

## THE PLIGHT OF THE THARU KAMAIYAS IN NEPAL: A REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACETS

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### Introduction

This paper examines the predicament of Tharus in the Tarai of Nepal who were subject to an extreme form of socio-economic exploitation through the Kamaiya system (a bonded labour system) until recently. It reviews the social and economic problems of the Tharus in an historical perspective. In particular it looks into the Kamaiya practice and the recent freeing of the Kamaiyas. The discussion in this paper reveals that the issues related to the Kamaiyas—before and after freedom—have not been looked at from a holistic perspective by the concerned agencies. The paper is primarily based on a review of existing literature (both published and grey) on the Tharus in Nepal supplemented by some interviews with Tharu youths during October-November 2002. Data for the district of Bardiya and the Rajapur area within the district have been presented in view of the fact that these areas have the largest proportion of Tharus in the local population. The Tharu youths interviewed while preparing this paper also came from the Rajapur area of Bardiya district.

Tharus are believed to be the aboriginal people of the Tarai region of Nepal and India. The earliest mention of Tharu as an ethnic label

is found in a 11<sup>th</sup> century geographer's description of an area called Tirhut—today's Mithila in eastern Tarai (see Krauskopff, 1999:50). In Nepal's Tarai today, there are various groups of people that are included under the ethnonym Tharu (see Guneratne, 2002). Guneratne reports that Tharus in Nepal's Tarai have not been a homogenous group of people in terms of their culture, language, and politico-economic situations although they now claim a pan-Tharu ethnic identity. However, in spite of the intra-ethnic-group variations in certain social and cultural aspects, most of the Tharus in various parts of the Tarai in Nepal seem to have gone through similar experiences in relation to their access to land and other vital resources in their own homelands (see Guneratne, 2002, Müller-Böker, 1999; Skar et. al., 1999). The emergence of intra- and inter-ethnic economic relations such as the well-known Kamaiya practices or similar economic relations (see Robertson and Mishra, 1997) have remained a widespread experience among the Tharu community.

Scholars have challenged the assumption that Tarai was an area inhabited by Tharus only before the migration of Paharis into the area (see Krauskoff, 1999, Rankin, 1999). According to researchers the idea that Tarai was a pristine forest area always inhabited by Tharu people only is not supported by historical records (see Rankin, 1999). Researchers cite persuasive historical facts to argue that non-Tharus too were in the Tarai already in the historical past. As evidences they cite the birth of Gautam Buddha in the Tarai and the founding of Simraongarh or Mithila around the 11<sup>th</sup> century (for details see, Sachau 1888 cited in Krauskopff 1999). Given this, the question of the emergence or the origins of Tharu population in the Tarai region of Nepal and India warrants closer examination with the aid of available historical documents and any other relevant evidence. Seeking an answer to this question, however, is not within the scope of this paper.

### The Tharus and their Population

The total population of Tharus according to 1991 census was 1.19 million in the country. This constituted 6.5% of the total population of Nepal. The recent population census of 2001 records a total of 1533879, Tharu population in Nepal, which is 6.75% of the country's total population (CBS, 2002). As is evident, the proportion of Tharus in the country seems to have gone up by 0.25% between 1991 and 2001.

In terms of the total population by caste/ethnic groups, Hill Brahmins, Chhetris and Magars are the only groups that have had larger populations than that of the Tharus in the country. It is interesting to note that the total percentage of the other three groups in Nepal's total population seems to have declined between 1991 and 2001 (Hill Brahmins—from 12.9% to 12.7%; Chhetris—from 16.0% to 15.8%; and Magars—from 7.2% to 7.1%) while that of the Tharus has increased. But within Bardiya district, the population of Tharus has declined by 0.21% while that of Brahmins, Chhetris, Thakuri, and other groups has either remained the same or has increased between 1991 and 2001 census period (see Table 1).

Of all the districts where Tharus live, Bardiya has the highest proportion of Tharu population vis-à-vis non-Tharus. Kailali is the only other district (and Rajapur area borders with Kailali) with approximately 50% Tharus in the total population of the district<sup>2</sup>. In Bardiya district, Tharus had a total population of 153,322, which constituted 52.81% of the total population of the district in 1991 (see CBS, 1999, Table 1.6). According to 2001 census reports, the population of Tharus in Bardiya has reached a total of 201276—registering a growth rate of 2.72%. In this district, they are the predominant people in terms of numbers followed by Chhetri (9.73%), Brahmin (9.44%) and other groups (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Population and Growth Rates by Caste/Ethnic Groups in Bardia District, 1991 and 2001**

Caste/Ethnic Group	1991 Census		2001 Census		Growth Rate 1991-2001
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	
Tharu	153322	52.81	201276	52.60	2.72
Chhetri	28264	9.73	40681	10.63	3.64
Hill Brahmin	27414	9.44	36163	9.45	2.77
Kami/Lohar	15561	5.36	13354	3.49	-1.53
Magar	8583	2.95	10749	2.81	2.25
Thakuri	6663	2.29	9384	2.45	3.42
Muslim~	7267	2.50	8409	2.20	1.46
Damai	5147	1.77	6657	1.74	2.57
Yadav/Ahir	5145	1.77	6852	1.79	2.86
Sarki/Chamar	3981	1.37	5242	1.37	2.75
Others*	28966	9.98	43882	11.47	4.15
<b>Total</b>	<b>290313</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>382649</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>2.76</b>

Sources: CBS, 1999; and CBS 2002.

