

# HARUWA, THE UNFREE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER: A CASE STUDY FROM EASTERN TARAI

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## Introduction: Patron-Client Ties in Agrarian Society and Haruwa System

The Government of Nepal promulgated the Kamaiya Labour (Prohibition) Act 2001 to free and rehabilitate bonded agricultural labourers under the Kamaiya system. The Act also included agricultural labourers like the Haliya, Haruwa, Hali, Charuwa, etc. under the term “Kamaiya Labour”, and declared these practices as illegal and punishable. However, except for the Kamaiya system among Tharus of western Nepal, there has been little research on other forms of bonded agricultural labour systems. A few studies (Sharma and Sharma: 2002; CSRC: 2006, NNDSWO& LWF) have indicated that certain ingredients of bondage exist under such long term labour agreements.

I begin this paper with a discussion of patron-client relations in an agrarian society in order to contextualise the Haruwa system in Nepal. This system as a whole is an outcome of historically framed patron-client relationship since generations. Patron-client relationship is defined as a “special case of dyadic (two-persons) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own 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” (Scott 1972a). Traditionally, thus, such a dyadic relationship is often viewed as being of the functional or beneficial character for the client. We can find ‘limitless’ distinctions between patron-client variations (*c.f.* Scott 1972a), for example, as a form of ‘economic interaction’ to ‘serfdom’ (*c.f.* Gould 1964). However, in inter-caste relations, the *jajajamani* system, with its vertical interdependency of groups and individuals based on the unequal distribution of resources, provides an appropriate context to discuss patron-client relations, showing that people of disparate status, wealth, and power are vertically integrated below patrons who in turn may be clients of patrons at a higher level. Scott (1972a) observes that the patron-client formation finds its “fullest elaboration” where there is a gap between a state’s centre and periphery. This implies situation of localised power and the organisation of production and distribution based on local resources (Scott 1972a). Hence, relations between patrons and clients are lopsided, with unequal and often non-comparable reciprocities. Clients’ expectations are limited to basic subsistence. Such dyadic ties embody certain structural features, such as ties between families, mutual trust, confidence, mutual expectations, community

support of values, and the conception of a moral bond (Bailey 1966; Scott 1972a & b; Michie 1981). The patron-client relationship is therefore a 'paradoxical set of elements combining inequality and asymmetry in power in mutual solidarity, combinations of potential coercion and exploitation with voluntary relations and compelling mutual obligations' (Eisenstad and Roniger 1980).

While maintaining 'functional and beneficial' dyadic ties, the patron-client system can be quite brutal, especially to those at the bottom. Such relationship might be functional in the short run and at a superficial level of analysis, it is dysfunctional in the 'long run and at a deeper level of analysis' (Stein 1984).

Like the Haruwa system, any other such dyadic relationships in a hierarchical caste-based society are, thus, an essential constituent of one with local autonomy and a subsistence economy.

Recently the system has transformed and declined, but has not disappeared and remains in the form of Haruwa in the Tarai of Nepal. The decline and eventual demise of patron-client systems can be traced to basic structural reasons. The old sets of relations became incompatible with the changing political environment. For such changes, the major impetus is not local, rather comes from state and national level, so that even though internal dynamics cannot be ignored, they provide only a partial explanation. Therefore, change not only has implications for the local level, but for a higher level as well (Michie 1981). Hence, the scope of analysis goes beyond the village to higher levels of socio-economic and political organisation.

Illustrating the case of Rajasthan of India, Michie (1981) outlines the factors responsible for the decline of patron-client system, namely introduction of commercialised agriculture, state and national electoral politics, development administration, and institutional reforms. They not only move the local system towards integration with higher levels, but also replace the old with a new set of relationships, purposes, and evaluation criteria at the local level (*c.f.* Brass 1999, Michie 1981, etc.). In the Nepalese context, we can see that political parties and to some extent Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) took over patronage functions, integrating all groups in to the wider, national system. In the historically changing political environment, patrons did not continue getting support from the state; however, some of them transformed according to the changing environment and still constituted the ruling elites.

In this paper, I have made an effort to explore the complexities, forms and determinants, as well as the exploitative nature of these practices by posing questions like: i) How did Haruwa system, arguably a traditionally framed *jajamani* (patron-client) relationship in an agrarian society, gradually change into a form of bonded labour?: ii) What kind of ties are maintained under different Haruwa practices? iii) How is the system transforming or

declining as a response to political, social and economic processes at the local and national level?

To answer these questions, I have utilised primary data and empirical cases from nine Village Development Committees (VDCs) of three adjoining Tarai districts, namely Siraha, Saptari and Dhanusha. Fieldwork was carried out in the first quarter of 2006. In addition, relevant literature has been reviewed and available secondary information utilised.

This paper can be broadly divided into three parts. In the first part, I will be discussing conceptual aspects and the relevance of patron-client relationships and the land tenure system of Nepal in the study the Haruwa system. I will then present the data collection methods and the primary data from the field followed by discussions and analysis.

### **Land Tenure, Landlessness and *Haruwa* System**

Traditionally, land has been the principal source of economic wellbeing, social status and political power in Nepal. It is a significant means of subsistence and livelihood for the majority of the Nepalese households. But still a large number of rural households, in the Eastern Tarai, in particular, are landless, which means that the households are dependent on agriculture but cannot claim any legal ownership over land. Thus a landless person had to enter into a dyadic relationship with the landed household. If he is not from a particular occupational caste, or living with traditional occupations, the only option left for him will be to till the landlord's land, but without any tenancy rights. Hence, a highly unequal land tenure system co-existing with under-developed economic structure featured with traditional agricultural system in one hand and the surplus population of the landless and near-landless sections compel them for the greater dependence on a few landed families.

