loan repaid. Although this form seems to be bonded casually but the informal and non-written forms of terms and conditions forced the labourers in a deep bondage. Haliyas use to work just for paying the interest obligations. However, they are found getting a sack of grain at the time of harvest and usually also getting two meals and snacks for workdays. As compared to Kamaiya, the Haliya are found to be freer and less bonded.

Haruwa: It is also a form of bonded labour system widely prevalent in Western Terai, especially in Rupandhi, Kapilvastu and Nawalparasi district. It is very much close to Kamaiya system in terms of caste based nature, mode and means of wage payment, time and methods of contract and the nature of work done. However, unfortunately this system has been still by passed by government and NGO's as a bonded labour system. The details of the system are presented into succeeding section.

Women and child-bonded labour are also found working under Kamaiya and Haruwa system. Usually the wife or young daughter of Kamaiya and Haruwa and children of them are also bonded to work at landlord's home. They have to perform household work such as carrying water, taking care of children, cooking and washing. During plantation and harvesting season, they have to do in field as well. The child labourers usually work as *Charwa* - to look after cattle. The female bonded labourers are called *Bukhahi* under Kamaiya and *Organi* under Haruwa system. Somewhere they are paid half of the wage of their male counterpart but somewhere they do not provide direct remuneration except the daily meals, snacks and wearing clothes.

HARUWAL LABOUR SYSTEM IN RUPANDEHI

As stated above, Haruwa system is a form of long-term (Permanent) labour relation in western Terai, Nepal. It is a form of bonded system prevailing in agriculture. It has been widely practicing since long in the rural areas of Rupandehi, Kapilbastu and Nawalparasi districts. This labour system is found associated with large holding and high caste Jamindars. The Terai Brahmin

migrated Brahmin, Chhetri, and Magar of the hills usually made contract indigenous Tharu as Haruwa. This short of labour arrangement is usual there either due to the tradition that the high-caste Jamindars do not plough or it is considered as economical and safe option to the employer. Since it is bonded type of arrangement, it may be considered as a residual of slavery and a symptom of exploitative feudal social relation.

Haruwas are basically the ploughmen of landlord, however they have to perform any other household venture such as cutting the grass, raising livestock, clearing the shed, collecting firewood, digging the field and supervising farm regularly. As the Tharus have been losing their status and the marginalization process hit them they have no alternative except accepting such inhuman system as a way of their survival.

Haruwa system originates from the root of poverty, ignorance and indebtedness. They are most deprived, disadvantaged oppressed section of rural terai. They are completely out of the mainstream development myth and benefit. It is not only due to their own blessing or backwardness but also the social reality that the development practice of Nepal is controlled by elite and feudal class who have control over majority resources-land and government budget.

This system is in human in the same that Haruwa have been found losing their basic economic freedom by the contract. For the period of contract they surrender all right to their employer. The wage rate is so low that they can hardly sustain their large size family. In addition, once they become indebted they could not get rid of the perpetual debt cycle. The debt burden is found transferred to generation to generation. In this way Haruwa system is a form of debt bandage. It is an exploitative relation because they work in a low wage and work more hours as compared to other farm labour; their whole family member are obliged to work for employer and their terms and condition have not been clearly defined and formally written. It is in this way the Haruwa system should be conceived as a similar system to the Kamaiya system of mid and Far Western Terai in all respect.

SOME FEATURES OF HARUWA SYATEM

THE LABOUR CONTRACT

Haruwa system establishes on the basis of informal contract between landlord and labour. The contract is made for a year usually in Magh month of each year. For Tharu it is like a festival named as *Maghi*. In this month they can search another employer if they dissatisfied with their current the employer. This is true in case of employers too. The major obligation will be that the new

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employer must repay the entire loan called *Vota* to the former employer to get Haruwa. At the time of contract, the terms and conditions have been settled

based of mutual understanding. However, such contract would not be in written form and have no legal value. The employer offers the rate of wage, *vota*, accommodation and other facilities and if the Haruwa agrees he can join. It seems generally a fair and free process but due to the low bargaining power, ignorance and absence of legal security, the poor labour always been in hopeless and marginalized position.