\* = Others include various Tarai and non-Tarai caste/ethnic groups. ~ = Muslims are a religious group. But they are erroneously listed as one of the caste/ethnic groups in the census tables.

Although Tharus are in majority in the district's total population, most of the indicators of socio-economic development show that they are disadvantaged in comparison to the non-Tharus in the district. For instance, the literacy rate for Tharus in Bardiya was reported as 17.2% while that for the non-Tharus was 37.5% (a 100% difference!). The labour force participation rate (Tharu, 55.9% and non-Tharu, 44.8%) and the proportion of Tharus in agricultural labour force (Tharu, 88.7% and non-Tharu, 74.8%) is much higher than that for the non-Tharus. This pattern is consistent in most of the districts in the Western Tarai Region where Tharus live in significant numbers (see Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998:22). Given this, it is evident that the numerically predominant Tharus

are disadvantaged and a deprived group of people in comparison to non-Tharus living together in the Tarai<sup>3</sup>.

### Population Features in Rajapur Area

Rajapur area within Bardiya is known for being predominantly settled by Tharu people. It is said that most of the Tharus in this area are first or second generation migrants from Dang district. There are 11 VDCs within Rajapur area (which is more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total of 31 VDCs and one Municipality in the district). The total population of Rajapur area as per the 2001 census is 92,908 in 13,303 households. This consists 24.3% of the total population of Bardiya district. The area has a fairly large average household size, i.e., 7.0—slightly larger than the district's average household size of 6.42 (for details see CBS, 2002). It is generally held that larger family size in a population may be associated with its poorer economic conditions. For instance, citing data from Nepal Living Standard Survey (1995/96), a recent report pointed out that the average household size for the Tharus varied by "poverty status with poor (population below poverty line) having larger average size than non-poor (population above poverty line). The actual household size for poor and non-poor Tharu households are 8.6 and 7.0, respectively" (see Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998:12). Thus, the larger average household size in Rajapur Area may also be an indication that majority of the people here could be economically very poor.

**Table 2: Population by Sex and Household Size in 11 VDCs of Rajapur Area, 2001.**

VDCs	Population			Household	
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Av. Size
Badalpur	6738	3408	3330	978	6.9
Bhimpur	9968	5036	4932	1360	7.3
Daulatpur	7246	3563	3683	1085	6.7
Gola	6679	3293	3386	918	7.3
Khairi Chandanpur	6901	3524	3377	1034	6.7
Manau	7054	3485	3569	1080	6.5
Manpur Tapara	9495	4738	4757	1307	7.2
Naya Gaun	5815	2952	2863	768	7.6
Pashupatinagar	6250	3068	3182	967	6.5
Patabhar	14105	6955	7150	1930	7.3
Rajapur	12657	6437	6220	1876	6.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>92908</b>	<b>46459</b>	<b>46449</b>	<b>13303</b>	<b>7.0</b>

Source: CBS, 2002.

More than 50 different caste/ethnic groups are represented within the Rajapur area (see CBS, 2002: VDC-level data). The proportion of Tharus in the area is 69.8%, (see Table 3) which is perhaps one of the highest spatial concentrations of Tharus in the whole country. The total population of Tharus in this area at present is 4.23% of the total Tharu population in the country. Studies have also shown that most of the Tharus are among the poorest groups of people in the country (see INSEC 1992; Robertson and Mishra, 1997; Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998). Given this, the discussion on the situation of Tharus in Rajapur Area in this paper could be considered to give us a fairly representative picture of this community in the region as well as other poor and disadvantaged groups of people in the country.