Historically, state's landlordism and its policy to distribute land to its functionaries and service providers continued for centuries, after unification, 1769 AD in general and during Rana oligarchic period (1846-1950 AD), in particular. Usually they used to come from royal and ruling family, warrior family, priests, and so on. In such process, only a few got the ownership over land and a large majority remained landless. The landless were forced to provide free service, *Jhara* to those landlords. Mostly Dalits and marginal farmers were the ones who had to provide such services. The landlord needed permanent plough men to till their field. Gradually, such relationship was institutionalised as patron-client relationship, an interdependency based on unequal reciprocity. By this, landlords get permanent labour to maintain production, and on the other hand, clients get support for the subsistence of his family. Previously, even becoming a Haruwa was a preferred occupation when there was no alternative wage labouring available. Such an attachment could have provided an assured subsistence and relatively secure employment.

In Nepal, where the land distribution is very much skewed among the various caste groups, overwhelming majority of Dalits of Tarai are landless, therefore, downtrodden and marginalised. Hence, denied access to the land is the common denominator for marginalisation and pauperization of the Dalits. Consequently, Dalits in more numbers have to enter into such a patron-client relationship for their subsistence. Table 1 provides the landownership situation of some selected Dalits from hills and Tarai.

**Table 1 : Land holding by caste\***

<b>Hill and Tarai Dalits</b>	<b>% of hh without any agri-land</b>	<b>Average area of landholding (ha)</b>
1. Hill	23.62	0.55
1.1 Hill Dalits in average	19.68	0.33
1.1.1 Kami	19.25	0.39
1.1.2 Sarki	15.71	0.35
1.1.3 Damai/Dholi/Badi/Gaine	23.81	0.18
2. Tarai	37.26	0.61
2.1 Tarai Dalits in average	61.90	0.17
2.1.1 Chamar/Harijan	57.45	0.25
2.1.2 Musahar	96.67	0.00
2.1.3 Other Tarai dalits: Dusadh/Paswan, Khatwe, Tatma, Chidimar, Dhobi, Banntar	44.90	0.21
3 Total	27.35	0.56

\*Compiled by Arun Lal Das, CEDA, 2007, based on NLSS2. This also includes urban households.

Hence, a majority of the Dalits are landless or nearly landless. Situation of the Tarai Dalits in general and Mushar in particular is the worst case. Those who own some land also cannot survive with the production from their farm. Often they own inferior quality of land. Therefore, they have to depend on landlords for their survival.

In case of most of the Tarai Dalits, despite being landless, they have to depend on agricultural activities, as a share cropper and mostly as a Haruwa. Table 2 illustrates the heavy dependence on agriculture or related activities.

**Table 2: Percentage of Population aged 5 years and above of Dalits and Non-Dalits in Occupational and Social Category, Nepal 1996**

Caste/ Ethnicity	Agriculture and related	Service	Trade comm- erce	Wage labou- rer	Sick, Disable, Depend- ent	Students	Others	Total (N)
Hill Dalits	49.2	3.8	1.3	11.4	12	17.7	4.6	7963
Tarai Dalits	37.5	1.9	0.9	32	16.7	7.8	3.2	3749
Total Dalits	45.4	3.2	1.2	18	13.5	14.5	4.2	11709
Non-Dalits	46.5	5.9	3	5.7	10.1	26.1	2.8	103791
Total	46.3	5.7	2.8	6.9	10.4	24.9	2.9	
N	53530	6550	3223	8015	12035	28788	3359	115500

Hill Dalit: Kami, Sarki, Damai, Badi, Gaine.

Tarai Dalit: Khatway, Chamar, Dusad, Mushahar, Dhobi

(Source: Calculated from the MEBDC Data file tapes; Adopted from Action Aid Nepal, CARE Nepal, Save the Children, May 2002, National Dalit Strategy Report)

A constrained access to the occupational opportunities and landlessness take one to maintain a dyadic relationship, with landlords, supposed to be beneficial to the client (the landless) also. Eventually, a client has to rely on his patron more than in himself. This context weakens the labourers' bargaining capacity as well as the access to the open labour market.

This relationship, however, is apparently declining, albeit, at a rather slow rate. There are several factors responsible for this. As I argued earlier, the state's land tenure policy provided the ground for such transformation along with the changing political and economic environment. However, in Nepalese context successive land reform programs for last five decades could not achieve much in transforming the cliental dependency ties. For example, the persistence of traditional landlord-peasant relations is also well manifested in the government generated statistics: the agriculture census 2001 shows that about 5 percent households own 37 % of arable land, while 47 % of households own only 15 % of arable land with an average farming size of 0.5 ha, insufficient to survive for an average household. In addition, about 25 percent of households are landless (cited in Joshi & Masson 2007).

Land reform initiatives were taken by the first elected government of the Nepali Congress in 1959. Though Royal Land Reform Commission of 1952 and Land Act 1957 had been enacted earlier, they did not bring much alteration. The Nepali Congress got huge support and won the election due to its slogan of "land to the tillers" (c.f. Joshi & Masson 2007). But, soon this

government was dismissed and the late king Mahendra introduced the partly-less Panchyat system. Even then, in order to get popular support, the king had to promulgate the Land Reorganization Act 1962 immediately. This land reform programme concluded in 1966, but again yielded little. Eventually, only 1.5 percent of the arable land was redistributed, and still 7.8 percent peasant households still remained landless (Zaman 1973, as quoted in Joshi & Masson 2007).

Even after the restoration of democracy in the country in 1991 and the governments formed thereafter talked much about land reform, but no substantial achievement was made, neither in promulgating the appropriate act nor implementing the existing programs effectively and efficiently. The situation of landless and marginal peasants continued to deteriorate. The political environment changed but the source of political power at the local level virtually remained the same, with the same old landlords and their families who in some cases took up the roles of local power elites and party representatives. Joshi & Masson (2007) observed that 'local patron also often act as a buffer between peasants and parties running candidates for elective offices'. Hence, the combination of impotent land reform efforts, the ability of the same old patrons to transform quickly and maintenance of their relations with the state or governing elites enabled the traditional form of dyadic relations between patron and client to remain intact, albeit in a weaker form. Thus even the dramatic political changes which have taken place in Nepal could not free the peasants from the cliental dependency. Rather, it is the ever growing labour market, commercialisation and mechanisation of agriculture as well as to some extent the mobilisation by the NGOs which has helped to bring about the decline of the old forms of patron-client relation in the agricultural production sectors. The case of Haruwa can be comprehended better if viewed from this perspective.