TYPE OF HARUWA

There are some variations found within Haruwa system too. In study area two forms of Haruwas are found to be in existence-residential and non-residential. Residential Haruwa usually stay at employers home and take meal with them. They use to get half of their fixed wage. Such Haruwa usually come from other villages or district and usually with very low economic status viz. landless and homeless.

The non-residential Haruwas do not live at employer's home. They usually come from near villages or to be indigenous. These Haruwas are found somewhat better in economic status since they have their own home or little land. Consequently, they use to be less mobile across the villages.

MODE, MEANS AND RATE OF WAGE AND PAYMENT

As stated above, the wage rate of Haruwa use to fix at the time of contract and could be revised yearly in mutual agreement. The experience and skilled Haruwa can get slightly higher scale then other new one. The wage usually paid in kind monthly or according to need. However, the *Orgeni* use to get either half of the wage of their male counterpart or two meals, snacks and wearing clothes, as the employers will. Some variation was observed in study area with regard to rate of wages. The level of wages prevailing in Saljhundi VDC is presented in Table 1.

The table reveals that there were two forms and six levels of wage rates prevailing in study area. Only 3 Haruwas were found wage in cash. The variation in wage rate was into found significant. Where there were more than two Haruwas in one employer, the head (known as *Aguwa*) was found receiving 8 gun of paddy and others. The table also clearly indicates that the wage rate is too low that the labourer's households could hardly maintain their subsistence need. If they feel sick or have to celebrate festivals they should seek the loan and so they use to fall in perpetual cycle of debt bondage.

Table -- 1: Different Wage Rates of Haruwa in Study Area

Level of Wages (In kind/ or cash)	Wage in Monetary Value (in RS.)			No. of Haruwa	Percent
	Annual	Monthly	Daily		
6 Gun Paddy + others	8680	723	24	4	8.3
6.5 Gun paddy +others	9320	777	26	13	27.1
7 Gun paddy + others	9960	830	27	14	29.2
7.5 Gun paddy + others	10600	883	29	10	20.8
8 Gun paddy +others	11240	937	31	4	8.3
In cash	12000	1000	33	3	6.3
Mean wage		837.32	27.6	48	100

Source: Field survey by Author, 1998.

- Note: 1) 1 Gun =64 pathi ==224 kg.
 2) Others include 4 pathi of oilseed, 4 pathi Dal, salt, daily snacks etc.
 3) Monetary values were computed taking the market price of included items prevailing in study in May 1998.

PROVISION OF LOAN

In study area, the provision of permanent so-called interest free loan, known as *vota*, is associated with Haruwa system. It is the tradition by which the Haruwas are getting bonded. This loan found continuously increases, none of the Haruwas are found repaid it completely. This loan use to transferred from one employer to another with the movement of Haruwa. Higher amount of *vota* is considered as a factor by which the Haruwas mobility is restricted. Similiary, the employers also prefer those Haruwas who have relatively lower amount of *vota* because they can easily change them if they want. In study area, only 3 Haruwas were found without *vota*. The distribution of Haruwas by level of *vota* is presented in table 2 .

Table -- 2: Distribution of Haruwas by Vota (In Rs.)

Group	No. of Huruwas	Percentage
Below 3000	5	10.4
3000-6000	25	52.1
6000-10000	9	18.7
10000 & over	6	12.5
Total	48	100

Source: Field survey by Author, 1998.

The table clearly shows that incidence of loan ranges from to zero up to more than 15 thousand, with an average of Rs. 5567. It seems very difficult to pay the entire loan with current wage rate that is virtually below the subsistence level.

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MOBILITY OF HARUWA LABOUR

Mobility refers to the trends of labour movement from one place to another and one occupation to another. However, here it is confined to the extend of movement of Haruwas to one employer to another and one place to another. The occupational mobility of Haruwa labour seems to be negligible because they do not have knowledge and skill to compete and to alter alternative occupation. Geographically, Huruwas were found moving across villages but majority of them were only in position to change employer within a VDC boundary and even in a village.

The main causes behind the low extent of mobility of Haruwas are their holding position, extent of vota, family size, level of knowledge and availability and access to alternative job. The analysis of the information of the study reveals that those Haruwas who have some land used to stay in same village continuously and who have no home and land in their procession use to move anywhere. This trend indicates the behavioral rule that higher the amount of vota lesser the chance to move and vice-versa. Similarly, it is found that the larger the size of family the lesser the degree of mobility. Moreover, the extent of knowledge and availability of alternative job opportunity also found to be the significant factors for low mobility of them.