**Table 3: Population Distribution in the VDCs within Rajapur Area by Caste/Ethnic Groups, 2001**

VDCs	Population by Caste/Ethnic Groups			
	Tharus	Dalits	Bahun-Chhetri	Others
Badalpur	5451 (80.9)	364 (5.4)	813 (12.1)	110 (1.6)
Bhimpur	6783 (68.0)	852 (8.5)	1438 (14.5)	895 (9.0)
Daulatpur	5790 (79.9)	280 (3.8)	1039 (14.3)	137 (2.0)
Gola	3786 (56.7)	625 (9.3)	2162 (32.4)	106 (1.6)
Khairi Chandanpur	4912 (71.2)	656 (9.5)	1040 (15.1)	293 (4.2)
Manau	4113 (58.3)	843 (12.0)	1750 (24.8)	348 (4.9)
Manpur Tapara	7754 (81.7)	584 (6.1)	1003 (10.6)	154 (1.6)
Naya Gaun	5428 (93.3)	77 (1.3)	223 (3.8)	87 (1.5)
Pashupatinagar	3476 (55.6)	401 (6.4)	2328 (37.2)	45 (0.8)
Patabhar	9876 (70.0)	929 (6.6)	3133 (22.2)	167 (1.2)
Rajapur	7519 (59.4)	681 (5.4)	2391 (18.9)	2066 (16.3)
<b>Total</b>	<b>64888 (69.8)</b>	<b>6292 (6.8)</b>	<b>17320 (18.6)</b>	<b>4408 (4.7)</b>

Source: CBS, 2002.

Note: Dalits include Damai/Dholi, Badi, Kalwar, Kami, Sonar, Sarki, Lohar, Hajam, Kumal, and Teli. Bahun-Chhetri include Bahuns (Hill and Tarai), Chhetris, Thakuris, Sanyasis, and Rajput.

The data summarised in Table 3 reveal that the Bahun-Chhetris who are reported to have held access to resources and power in most of the Tarai districts in western half of Nepal in recent years may not be numerically a predominant group of people in the area. In Rajapur area they consist only 18.6% in the total population whereas the socially and economically disadvantaged groups of people (Tharus and Dalits together) comprise 76.6%. This should be considered a significant point for our discussion in this paper. It becomes evident that the numerical size of a group of people in a given geographical locality may not necessarily be correlated to its dominance or lack of it in the social and economic life within the

locality. A question that crops up immediately is whether the social and economic disparities prevailing in the area between the numerically few elite and the larger number of poor including the Tharus in the Tarai could be the backdrop for today's miseries or unhappy state of affairs in the country. This point will be referred again while discussing the Kamaiya practices.

### Literacy in Rajapur Area

Literacy situation of an area can be one of the indicators for assessing the level of socio-economic development, access to resources, empowerment, etc., in the local population. The data presented in Table 4 show that the percentage of illiterates is significant (ranging from 28.7% to 46.5% among male and 47.3% to 66.0% among female population). Once again, the data on literacy level for Tharus and other disadvantaged groups of people are not yet available from the 2001 census. Given the fact that the social and economic conditions of poor people like the Tharu Kamaiyas has not changed much in the past few years, it could be assumed that their literacy level also may have hardly registered any significant change. However, surveys conducted by INSEC suggest that literacy situation among the Kamaiyas has been improving in recent years. Sharma and Thakurathi (1998) found that the literacy among Kamaiyas in Baridiya district had increased from 4.6% in 1991 to 30.5% in 1997. Similarly, the children attending school also is shown to have gone up from 0.2% in 1991 to 7.7% in 1997. These are certainly encouraging signs and it could be easily inferred that literacy status among the Kamaiyas in Rajapur area must also be improving.

**Table 4: Population 6 Years of Age and Over by Literacy Status (%) for Sex in Rajapur Area, 2001**

VDCs	Illiterate*		Read Only		Read and Write	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Badalpur	31.5	58.6	7.1	8.1	61.4	3.3
Bhimapur	46.5	66.0	8.4	7.3	45.0	26.7
Daulatpur	35.5	58.0	1.8	3.3	62.7	38.7
Gola	29.1	47.3	17.1	20.8	53.7	31.9
Khairi Chandanpur	41.8	60.5	4.7	7.2	53.5	32.3
Manau	32.3	53.3	1.7	3.0	66.0	43.6
Manpur Tapara	31.1	52.1	4.5	6.0	64.3	42.0
Naya Gaun	37.0	58.5	4.1	8.0	58.9	33.5
Pashupatinagar	35.2	49.9	11.4	12.8	53.2	37.3
Patabhar	30.6	49.1	3.2	5.7	68.0	44.8
<b>Rajapur</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>53.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>66.0</b>	<b>43.7</b>

Source: CBS, 2002. \* 'Not Stated' have been included under this category assuming that illiterate people would have most likely reported clearly on their literacy status.

The percentage of illiterate population is quite significant in the Rajapur area. The women in this area seem to be further disadvantaged in terms of access to education (considered as a medium for access to information and empowerment). Since the majority of the people in this area consist of Tharus and Dalits—who are, in general, also very poor—it is very likely that most of the people who can read and write belong to the Brahmin-Chhetri and other economically and socially better off groups.