### **Methods of Study**

Three districts from the eastern Tarai—Saptari, Siraha, and Dhanusha —were selected on the basis of the prevalence rate of Haruwa, proportion of Dalit population and situation of landlessness and economic backwardness as reported by previous studies. The landless population in these three districts is about 33% (34.4 percent in Dhanusha, 29.2% in Siraha and 32.3% in Saptari - CBS 2002). Three VDCs from each district were selected following similar criteria that of the district selection.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used. Quantitative data portrays the patterns of distribution of Haruwas, their age-gender structure, caste/ethnic composition, land ownership pattern, contract system and wage level, whereas qualitative information seeks to explain them.

The primary data were gathered through a household survey of Haruwa families. Out of a total 11,216 households (CBS 2001) in the study VDCs,

the basic socio-economic and demographic features of 1,594 Haruwa families (i.e., 14.21%) were identified, and this was then followed by a detailed survey. Three wards from each VDC were identified with stratified random sampling and with high, medium and low prevalence rates of the haruwa system were randomly selected. Then a questionnaire survey was administered in the sample wards which yielded 527 families of Haruwa in total. The questionnaire survey explored more the economic aspects such as wages, types of contracts, and labour migration.

Qualitative information was gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with Haruwas and some key informants. Focused Group Discussions (FGD) with the Haruwa were conducted to collect qualitative data as well as to triangulate the already gathered information. Observations provided a general insight about the working condition of the Haruwas.

Secondary data were collected from various published and unpublished sources and was analysed using simple statistical techniques, substantiated with qualitative information. The major source of information was collected from Haruwa respondents and only a few interviews were carried out with landlords, therefore, this paper may inadequately reflect the landlords' perspectives and explanations about the system.

The field study was carried out during the eve of jana andolan (people's movement) of 2006. The heightening conflict between the government and the Communist Party of Nepal, Maoists (CPNM), thereby worsening security situation caused some difficulties in mobility and communication during the field work. However, it is argued that the information gathered and the conclusions drawn from the study are robust.

### **Typology and Overview of Haruwa System in the Study Area**

Etymologically, the term, Haruwa<sup>1</sup>, means one who ploughs the field. In the study area, Haruwa specifically refers to one who ploughs the field of landlord under a long-term labour contract. He is attached to landlord's family and bound to perform his agricultural activities. Most of Haruwa are landless and most are also Dalits belonging to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy and traditionally considered 'untouchables'.

Hence a Haruwa is the one who works in landlords' agricultural land, at least for one year contract, usually starting from *shree panchanmi*<sup>2</sup>, a Hindu festival that falls during February. They are often tied with cliental dependency and under domination of the landlords.

Hence, a Haruwa is the one who works in landlords' agricultural land, at least for one year contract usually starting from *shree panchanmi*, a Hindu festival that falls during January. Traditionally Haruwa implies a labour contract between landlord and labourers which often is not time-bound; rather it frequently is passed through generations due to debt bondage. A haruwa or haliya thus earns his livelihood from the land and yet he does not acquire any right over it or other sort of permanent property. Rather, he

simply gets a piece of land (*Hahliya Chal*), usually of an inferior quality as incentive to cultivate during the contract period. Furthermore, Haruwa are bound not only by debt but also by moral bondage in a traditional patron-client relationship, and sometimes even family ties of fictive kinship and loyalty.

Haruwa have not only to work in the landlords' fields but also perform any other tasks required, which means they remain busy for long hours each day in service of the landlord and his family. A Haruwa's wife and children also serve the landlord's family, often without being paid, but getting other support in return, for example, leftover food, used clothes and protection in some cases.

No Haruwa work without wages but their wages vary widely and are often low compared to those of other agricultural labourers. Haruwa may have their own houses or may live in a *haliyachal* provided by the landlord. *Haliya Chal*, is usually a 10 *Katha* piece of land, often of inferior quality, is provided to Haruwa for the period of service contract.

There are variants among the Haruwas in terms of the types of contract they are tied with. The four major types are as follows:

#### **I. Based on duration and types of contracts**

- i. For generations, inherited from (fore-) fathers
- ii. One year (annual) contract
- iii. Seasonal (Jestha – Poush; only hired for major agricultural seasons)
- iv. Contract for certain time period

#### **II. Based on modality of payments**

- i. Granting a *haliyahcal* (piece of land granted to Haruwa, usually up to 10 *katha* for contracted period, no tenancy rights could be claimed)
- ii. *Bataiya/Adhiya*, allowing share cropping on a 50-50 basis in a certain area of land
- iii. Wage in *Thekka* (contract) or annual wage, (nearly 5 quintal, i.e.480 kg paddy a year)
- iv. Loan or debt (in cash or, either kind incurred by oneself or by father)
- v. Day counting basis (like wage labouring but contracted for longer period; usually 5 – 8 kg paddy per day; equivalent to Nrs. 35-56 at current market price)

#### **III. Based on residence arrangement of Haruwa**

- i. Living in own house
- ii. Living in landlord house (for e.g., in servant quarter)
- iii. Landlord's land
- iv. Rented/borrowed/others' house

#### **IV. Single or Family working for landlords**

- i. Alone

- ii. With family members (often son as Charuwa, and wife as a house servant)

These typologies are not mutually exclusive though. One may have overlapping contracts constituting a combination of two or more of these. For example, several cases were reported of people with debt bondage inherited from the father, now living on the landlord's land also cultivating a few *Kathas* of *Haliyachal* and the whole family is working for the landlords.

**Social Demography:** The total number of household in the study area was 11,216 (CBS 2001) of which 1594 households were identified as Haruwa households. Table 3 presents the distribution of Haruwas by VDC in the study area.