LIVING CONDITION AND NATURE OF WORK

The male Haruwas are basically the farm workers. They use to plough and dig the field along plantation season. In other season they have to do any household works as directed by employer such as cut the grass, feed the bulls, collect firewood, rapier plough etc. Almost all the Haruwa reported that they have to work more than 12 hours a day from the every morning to late evening. There is no specific shilling of working hours and provision of leaves to them. So, the Haruwas may be considered as household servant or as a new form of slavery. For Haruwas, their material aspirations are always limited to have enough food, some clothes and a residence. It was observed that they possess a tiny house made of seula, vager and mud with a leaky roof. Moreover some do not possess even such facility and use to live in landlords hot. Life is always hand to mouth to them, a constant struggle for survival. So it is obvious that they have been living in an extreme poverty. Almost all of the Haruwas households were found below the absolute poverty line defined by the subsistence norm. To their innocent mind poverty looks so natural. They have been accepting it as a matter of fate not a social creation as such.

LANDLORD-HARUWA RELATIONSHIP

Relationship between Haruwas and landlord was not better or worse than those between any high caste and low caste groups. It was like the master and servant relation. Since the Haruwas are illiterate and unknown groups, they

do not show any dissatisfaction and report that they are feeling well and getting satisfactory behaviours from their employer. The Haruwas were found completely unaware about the unionization and liberation as such but they are accepting this way of life as god given reality on the fatalistic ground.

CAUSES BEHIND HARUWA SYSTEM

From above discussion, it is clear that the sole cause of this system is poverty and indebtedness. It is a symptom of feudal mode of production still existing in agriculture. There exists a vicious circle of Haruwa system closely related to poverty.

From the study it is found that the causes also differs according to the category of Haruwa. The Haruwa who have some land and home in their possession responded that they have been accepting this occupation due to the growing incidence of debt, insufficient size of holding, disguised unemployment, family break down and large family size. Whereas, for the landless Haruwas their perpetual status (landlessness) itself is the major cause of Harwai along with other causes such is ignorance, lack of skill and unavailability of alternative job opportunities etc. In general, poverty, indebtedness, ignorance and backwardness seems to be the significant causes behind the Haruwa system.

In the survey the Haruwas were asked about the causes of the same. The consolidated responses of the respondent have been presented in Table 3.

Table – 3: Causes of being Haruwa According to Respondent

Causes	No. of Respondent	Percent
Poverty and indebtedness	40	83.3
Hereditary tradition	32	66.3
Landlessness/homelessness	20	41.7
Lack of enough production of their farm	13	27.1
Ignorance about other job	10	20.8
Do not specify	6	12.5

Source: Field survey by Author, 1998.

Note: Almost all respondents told more than one cause.

It is evident from the table that proverty and indebtedness is the first cause (83.3%) followed by hereditary tradition (66.7%), landlessness and homelessness (41.7%), lack of enough production (27.1%) and ignorance (20.8%). However, six respondents (12.5%) did not specify any cause.

CONCLUSION

The show pace of change is the basic feature of Nepalese agriculture. Various factors have been found contributing to such phenomena. Among the factors, the systems of laboring are also considered as significant institutional factors hindering the very process of modernization of this sector. As stated by Todaro (1993), in order to avert starvation and raise level of living for the average rural dweller, agricultural production and the productivity of both labour and land must be rapidly increase. It is only possible if economic, institutional and structural changes are made there in.

There are some exploitative labor relations widely prevalent in Nepalese agriculture, which are considered as bonded labour system. Haruwa system is one of the forms of bondage extensively practiced in Terai of Lumbini zone, Nepal. It is, however, not duly acknowledged and addressed by government and concerned NGOs and their programme of action currently going to launch. Being a similar form as Kamaiya it is not sufficiently studies and exposed. Hence, this form of labour should be included and addressed to the ongoing programmes of government and of the NGOs network as well.

The complete abolition of the bonded system such as Kamaiya and Haruwa would be possible if and only if the government have package programme which include socio-cultural, economic, and political measures simultaneously. The government should acknowledge it as a socially created problem and address it accordingly with full commitment and strong political will.

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