One striking feature of the data presented in Table 4 is that in the 'Read Only' category, except for Rajapur VDC, the percentage of women is consistently higher for all VDCs than that for the men. A question that needs to be examined is whether this is because of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) or adult literacy program (which tends to focus primarily on adult females) conducted by various

agencies with support from different programs and donors. If the answer to this question were to be positive, the efficacy of the program should not only be recognised but also concerted attempts ought to be made to give continuity to such programs in the future. The NGO, INGOs, and donors together seem to have made a significant difference in raising awareness and empowering the local poor and disadvantaged groups including the women—and this warrants a closer examination.

### **The Kamaiya Practices: Social, Economic and Political Facets**

Tharus in the Tarai of Nepal are known to have been a community dependent on agriculture for making a living. That is, Tharus are known to have been mostly involved in agriculture as their primary economic activity. This is an irony in the face of the fact that majority of the Tharus have also been landless people in recent years. Given this, a question that has drawn the attention of researchers has been whether Tharus as agriculturists did own farmlands in the past or that they have always been working for the landlords. Some studies have attempted to examine this question but (see Guneratne, 2002; Lowe, 2001). Peter Lowe, on the basis of personal stories collected from many Tharu Kamaiya and ex-Kamaiya men and women reveals how once the land owning Tharus slowly turned into landless people. His study corroborates the earlier story common in research reports and studies that Tharus were gradually alienated from their land by Pahari people and other elite within the past 100 or 200 years (Bhandari, 1985; Krauskoff, 2000; INSEC, 1992; 1998; McDonough, 1997).

A brief discussion of the Kamaiya practices that prevailed in certain parts of the Tarai will help us understand the deteriorating economic condition of Tharus and some other intriguing issues in this context. Specifically, focusing on the socio-economic relations among different groups of people will be useful to understand the

predicament of the Tharus. To begin with let us first consider the connotations of the term Kamaiya. From a quick survey of the literature on Tharus, it becomes evident that the term Kamaiya has been given two sets of meanings. One of these has a positive connotation according to which the term Kamaiya denotes any one who works hard. For instance, in local vernacular the term simply means a hard-working farmer, a hard tiller of land, and an earner (Nepali Dictionary). Similarly, in the languages spoken by the Tharus, “the words *Kamaiya* and *kamalahari* (both used as a noun) mean male and female hard working persons respectively. *Kamaina* (used as a verb) literally means to ‘earn’” (Dhakal et. al., 2000:28). Such people may have worked on their own or in someone else’s farm in the past and the term Kamaiya therefore did not have any derogatory or demeaning connotations.

The other meaning of the term Kamaiya has a more negative connotation and appears to be of recent origin. A Tharu informant asserted that “In the past it was not a bad thing to recognise someone as a Kamaiya because it simply meant a hard working person. But the element of bonded labour in recent years has made Kamaiya a derogatory term”. The entry of the element of bonded labour and slavery as features had turned the person who worked very hard into some sort of ‘a commodity’ to be owned, bought and sold, and exploited to the extent possible. Today, the term Kamaiya has become a loaded term which connotes a person working for a landlord and someone who may be a bonded labour. Kamaiya may have taken a derogatory connotation when they were bought and sold between landlords (through payments of *Saunki*) during *Maghi*. A closer look at the history of Kamaiya practices reveals that in recent years the Kamaiya system was converted into a highly exploitative one whereby the large landlords kept Kamaiya to work their land in the same way they kept oxen, or other farm livestock (see Robertson and Mishra, 1997:17). Kamaiyas as bonded labours

were relegated to the status of slaves over time by the landlords and elite for whom the Kamaiyas worked in various capacities.

Kamaiya form of bonded labour was prevalent in several of the Tarai districts like Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, and Kanchanpur until it was officially abolished by His Majesty’s Government of Nepal with a declaration to that effect on July 17, 2000. Under this system of bonded labour, the Kamaiya—generally a male—entered a labour contract with a landlord (large or small). Payments to the Kamaiya families would be either in kind (a fixed amount of paddy and some lentils, etc.) or in the form of share (normally 1/3<sup>rd</sup>) of the total production of the main crop (i.e., paddy). The term Kamaiya today seems to be synonymously used to refer to a poor Tharu who is/was made to work as a slave for a landlord for his own and his family’s survival. Such use of the term may be because of the fact that most of the Kamaiyas came from this community in a number of districts in the Tarai (see Table 5).