**Table 3: Distribution of HH having Haruwa in the study area**

District	VDC	Total HH	Haruwa	% of Haruwa
Dhanusa	Bharatpur	2567	114	4.4
	Raghunathpur	2218	172	7.8
	Ramdaiya Bhawadi	1069	86	8.0
	Sub total	5854	372	6.4
Siraha	Bastipur	1060	84	8.0
	Hanuman Nagar	661	108	16.2
	Naharari Goul	754	322	42.7
	Sub total	2475	514	20.8
Saptari	Pato	755	82	11.0
	Jamuni Madhyapura	1107	316	28.5
	Malekpur	1025	310	31.0
	Sub total	2887	708	24.5
	Grand Total	13621	1687	12.4

*Source: Field survey, 2006.*

On average 12.4 percent of the households earn their livelihood as Haruwa in the study area. Haruwa may also work for other landlords outside. Similarly, other Haruwa may be coming to work in the study area. In such cases, Haruwa coming from outside the study VDCs are not enumerated in this survey.

**Caste/Ethnicity distribution of Haruwa in the study area:** It is apparent that the majority of Haruwa are from Dalit communities. Most of Dalits are landless or nearly landless and present in a high proportion in the study area. Table 4 presents the caste/ethnic distribution of the Haruwas.

**Table 4: Caste/Ethnicity distribution of Haruwas**

Districts	Dalits	Hill Jana	Terai Jana & middle caste	Muslim
Siraha	274	29	149	62
Saptari	528	7	162	15
Dhanusha	269	3	92	4
Total	1071	39	403	81
Percentage	67.19	2.45	25.28	5.08

Source: Field Survey, 2006

Hence, 67 percent of Haruwas are from Dalit communities. Out of them, 55 percent work as individual where as 45 percent are involved with their families. Most often, the son or daughter of a Haruwa works as Charuwa, and wife work as a housemaid. Sometimes, they have to work unpaid or receive a relatively low wage; however, usually one meal a day is provided.

The present survey study has revealed that 85 percent of Dalit Haruwa live in their own houses, and 15 percent live in the landlord's yard or house. All *janajati* groups live in their own houses, similarly 92 percent non-Dalit and 83 percent of Muslim live in their own houses, and only 8 percent of non-Dalits and 17 percent of Muslim live in landlord's house or yard corner provided by landlord.

In most of the cases, those living in their own house had built it not on their own land, but rather on public, government land.

**Contract and Contract Duration:** There are basically two types of contract: working for the entire year (at least) and a seasonal one. Usually the contract begins from *Shreei Panchami*, which is one of the the major Hindu festivals, observed the worshipping of Saraswati, goddess of knowledge. Generally this festival falls in the third week of January.

**Table 5: presents the types of Haruwas in terms of their contract period**

District	Duration	no	Percent
Siraha	Seasonal	205	39.9
	Whole year	309	60.1
	Total	514	100
Saptari	Seasonal	411	58.1
	Whole year	297	41.9
	Total	708	100
Dhanusha	Seasonal	38	10.2
	Whole year	334	89.8
	Total	372	100

Source: Field Survey, 2006

Haruwa working for the whole year contract is higher in Siraha (60%) and Dhanusha (90%), and comparatively low in Saptari (42%). A number of Haruwa in Siraha and Dhanusha also work for Indian landlords and the number of Janajati landlords is also higher in these districts. This, presumably, may explain the reasons for the variation in the percentage of Haruwa working for the entire year.

The number of years one has spent as Haruwa illustrates how one gets into the system on a longer term basis. The study suggests that a Haruwa who is indebted and consequently is forced to plough is reported to have served a single landlord for longer years. The majority (58%) of the Haruwa have entered into the system within last ten years. A quarter (25%) of them has already served 10-20 years as Haruwa.

**Table 6: presents the number of years serving as Haruwa among different caste/ethnic groups.**

	Number of Years Living as Haruwa/Charuwa (In %)							Total
	1-10	10-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	
Dalit	41.00	17.10	6.80	2.80	0.50	0.10	0.10	68.30
Janajati	1.80	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.30
Nondalit	13.40	6.00	3.70	1.00	0.30	0.10	0.00	24.50
Muslim	1.80	1.50	1.10	0.30	0.10	0.00	0.00	4.80
Total	58.00	25.10	11.60	4.10	0.90	0.10	0.10	100.00

*Source: Field Survey, 2006*

In the given context of the study area, years of serving as Haruwa means years of bondage also, either debt bondage or moral bondage, often ritualised as patron-client relation.

**Work, Wage and Working Conditions:** A Haruwa has to work more than normal working hours from dusk to dawn. That means their daily working hour is not fixed. The workload of Haruwa depends on the nature of contract. If he is a debt bondage and working for years, he has to work almost like a house servant, who is supposed to help in every household chore, in addition to ploughing the field. For example, they have to fetch fire wood and water, and carry out all works related to harvesting. They even have to send wife and children to help in the field during the peak agriculture seasons. The field study shows that 42 percent of Haruwa work alongside their family members, either an additional member or the entire family members. They sometimes even have to carry gifts/goods to or from the relatives. It is also the duty of Haruwa to provide security to his landlord. Reciprocity of the

security (the protection), thus, adds one more dimension in such interdependent relationship.

Haruwa and their families also work day and night at landlords' house during festivals, and on occasions like weddings, pujas, etc. But, this is not even counted as 'work' days and they do not get a regular wage. They are told, "It is not agriculture work as usual, rather occasional events; therefore, all should work in their own capacity like a family member." They are provided with two meals on such days. Thus, they are supposed to carry out any necessary work in the landlord's house, often without any payment. Almost all types of Haruwas are supposed to get involved in such events in landlord's house. If a Haruwa fails to attend his regular job, he should send someone to take up his daily work.

In numerous cases Haruwa's families are living in the land, either a village block or public lands, where they do not have land ownership rights. In such cases, Haruwas need some protection from landlords to remain on such land, and therefore, they are obliged to become loyal to the landlords, consequently more dependent. Several such cases from the study area also suggested that the landlord's behaviour to a Haruwa or his family also depends on their caste identity although Haruwa themselves state that they do not find any differentiation in the behaviour of the landlords according to their caste identity.

The normal remuneration for a Haruwa is up to 10 *kathhas* of land for cultivation as a part of contract for ploughing the landlord's field. He cannot claim any tenancy rights over this land, and he has to give it back once the contract is terminated.

Landlords keep Haruwa as long as they are physically able to carry out heavy and tough work, like ploughing; otherwise, they will be sent away. Although a few landlords claimed to do so, we could not obtain any evidence of any landlord paying the medical expenses of his Haruwa, in spite of the fact that the latter always treats his landlord's work as high priority, even at the cost of his own work and benefits.

Hence, the main responsibility of a Haruwa is to carry out all the activities with related to the agriculture farming, and contingent works for landlords. Traditionally, to regulate such work, the landlord system had maintained (and still maintains) a web of relationships with different service providers (the clients), Haruwa being one of them, and these relationship constitutes a household level production unit.

**The Work Organisation of Landlords:** A landlord also continuously maintains his relation with state or political organisation, local or national, to secure power and authority. It is often the case that most of the elected representatives are landlord themselves or their close kin. At the same time, a landlord also has to maintain a relation with the market to buy and sell products. The market also favours landlords because of their connection with the state or political authorities. Likewise, they also maintain their reputation by presenting themselves as social workers who are benevolent to the poor, regularly perform the religious rituals, pujas, and give donation to social organisations and political parties.

In all those activities and events, a landlord is supported and suggested by his *Munsi*, often from a particular caste, known as Kayastha in Tarai. A *Munsi* keeps all the records of his landlord, particularly of the economic transactions. He is the one who plays a key role in hiring Haruwa, negotiating and binding them with contracts. Therefore, usually a Haruwa seeks support and favour from a *Munsi*.

The immediate receiver of his or his assistance order is called *Hatway*. He measures all the produce and takes care of it. He regularly reports to the *Munsi* and the landlord if needed.

For daily execution of the agricultural work and monitoring, a *Laguwa*, who is normally a senior Haruwa, or the most loyal one, is employed. A relative of landlord may also work as *Laguwa*. He also has to arrange additional labourers in peak agricultural seasons.

Then Haruwa, the main labourer, is to carry out all physical labour including his main job, i.e. ploughing and associated tasks. Often Haruwa himself requests his landlord to employ his children as *Charuwa*, (a cattle herder). During main seasons of agriculture, they have to work with other labourers who are not tied with similar contracts but worked for wage. During this period a *Tahalu* monitors works and takes care of the mid day meal for the labourers. Female *Tahalu* is called *Tahali*. Though they do not have to work for the entire year, but they are more or less attached to the same landlord. While *Mestar*, a sweeper is the lowest in the rank, his/her main job is to sweep and clean the court yard of the landlord.

Hence, traditionally, landlords maintain a systematic network of labourers and service providers. By doing so, the landlords not only ensure their agricultural production cycle but also maintain their political authority at the local level and connect themselves to the higher authorities. Such patterns, however, are not of the same intensity everywhere.

The system has been affected by changing cropping pattern, for example, with cash crops such as jute and sugarcane; fragmented land size, increasing trends of labour migration even among landless and marginal families. In some villages, the Maoist insurgency has brought some alteration in the system. However, no Haruwa agreed with this later

argument. Rather, they repeatedly alleged that Maoist never favoured them but always listened to the landlords and established contacts with them. Bilttu Sada (name changed) from Naharai Goul VDC explained that, “[since] a large number of Maoists have to be fed frequently, they need donation, so how would they take the side of a landless Haruwa? What can we offer to them? They always have taken the side of landlords.”

**The Landlords:** There are significant variations in the characteristic features of the landlords. Often they belong to the upper castes who traditionally owned the land for cultivation. There are, however, some cases of Dalit landlords, in areas bordering India in particular, as some Haruwa have been working for Indian landlords as well. Figure 1 presents the caste/ethnic distribution of the landlords in the study area.

**Fig 1: Distribution of Lanlords by caste/ethnicity**



Those Haruwa who work for Indian landlords in India work in an annual working contract, and some of them have been serving the same landlords for years. No evidence of debt bondage with Indian landlords was reported. However, Haruwa can get part of the contract money in advance. On the other hand, cases of Indian wage labourer coming to Nepal for agriculture wage labour was observed, but not in long-term labour contract.

A Haruwa working for an Indian landlord sometimes takes a labour-gang to work at his landlord's land during the peak agricultural seasons. Such labourers bring cash from India.

**Indebtedness and Moral Bondage:** Indebtedness appears to be the most compelling factor for a Haruwa to work as a bonded labourer, a perpetuated cliental dependency. The nature and the amount of debt, in fact, determine the condition of a Haruwa, whether he is bonded or voluntarily working as a Haruwa. The system exhibits different circumstantial and contractual basis to keep one tied into the bondage. The empirical facts suggest that the loan incurred by oneself or by fathers and forefathers compounded with exceptionally high interest rates ties one into 'bondage'. The interest rate can be up to 120 percent; however, lenders generally take 36 percent. Although it is not explicitly stated in any contract or bond papers, debtors are also bound to plough the landlord's field. Hence, debt functions as the method by which landlords ensure themselves of a supply of permanent yet cheap agricultural labourers, and create mechanism thereby agricultural labourers continue to be attached to the landlords.

Table 7 presents the details of loans borrowed by Haruwa from different sources. The table also presents the range (maximum and minimum amount) of loan taken.

**Table 7: Amount of Loan received (borrowed) from various sources by Haruwas**

	From Landlord (NRS)	From Relatives (NRS)	From Friends (NRS)	From Bank/finance company (NRS)	From other sources (NRS)	Total amount taken from all sources (NRS)
Number	91	21	13	21	70	134
Median	5,000	2,000	1,500	7,000	10,000	10,250
Minimum	500	500	500	400	200	700
Maximum	15,000	50,000	10,000	15,000	21,000	150,000
Number	89	1	5	20	7	71
Median	3,000	20,000	1,500	8,500	5,000	3,500
Minimum	350	20,000	1,000	1,000	3,000	500
Maximum	50,000	20,000	5,000	25,000	11,000	50,000
Number	138	1	10	0	5	113
Median	5,500	4,000	4,500		4,000	10,000
Minimum	200	4,000	1,000		2,000	200
Maximum	400,000	4,000	55,000		8,000	400,000

*Source: Field Survey, 2006*

Hence, for all three districts, the average (median) loan taken by a household is NRS 9,000 with minimum NRs 200 and maximum NRs 400,000.