According to a recent report, majority of the Kamaiyas belong to Tharu community while non-Tharu Kamaiya were also to be found in significant numbers in some districts (see Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998:44, Table 4.14 for details). On the basis of a field survey conducted in 1997 in eight Tarai districts, Sharma and Thakurathi (1998) conclude that the districts where Tharus have a larger concentration of population than non-Tharus, the percentage of Tharu Kamaiya was more than 90% (see Table 5). Since there are no reliable data on the exact number of Kamaiyas for the country or for Bardiya district for that matter, it becomes really difficult to make an estimate of the total Kamaiya Tharu households in Rajapur area. On the basis of some assumptions and the available statistics on Tharus and Kamaiyas in some selected sources, it was estimated that Rajapur area may have a total of about 9,218 Tharu Kamaiyas (see footnote # 3 for details on the assumptions)<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 5: Percentage Distribution of Kamaiya by Ethnic Groups in Selected Districts, 1997**

Districts	Ethnic Group		Sample Kamaiyas
	Tharu	Non-Tharu	
Kanchanpur	95.9	4.1	362
Kailali	98.7	1.3	602
Bardiya	84.8	15.2	604
Banke	77.9	22.1	353
Dang	93.8	6.2	482
Kapilbastu	94.2	5.8	308
Rupandehi	50.9	49.1	169
<b>Nawalparasi</b>	<b>67.3</b>	<b>32.7</b>	<b>156</b>

Source: Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998, Table 4.14.

It was the operating mechanism of the Kamaiya system which was responsible for further marginalizing the Kamaiya Tharus. Once an individual entered the Kamaiya contract, the combinations of labour, credit, and land contracts together made it virtually impossible for the Kamaiya to get out of the vicious circle/cycle (for details see Dhakal et. al., 2000; Krauskoff, 1999; Rankin, 1999; Robertson and Mishra, 1997). Kamaiyas happen to be not only poor but also illiterate. Thus their landlords would manipulate the Saunki (the loan—in cash or kind—taken by a Kamaiya) and increase the amount. As a consequence of this the Kamaiya would end up with a large amount of loan that he would not be able to pay back (see INSEC, 1992 for further details).

Researchers have reported not only about the diversity of groups of people subsumed under the ethnonym Tharu, but also that each of such groups seem to have their own history of Kamaiya practices (see Guneratne, 2002; Krauskoff, 1999; Mayer and Deuel, 1999, Rankin, 1999). Rankin in particular refutes the reduction in popular discourse of a single Kamaiya system while suggesting that the Nepali state's taxation and resettlement policies during the Shah,

Rana and Panchayat regimes could have also given rise to some of the forms of Kamaiya practices (see Rankin, 1999:28). That is, closer look at the history of the taxation, resettlement, and land tenure policies of the Nepali state would allow us to find out how Kamaiya or similar exploitative bonded labour practices began and took roots in different parts of the country.

### State Policy and Variations in Kamaiya Practices

A combination of social, economic and political processes that operated in Nepal during the past three hundred years or so seem to have given rise to and then nurtured the Kamaiya practices which became known in recent years as a form of "veiled slave trade" (Robertson and Mishra, 1997:15). Historically, the Tharus were said to have lived in the Tarai by owning and cultivating the lands in the area. The community may have been self-sufficient until the State intervened with its taxation and land policies within a unified Nepal. The gradual penetration of the state into the Tarai and in the lives of the Tharus (which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) seems to have made itself a force by mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when the government began to take control of land and other resources in the Tarai (see Krauskoff and Mayer, 2001). The state recognised the land in the Tarai as an important resource in order to sustain its economic and political power base. In order to realise this potential, land grants were made (in the form of Birta, Jagir, etc.) to members of the royal family, nobility, civil and military personnel, etc. Such a practice of the state resulted in the eventual alienation of the Tharus from their farmlands while creating a socio-economic and political environment conducive for the cycle of dependency, disempowerment, exploitation and oppression to operate.

Rankin (1999) provides detailed information about how traditional Kamaiya system operated and how it was transformed since the nineteenth century. Rankin's study among Rana Tharus in Kailali

and Kanchanpur districts reveals that traditional Kamaiya practices were not of the oppressive type but were an “example of the social embeddedness of bonded labour practices” (Rankin, 1999:29). Borrowing a concept from James Watson (1979), she considers this to be an “open system of slavery”. Under this traditional Kamaiya system, the Tharu Kisan (farmer) family would retain Kamaiya Tharu through the bonds of debt and affectionate ties in order to ensure availability of labour supply during peak agricultural seasons. Both Kisan and the Kamaiya would depend on each other and thus in this case “the bonded labor system serves as a social safety net that will protect them against utter destitution” (1999:33). That is, the Kamaiya families would have access to food that came in the form of shares/wages annually while their landlords did not have to worry about shortage of labour during peak agricultural activities every year.

On the basis of her field research among Rana Tharus in Kailali and Kanchanpur, Rankin observes that in certain circumstances “the terms of indebtedness through Kamaiya contract may extend over several years, but is rarely life-long or inherited across generations” (1999:32). She also points out that a Kamaiya could pay off the debt and graduate to become an *adhiya* tenant (i.e., share cropper) or even a kisan himself—that is, a subsistence farmer to begin with. Thus the traditional form of Kamaiya was not a fixed status in all instances but one that could be changed. That is, it was possible for the Kamaiya to be transformed into an independent farmer. The more recent Kamaiya model did not have this option.