A large number of 318 (59.3%) of Haruwa took loan from landlords from who they are working with interest rates ranging from 24 to 72 percentage. The average interest rate is 60 percent which is up to 500 percent

of the commercial bank rate. Others obtained loans in other ways: 23 (4.3%) mentioned that they took loans from their relatives; 28 (5.2%), friends; 41 (7.6%) banks and financial institutions. Remaining 82 (15.3%) Haruwa reported that they took loan from other sources such as local traders or school teachers.

It is evident that indebtedness is the major reasons for entering into a long term labour contract. Due to the loan, especially when it is from the landlord, a Haruwa cannot explore the jobs in the open labour market and compete for the better wage. Therefore, there are cases that Haruwas who have been working for same or different masters for decades. When they have to work as Haruwa, they just about manage to pay the interest of the loan but not the principal amount. Hence, once one falls into a trap of debt he cannot get out of it easily, and bound to entail ever-diminishing returns of their labour-power. The landlords, the creditor-employer in this context, even manipulate the debt as an instrument for coercion.

Their dependence on landlords even for a small amount has remained as one of the major reasons for falling into such trap. Their access to different sources is denied for various reasons. They cannot mortgage anything to get a loan from formal sources, or, once one is already indebted, he is not supposed to seek a loan from others. He is not even trusted by anyone other than his patron. Their minimal presence in saving-credit groups or any other micro credit scheme makes them more vulnerable. Hence, loan appears to be the major instrument of reproducing the Haruwa bond. Haruwa can never seek a better livelihood opportunity as he is bound to serve his landlord for his entire life.

**Livelihood Constraints: Access to the Farmland is Minimal:** There is a strong association between Dalits, landlessness and long-term labour contract as Haruwa. Historically, access to land was denied to Haruwas, thereby perpetuating the poverty by reproducing it in a structural way. The study shows that almost half (49%) of Haruwa were landless, and one third of them (33%) owned only less than 0.05 ha of land. No single Haruwa reported to have owned 1 ha of land, however, 0.7 percent reported to have owned more than 0.5 ha of land in their own name.

Thus, the exasperating land distribution among Haruwa, mostly Dalits, indicates their poverty level. Their lack of access to land to cultivate creates complex problems for them. Without having sufficient land (a productive source and valuable asset) one cannot even have access to credit institutions. Therefore, dependence on and loyalty towards one's landlords is the only option. In turn, they are bound to plough the landlord's fields until the loan is paid. For landlords the presence of physically able workers in the borrower's family becomes one of the major resources in providing services.

**Share Cropping and Land Tenure Arrangements:** Share cropping seems to be a viable option for landless families. There is an increasing trend of renting out land for sharecropping so that landowners are freed from burden of farming activities. But, for share cropping, one is expected to have his own bullocks to plough the field, which a landless Haruwa family cannot afford. The field study showed that 87 percent of Haruwa in Tarai districts have not cultivated any land under the share cropping arrangement (Table 8).

**Table 8 : Adhiya land in ha (Siraha, Saptari and Dhanusa)**

Details	Number	Percent
No Adhiya Land	465	86.8
0.01-0.05 ha	2	0.4
More than 1 ha	69	12.9
Total	536	100

Source: Field Survey, 2006

It is worth noting here that nearly 13 percent have cultivated more than 1 ha of land under share-cropping arrangements, a little more than 3 percent of them have cultivating the land under *Thekka* (contract) tenure arrangement. Of which, 3 percent have been cultivating 1 or more than 1 ha of land, where as 0.2 percent have been cultivating less than 1 ha of land. Whatever land Haruwa families are cultivating, they hardly can claim any tenancy rights (*mohiyani*) over them. Field survey reveals that 95 percent have no such *mohiyani* rights over land at all, and remaining 5 percent owns up to 1 ha of such land.

The most common way of accessing cultivable land is in the form of *Haliya Chal*, a piece of land given to Haruwa for cultivation as a form of payment for his service, usually, 10 *katha* of land per Haruwa. Table 9 presents the total number of Haruwa in the study area having access to *Haliya chal*.

**Table 9 : Haliyachal land details in the study area (in ha.)**

Details	Number	Percent
No Haliyachal Land	227	42.4
0.01-0.05	4	0.7
0.06-0.1	30	5.6
0.11-0.2	169	31.5
0.21-0.5	103	19.2
0.51-1	3	0.6
Total	536	100

Source: Field Survey, 2006

Little more than 42 percent of Haruwa does not have any *Haliya Chal*. Of those, who cultivate in *Haliyachal*, almost 99 percent of them have less than 0.5 ha of land.

**Food Security Situation:** Due to the severe lack of access to productive resources, like land and livestock, food security among Haruwa households is always at risk. Table 10 presents the food security situation of the Haruwa households in the study area.

**Table 10: Food Security Situation of Haruwa in Study Districts (in %)**

District	less than 1 month	1-3 months	4-6 months	7-9 months	10-12 months
Saptari	11.20	51.70	29.20	3.90	3.90
Siraha	31.70	38.20	22.60	3.00	4.50
Dhanusha	55.30	35.80	8.20	0.60	0
Average	32.73	41.90	20.00	2.50	2.80

Source: Field Survey, 2006

The study reveals that only 2.8 percent of Haruwa families can survive 10-12 months a year with their own production. A Haruwa who does not have or have only limited access to the cultivable land is bound to work for a landlord as an attached labourer. This fact exposes the intensity of poverty among the Haruwa in Tarai. Nearly 33 percent of the Haruwa households cannot feed themselves even for a single month. Likewise, about 42 percent of them can survive for only up to 3 months with their own production. In brief, 72 percent of the Haruwa households survive less than 3 months from their own production.

**Assets Possessed by Haruwa Families:** Assets owned by Haruwa families show the level of poverty among them. Haruwa are deprived of not only land but also utensils, clothes and a proper shelter.

Among 536 surveyed households, only 127 have radios (23%). Most of them have Chinese radio which costs just a couple of hundreds rupees. Similarly, 29 households (5.4 %) have got television, most often a 14-inch black and white one usually brought by the labour migrants from India. Nearly one-third (29.4%) of them possess bicycles.

In terms of agricultural implements, only 10 percent of them possess the wooden plough of their own while 73.5 percent possess *Kodali* (spades - often more than one in each family) and, 88 percent have sickles. Ploughs and spades are supposed to be male property, whereas, sickles are supposed to be female property. Only 5 households (4 Dalits and 1 Janajati) reported owning a bullock cart.

The survey also shows that 12.8 percent of households have tube-wells of their own, mostly supported by development NGOs; however, this is very low compared to other Tarai households. One Dalit households in Siraha even has a solar panel for power. Likewise, only 6 households reported having a sewing machine in their possession.

**Coping Strategies of Haruwa Households:** An apparent challenge for Haruwa families is to cope with their vulnerable situation. Since they are in perennial poverty and do not poses substantial assets or productive resources, searching for alternatives or diversifying their livelihood portfolios is difficult. In addition to work as a Haruwa, the family members of Haruwa or sometimes he himself adopts other options for survival (Table 11).

**Table 11: Survival Option and Strategies**

District	Caste/ Ethnicity	Not answered	Plough in wage labour	Work at Brick Factory	Work outside of District	Others
Siraha	Dalit	2.90	18.10	66.70	8.70	3.60
	Janajati	0	0	10	0	0
	Non-Dalit	5.60	11.10	83.30	0.00	0.00
	Muslim	0.00	8.30	66.70	25.00	0.00
	Total	2.80	15.70	70.20	8.40	2.80
Saptari	Dalit	6.50	19.60	53.80	0.50	19.60
	Janajati	0.00	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00
	Non-Dalit	25.00	0.00	25.00	0.00	50.00
	Muslim	0.00	0.00	83.30	0.00	16.70
	Total	7.00	18.10	53.80	0.50	20.60
Dhanusa	Dalit	3.10	51.20	20.50	0	25.20
	Janajati	0.00	33.30	33.30	0	33.30
	Non-Dalit	20.00	24.00	12.00	0	44.00
	Muslim	0.00	0.00	0.00	0	100.00
	Total	5.70	45.90	19.50	0	28.90
	Avgerage	5.17	26.57	47.83	2.97	17.43

*Source: Field Survey, 2006*

For majority of them (48%), working in the brick kilns as seasonal wage labourer has been one of the main sources of alternative incomes. Most of such brick factory workers work as a labour gang, managed by a middleman, and in many cases they are also in 'debt bondage', meaning the workers take the money in advance, therefore, and are bound to work as arranged by the middleman. Similarly, about 27 percent of the households have also been working as ploughman for people other than their main landlord. Nearly 3

percent are outside the districts. A few have also gone to India and The Middle East.

Working for landlords is obviously the first task of Haruwa, and then the second option can be working in brick kilns. They stated that they get better wage if they work outside their village, where they only earn NRs 40-50 per day, whereas they may get up to NRs 125 outside the village. However, finding such work outside the village is not easy for them.

Labour migration abroad, for e.g. to the Middle Eastern countries, has been a recent attraction, but very few could afford it.

**Citizenship and Haruwa:** Citizenship has been a pertinent issue in the Tarai, especially among the landless and Dalits. An effort was made to look at the situation of citizenship among the Haruwas. For Haruwa, it is an instrument for accessing different sources of livelihood, such as, getting a passport to go abroad, having access to formal credit facilities, or buying or owning land. The study reveals that more than half of the population of 16 years and above has no citizenship certificate (Table 12).

**Table 12: Details of citizenship card in study VDCs (of Dhanusa, Sarlahi and Saptari districts)**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Don't have citizenship (in %)</b>	<b>Having citizenship (in %)</b>
Male	38.90	61.10
Female	63.58	36.42
Total	51.24	48.76

*Source: Field Survey 2006.*

In many instances, Haruwas serve their landlords for years expecting that their patrons would help them to get citizenship certificates. Usually, such landlords also have good connection with the political leaders and administrative personnel. In many cases, forefathers of Haruwa had come from India and since then they have been serving the same patron's family. Therefore, they never require a citizenship certificate. But, now they need it for various purposes, they have difficulty in obtaining it. Many cases were reported that landlords promised Haruwas to get citizenship certificates for them therefore they served the landlords almost for free. The fact that only a very few Haruwa families actually have citizenship certificates is explicable in terms of the landlords' need to secure loyalty by maintaining dependency.<sup>3</sup>

**Child Labour and Reproduction of Haruwa:** More than a quarter (27.52%) of the total population was children aged between 5-14 years, of which 4.66 percent were living away from their families during the study period. Virtually in all cases, they are working as Charuwa or house servants. The school attendance of children of that age is very low. Even if they are living with their own families, many of them still work as Charuwa.

Although often invisible, child labour and child rights are the serious issues in the Haruwa system and are largely overlooked by I/NGO who claimed to have been working with a rights-based approach. Usually the male child of a Haruwa grows up as a Charuwa, a cattle herder, for his landlord. Since the entire system of Haruwa is utterly tied up with pre-modern, pre-capitalist mode of production where by the family is a production unit, a Charuwa becomes an integral part of the system.

Cattle rearing are closely linked to traditional agricultural practices in the rural Nepal. Charuwas are often young boys or sometimes girls who look after cattle and carry out associated tasks. He or she is also attached with similar kinds of 'obligations' as a bonded labourer. These child workers have to work entire day for their masters. Their rights (as defined in different national and international Child Rights Conventions, Regulations and Acts) are denied. In many case, as Charuwa grows up, he gradually takes on the role of Haruwa, thereby perpetuating his father's labour relationship with the landlords.

The survey reveals that about one fifth (19.1%) landlords employing Haruwa have also kept Charuwa, often young children, aged 8-16 years. As Bechan, Charuwa of 12 years from Bastipur, Siraha empathetically expressed, "Who doesn't want to go to school? I know it will be fun. I have to take my *malik's* (master's) children to school everyday. I have seen school. But, who will pay my fees? Who will feed me? My parents are poor; therefore, I have to work". Before he finished his last sentence, his eyes were filled with tears.