State policy in Nepal has had implications for demographic and socio-economic processes in the Tarai. Governments in the country used to appoint tax collectors who would obtain revenue for the state from the farmers within their area of responsibility. Such functionaries were known as Chaudhari in the past. This suggests

that local people themselves—including Tharus—were appointed for that purpose by the state. But later day tax collecting officials called Jamindars were not always filled by former Chaudharis. This is an indication of the entry of Paharis as landlords and a politically powerful class in the Tarai.

Creation of local Tharu elite and the economic disparity in local population may have resulted through the appointment of Chaudharis or Jamindars and Talukdars. These tax collectors and other land grant holders (of Birta, Jagir, etc.) had considerable autonomy in administering the ‘means of production’ including the right to exact unpaid labour from their tenants (see Regmi, 1978). This practice plus the absentee landlords could have very well been responsible for the genesis of the present day Kamaiya practices (i.e., the exploitative form of bonded labours). The creation of landlord class by the state thus resulted in the formation of another ‘fixed’ class—the Kamaiya.

Rankin contends that “taxation and resettlement policies of the Nepalese state during the early Shah, Rana and Panchayat regimes” (1999:28) laid the foundation for transformation of the previously socio-economically embedded Kamaiya system into an oppressive, exploitative and malignant form of bonded labour. Under the transformed Kamaiya system, the landlords (mostly Paharis) engaged the Kamaiya as bonded labourers and exploited them to the fullest possible extent. Studies have also revealed that Kamaiyas bonded to the landlords or jamindars would generally work longer hours and on a greater variety of tasks than Kamaiyas on Kisan farms (see Guneratne 2002; Karauskoff, 1999; Rankin, 1999). Rankin summarises the plight of the Kamaiyas as it was until few years ago (1999:39):

State policies of revenue farming and resettlement thus created the potential for both elite Tharu and Pahari



landlords to produce large agricultural surpluses based first on rights to unpaid labor and increasingly on cheap Kamaiya labor. By maintaining large Kamaiya debts—through fines, compounded interest, and other dishonest and illegal strategies—and by relying on political alliances to insulate their agrarian enterprises from legal scrutiny, landlords continue to ensure a reliable supply of Kamaiya labour and enjoy opportunities of unregulated exploitation.

Researchers argue that the earlier Kisan landlord and Kamaiya relations were often directed towards fulfilling their mutual interests and were not always characterised by (or not perceived as) an exploitative relation. But when the Kisan landlords were no longer the Tharus only, the non-Tharu landlords must have manipulated the Kamaiya contracts on more exploitative grounds. Such a practice marked the end of socially embedded moral economy in the Tarai and thus the condition of the Tharus as bonded labour begins to worsen. In this context it is worth noting what Rankin writes in a footnote. She contends that the claim by Tharu jamindars as better masters to their Kamaiya than the Pahari counterparts needs to be taken with caution. She points out that “with respect to Kamaiyas, the class convergence of Pahari and Tharu jamindars is more significant than the shared ethnic identity of Tharu Kamaiyas and Tharu jamindars” (Rankin, 1999:44 note #22). That is, the solidarity of the landlords as a class (with identical economic and political interests) vis-à-vis that of the poorer people including the Kamaiya Tharus began to intensify along two ends of the social, economic and political continuum within the Tarai region. This seems to have manifested in the recent uprising among the Tharus of Mid- and Far-Western Nepal that eventually forced the government to yield to their demands for freedom (or abolition of Kamaiya system).

### Abolition of Kamaiya Practices

In Nepal, the age-old “Kamara-Kamari” or the country’s own form of slavery system was abolished in 1924 by the then Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher. The government is said to have paid large sums of money to the owners of such slaves in order to free them from slavery. In spite of the abolition of the practice of slavery, Kamaiya and similar forms of unpaid or underpaid bonded labour system seem to have prevailed in the country until recently.

It is worth pointing out here that the very NGOs that are often alleged to be dependent on donor’s dollars in the name of the poor in Nepal seem to have played a critical role in backing the Kamaiyas in the ‘Free Kamaiya’ movement. The awareness raising for this movement must have been a daunting task (see Lowe, 2001; Ødegaard, 1999; Rankin, 1999). The Tharu elite who were so much concerned about creating a pan-Tharu ethnic identity in the country do not seem to have spoken about the evils of Kamaiya system (see Guneratne, 2002). But the issue of Kamaiyas was addressed by NGOs including one belonging to the Tharus themselves (BASE) little over a decade only. Efforts to do away with the Kamaiya system gained strength, as the Kamaiyas themselves gradually became aware about how they had been exploited by their landlords (see Lowe, 2001). The movement certainly resulted in empowering the Kamaiyas by publicising the issue and by putting a pressure on the government to take necessary action. But, the problems of the ‘free Kamaiyas’ do not seem to have come to an end.

### Post-Freedom Predicaments

Kamaiya system was officially banned by His Majesty’s Government of Nepal on 17 July 2000. The loan papers held by the landlords as proof of cash loans said to have been taken by the Kamaiya were also declared illegal. That is, they became free of all

the debts or Sauki they had supposedly incurred during their lifetime or inherited from their parents. The government had also announced that small parcels of land would be allocated to each of the freed Kamaiya families. Besides they were promised that they would also be granted small volume of timber to enable them to build living quarters for themselves in such newly acquired lands.

It remains little known as to what the changes in the wider socio-economic and political contexts in Nepal or just in their region have meant for the Tharus. The life experiences or situation for many Kamaiya Tharus at present is perhaps described well by the saying 'from the frying pan into the fire'. In the past when they were bought and sold during Maghi, the bonded labourer families in most cases moved from one cunning and often cruel landlord to another one who treated them equally badly if not worse. The recent Kamaiya mukti or freedom does not seem to have done much to "free" the Kamaiyas of their genuine problems. In the post freedom years too the poor Tharus have been subject to exploitation. Besides, lack of employment opportunities for the Tharu Kamaiyas outside the landlords' farms makes them more vulnerable.

A Tharu youth said "Soon after the Radio Nepal aired the news that the Kamaiyas had been freed, the landlords evicted their Kamaiyas. Kamaiyas felt good to be free from the bonded slavery. But we found out soon that Kamaiya families had become homeless and jobless". The Tharu youths concurred that with this 'freedom' ended the relationship of the Kamaiyas with the agricultural farms and with production system—even though the relationship was with landlords' farms and not their own. The Kamaiyas who were recognised as skilled and hard-working agriculturists were not only turned into "non-productive" category of people but also were left with no alternative livelihood earning option. As most of them

lacked skills to work outside the farming sector, they and their families were bound to starvation.

Kamaiyas were and are used to hard work. They worked hard whether it was in the fields or in the houses of their landlords. But after they were freed, their energies for work may have been unutilised or under-utilised. Keeping a workforce that has specialised skills and the required energy to do productive work is a loss to the country. As suggested by news reports in the post freedom years, many Kamaiyas are already going across the border to India in search of work/employment. It will not be difficult for such hard-working people to find work wherever they go. How this plight of Kamaiyas from their homelands will affect the food production in Nepal's Tarai can only be imagined. Future research on this subject can only reveal the realities.

Considering the announcement to free the Kamaiya and the un-met promises that were made to them, it becomes evident that a holistic approach to the problems associated with the Kamaiya practices was lacking. A recent publication with pictures of freed Kamaiyas and their stories bolsters this argument (see Peter Lowe, 2001). Many freed Kamaiyas have repeated the argument that they were not only made to evacuate their living quarters built within their landlord's farms, but were also denied access to their own belongings left inside such quarters. This is a clear example of how haphazard, inhuman and careless the process of freeing the Kamaiyas was.

Some Kamaiyas continue to work for the landlords and earn daily wages (see Lowe, 2001). It is true that examples of this type of relationship are not going to be many at present. However, the trend should be of concern to the state or concerned agencies. As reported in the Kantipur (Nepali National Daily, January 2, 2003), some parents have already started sending their children back to the

landlords to work as Kamaiyas in return for 1-2 quintals of rice paddy.

According to a report published in Kantipur (Nepali National Daily) on January 2, 2003, lack of employment has forced many Kamaiya families to starvation besides being victims of other problems. Some parents have sent their children to work in the restaurants while they themselves are forced to take any kind of casual work (including rickshaw pulling) available in the nearby urban centres.

If Kamaiyas and their children are forced to return to the same or similar working environments in order to earn a living, one is bound to ask: Were the Kamaiyas really freed? Was the intention of the government just to save its own face? Was the government eager only to get applause by making a progressive looking decision? Questions such as these come up now because the problems associated with Kamaiya practices in the Tarai seem to have been shifted elsewhere than being solved. A genuine commitment to end the malady is yet to be seen.

### Concluding Remarks

As a result of the freedom movement launched by the Kamaiyas they got freedom in principle—which came in the form of a government decree. A genuine freedom from the servitude and exploitation is yet to be a reality. Kamaiya Tharus are not yet able to stand on their own and become self-sufficient. They are forced to depend on 'others' for survival and their struggle for a genuine freedom seems to be far from over. The challenge ahead for them now may lie in the question of land and employment—that is, creating an environment for equal opportunities for earning a living, improving their livelihoods and ensuring a secure future for their children.

It has to be acknowledged that the fundamental power structure which had put majority of the Tharu Kamaiyas into vicious cycle of poverty and servitude over the years has been challenged albeit all that needs to be changed is yet to come about. The post-1990 reintroduction of multiparty democracy in the country certainly provided an enabling environment for the Kamaiyas, the NGOs and the Human Rights organisations to join hands in the struggle for the freedom of Kamaiyas. "This sort of open and coordinated popular movement would never have been allowed under the one-party Panchayat system..." (Whyte in Lowe, 2001).