However, grown-up children of Haruwa, nowadays, want to have alternative occupations rather than becoming Haruwa. They think it is humiliation and exploitation. They prefer to go to India, Kathmandu or any other places if they could afford. In recent years, due to the increasing trend of labour migration to India and abroad, the new generation does not want to be Haruwa. The bargaining capacity of the existing Haruwa has not enhanced though. They express their dissatisfaction, and report to outsiders (for example, researchers like us) that they are not content with the terms and conditions of the contract to be Haruwa. Some younger Haruwa univocally told that due to lack of capabilities to pursue alternative source of income they are compelled to stick to the same job. A young Paswan Haruwa from Dhanusha expressed, "Who would have lived a dog's life (*kukkur ko jindagi*), if we had some one to trust us for 20-30 thousands!" It is obvious

that a poor peasant's family cannot invest in foreign employment, and he cannot get loan from any one, either.

It is also evident that parents also do not want their children to continue as Haruwa. Ratan Khatwe (name changed) in Dhanusha told, "Had I been able to send my son to Arab or Malasiya, or at least to Punjab, I would have paid the loan in one year or two. I could live my own life. But, I cannot afford this, so I have to surrender myself to the same criminal (*aparadhi*), as I have no other choices left. After a few years my son has to take up my loan and my fate". Hence, even if employment outside is lucrative and liberating, most Haruwa cannot afford this.

### Conclusions

This study exhibits the historical existence of Haruwa system and reproduction of unfree labour and conducive socio-economic conditions consequently and apparently leading them to some form of bonded labourer in the study area.

Thus the Haruwa system is historically and culturally rooted, and often tied up with indebtedness. Traditional patron-client relationships, based on inter-dependency, mutual trust and benefits, are its foundation. Still the system exhibits several attributes of traditional patron-client relationships as they existed in a rural agrarian economy, albeit in a weakening form. The Haruwa system becomes more complicated as it is closely linked with the landownership issues and social structure embedded in the overall caste hierarchies.

Historically an internalised relationship of reciprocal dependency gradually declined to one of indebtedness and 'moral bondage' for clients, and they lost their freedom to choose their profession, and eventually spending their entire lives in bondage. Primarily a landlord is more interested in attaching farm labour; however, it is also to maintain his social status and political power. Hence, debt becomes both economic and political institution by which a labour is manipulated in a relationship of dependency. Landlords, therefore, are actually willing to give some loan to his client, not only to fulfil latter's need, but also to keep him tied since Haruwa, for landlords, can no longer be trusted if he is not bound with such an indebtedness.

Haruwas, who have been ploughing the landlord's land for generations are not entitled to any tenancy rights. Despite the hard toil throughout the life time, he cannot get rid of downtrodden spiral of poverty. In fact, those who are forced to become indebted never get a chance to choose an alternative mode of living. And, the lack of access to the alternative sources of livelihood, some families have to end up as Haruwas for some years, if not, generations.

The low presence of Haruwa families in community organisation has limited their access to the 'social capital' and 'social safety nets' thereby

restricting their upward mobility. Working condition is not according to the decent working condition. Wage or its equivalent in kind they receive at present is not sufficient to feed their families.

Generally, such a form of bonded labour system regarded as the 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal' nature of agriculture 'pre-capitalist' relation, is in gradual decline. At the same time, the study has illustrated that such relationship can exist also in the industrial wage market. Traditionally such economic interaction in agricultural society is also a ritualised interaction that therefore has cultural dimensions, too, whereas, in the case of bondage in industrial sector is merely an economic interaction.

In the changing political context, with the gradual loss of local political authority of the patrons, partly due to the interventions of the state with its policies and programmes at the local level coupled with the growing activities of political parties in the village level have weakened the traditional system of cliental dependency.

Changing pattern of farming system from labour intensive to capital intensive, and growing cash crop cultivation diminish the importance of such 'loyal' and fully dependent Haruwa and his family to continue the production cycle. For those landlords, who adopted the new or modified roles in the changing political environment, became Pradhan Panch, VDC Chairman, party leaders. In such cases, Haruwa and a group of loyal workforce still remained the important for the political interest. For long, even after the restoration of multiparty democracy, political parties largely depended on the same landlords to garner the political supports at the local level. However, horizontal contradictions between two parties or leaders lead one or another to penetrate up to the resource poor farmers, which gave these Haruwas recognitions, a sense of identity and a little awareness of their rights.

Some NGOs, with agency focused perspective, have targeted the issue of Haruwa and elements of bondage in the contract. In a few cases, NGO activists have been received as new 'patrons' by Haruwas of the study area. Arguably, the Maoist armed struggle (1996-2006) weakened such ties and were able to gain support from such peasants (*c.f.* Joshi & Masson 2006), has remained highly critical and questionable in the case of the study area.

In addition, the ever-expanding labour market in the country and outside have become influential in weakening the ties. In some cases, even a landlord provides loan to a Haruwa family and helps Haruwa's son to send for the labour migration, and retains his father as a Haruwa till the loan is paid back with interest.

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### Notes

1. In colloquial term in Tarai, Haruwa is pronounced as Harahawa, meaning 'one who ploughs' and the service provided after such contract is called *Harwahi*.
2. Following a long pause after harvest of the main crops, farmers in the eastern Tarai begin the agriculture cycle for the coming year from around February. The first activity is to plough the field for the next crop, usually wheat. Therefore, besides having a functional implication that is beginning of agricultural activities for the following year this has also been given a symbolic meaning by ritualising the process of appointing Haruwa for the next year. Also compare it with *Maghi* in western Tarai, where every labor contract is renewed on that day. Previously, *Kamiya* contract used to be renewed or terminated on this day.
3. Beginning of the year 2007, the government of 8 parties alliance decided to provide certificates who are eligible to get one. This was coordinated by the 8 party alliances at the VDC level, with the consent of 8 party representatives at the local VDC level; VDC offices distributed the citizenship certificates. The problem now remains negligible.

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