Raj Dev Chaudhary who was reported to be one of the first Kamaiyas to have filed the case for freedom once remarked: "If the government gives us only one or two katthas of land, most of the Kamaiyas will have to go back to the landlord to work. They will become Kamaiya again" (Quoted by Whyte, 2001). His prediction has come true for a number of such Kamaiyas even after four years of the banning of the practice by the state.

What amounts of land grants per family are going to be enough for a Kamaiya family to become self-sufficient? This is not going to be an easy thing to determine. Other alternatives may have to be identified and adopted in order to address the livelihood issues of the freed Kamaiyas and their families now living in the makeshift rehabilitation camps. More crucial can be the creation of situations that will enable the freed Kamaiyas to negotiate favourable conditions of employment for themselves as cultivators, wage earners or in other kinds of jobs. All the agencies (State or Government, NGOs, etc.) will need to make concerted efforts in making the Kamaiyas less dependent on outside support only. Moreover, equally crucial will be to enable and empower the Kamaiyas (and other disadvantaged groups of people) so that they

continue challenging the traditional social, economic and power structures that oppress them now or may do so in the future.

Poverty is a key problem in Tarai where Tharus live. The economic plight of the Tharus seems to be associated with the unequal relations with the landlords fostered by the Kamaiya practices. Such unequal socio-economic and political relations go back to many generations (see Karaukoff and Meyer, 2000). State policies in relation to resource access and ownership, plus the locally dominant groups of people may have had equal share of the responsibility for the plight of the Kamaiya Tharus. Given this, efforts to improve the lot of the Kamaiyas have to come from all sides in a concerted way.

The case of the Tharus discussed here may only be symptomatic of a larger or a more serious tragedy in the making for the majority of the poor and disadvantaged people across the length and breadth of the country. That is, many other communities that are also economically deprived, socially and politically disenfranchised in many ways in different parts of the country could be either having similar problems or may be closer to what is happening to the Kamaiya Tharus today. Whether to avert the tragedy or deal with it when it comes about are the two alternative choices available for all concerned parties claiming to serve the interests of the 'people'.

#### End Note

1. I am grateful to Dr. Hikmat Bahadur Bista for his constructive ideas and support in preparing this review paper. He also provided useful comments on an earlier version of the paper.
2. According to the 1991 census, the proportion of Tharus in the eight districts of Western Tarai is as the following: Nawalparasi—16.9%; Rupandehi—10.7%; Kapilvastu—11.8%; Dang—31.5%; Banke—16.0%; Bardiya—52.8%; Kailali—49.5%; and Kanchanpur—27.4% (see Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998:22).

3. See Sharma and Thakurathi 1998:22 (Appendix Table 1) for data on other districts. It should be noted that the non-Tharus in the table must include a number of Dalits and other disadvantaged groups of people. Thus, if the data were to be further disaggregated for Bahun-Chhetris and others, the socio-economic disparities may widen significantly.
4. **Assumption 1:** 11.7% of the total population or households in Bardiya are Kamaiyas (based on data presented by Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998: Table 3.1). Applying this to the total population of Rajapur at present we get 10870 as the total Kamaiya population here. **Assumption 2:** 84.8% of the Kamaiyas in Bardiya are Tharus (based on data presented in Table 4.14 in Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998). Applying this to the total Kamaiya population just calculated in Assumption 1, the total Tharu Kamaiyas in Rajapur is derived as 9218.

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## NEPALESE BUDDHISTS' VIEW OF HINDUISM<sup>1</sup>

Krishna B. Bhattachan

### Introduction

Nepal is a multi-caste/ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. The Hindu "high castes" belong to Caucasoid race and they are divided into Bahun/Brahmin, Chhetri/Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra/Dalits and the peoples belonging to the Hill castes speak Nepali and the Madhesi castes speak various mother tongues belonging to the same Indo-Aryan families. There are 59 indigenous nationalities of Nepal and most of them belong to Mongoloid race and speak Tibeto-Burman languages. There are Dravid and Proto-Australoid races, who speak Dravid and Munda language respectively and they are also Indigenous Nationalities of Nepal. About 125 languages and dialects belong to four language families, namely, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Dravid and Munda.

Nepalese peoples have faith in different religions, including animism, Bon, Kirata, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism and Bahai (cf. Dastider 1995). All religions are divided into different sects. For example, Bon is divided into White Stripe Bon and Black Stripe Bon. Kirata is divided into White Stripe and Red Stripe Kirata and the followers of Guru Falgunanda. Similarly, Buddhism is divided into *Hinayan*, *Mahayan*, *Bajrayan* and *Therbada* (cf. Gurung 1987). Hinduism is divided into Shaivism, Vaisnavism etc.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Christians are divided into