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The Bonded Labor System in Nepal: Exploring Halia and Kamaiya Children’s Life-worlds

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of (debt) bonded labor, often termed a contemporary form of slavery, has become of global concern (CWA 2007). Out of 27 million globally, around 15 million South Asian people are reportedly in a bonded system (Bales and Robbins 2001, Bales 2004). As far as Nepal is concerned, Anti-Slavery International in association with the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery estimates that there are some 300,000 to 2 million bonded laborers under the haliya/kamaiya systems (Sattaur 1993, Robertson and Mishra 1997, Lamichhane 2005, Dhakal 2007); this estimate, however, appears to be silent regarding the number of children in bondage (Giri 2004, 2009). In the kamaiya practice, over 95 percent of kamaiya laborers reportedly belong to the ethnic Tharu community—the Nepalese Census 2001 reports that there are 1,533,879 ethnic Tharu, who are 6.75 percent of the country’s total population (Gurung 2001, NTG 2006). The Tharu people are culturally and linguistically extremely diverse and inhabit virtually every Tarai district with particular concentrations in the far west (see Krauskopf 1989, Skar 1999, Gunaratne 2002). For instance, of the above-mentioned total Tharu inhabitants, 1,331,546 are reported to speak one of the seven Tharu dialects as a mother tongue (Gurung 2001, NTG 2006). My article focuses on the Tharu community of Bardiya district, who speak the Dangura Tharu language originating in the Dang district. As for haliya laborers, the vast majority of them belong to the so-called dalit (low caste), comprising various castes, sub-castes, and ethnolinguistic groups, but my article focuses on the Musahar community.

In the Nepali language, the term haliya means “one who ploughs,” yet it is understood to have the broader sense of an agricultural laborer who works on another person’s land for daily or short-term fixed wages (Robertson and Mishra 1997, Sharma and Sharma 2002). As haliya workers find it hard to support their large families all year round from seasonal labor, they are often forced to take loans from their kisan [or “small landowner”]. In the long-term, however, some of them may end up in debt due to high annual interest rates (up to 60 percent). As they face lack of work opportunities to pay it back, they may eventually become bonded laborers (Rankin 1999). Newspapers and advocacy groups4 claim that haliya...
workers belong to many different ethnic and caste groups and are found mostly in the far western hills and eastern Tarai districts (Giri 2004, 2009, Dhakal 2007).

Likewise, the word kamaïya refers to a hard-worker in the (Dangaura) Tharu language, but in Nepali, it means a hired worker, who is given some remuneration for his labor (Jha 1999: 3). However, the kamaïya system is commonly known as an agriculturally based bonded labor system in which a kamaïya makes a verbal contract with a kisan or a moneylender to work for him for a year (Sharma et al. 2001). The practice of payment-in-kind (typically a small share of the produce, ranging from three to six quintals of unhusked rice) rather than wages barely allows a kamaïya to make a living from mono-cropped land. In times of crop failure or family hardships, his family will be forced to take loans at high interest, which can be repaid only by working for the creditor. Once the kamaïya becomes indebted, his lender may impose all kinds of conditions unilaterally, including demanding his (and often the entire family's) labor without pay. The compounding situation could lead to long-term debt bondage, which may even become generational in the cases where debt is transferable to the offspring (Rankin 1999, Kunwar 2000, Pandey 2004, Chhetri 2005).

After widespread reporting by newspapers and lobbying by NGOs and by bonded laborers themselves (INSEC 2000, Dhalak et al. 2000, Fujikura 2001, Lowe et al. 2001), the government of Nepal was compelled to ban the kamaïya system in 2000, and the haliya practice in 2008 (Daru et al. 2005, Edwin et al. 2005, Dhakal 2007, Giri 2009).3 After the ban, the government promised to break the kamaïya-kisan relationship once and for all by offering 2.5 kattha (0.034-0.169 hectares) of land to each freed kamaïya family to settle in the various designated areas like the Nayajib settlement that I have studied. As of 2009, however, advocacy groups continue to argue that the rehabilitation effort falls far short of meeting the needs of large families, and as a result, children have increasingly come to act as replacements for adults in haliya/kamaïya labor practices (Giri 2009, cf. Daughters for Sale 2008). The majority of these children, employed in rural areas, may initially be hired as domestic helpers, but, as in other parts of the world, they often end up carrying out both household and agricultural activities (Janak 2000, Jacquemin 2004). This combination not only makes the lives of these children very hard, but also vulnerable to physical, psychological, and sexual maltreatment (Black 1997, Blagbrough and glyc 1999). However, there are hardly any studies done concerning children working under haliya/kamaïya systems, and, in particular, one that explores children's understanding of their everyday world of work from their own perspectives (Woodhead 1998, 1999, Montgomery 2001, Giri 2007).

In order to fill the research gap, this paper is organized under at least two broad conceptual themes. Firstly, the Musahar and Tharu children I studied, are compelled to take up haliya/kamaïya work from an early age due to severe lack of alternatives available to them, and, in particular, to their families struggling to meet their daily survival needs. Secondly, as the government has outlawed both the haliya and kamaïya systems, the promise of education by the employers has become another motivating factor for continuation of bonded labor contract—it is immensely attractive, albeit not always realised, for children who would otherwise not get any chance of attending school while staying with their families.

The analysis will be organized as follows. Firstly, I offer a brief overview of how the practice of bonded labor evolved in Nepal, and present the research design and methods used in studying haliya/kamaïya labor practices. Secondly, I describe the processes by which Musahar and Tharu children become haliya/kamaïya laborers. Thirdly, I present these children's perspectives concerning their daily working and living conditions. Fourthly, I discuss the circumstances that prompt these children to terminate the terms of their contract, and conclude by inquiring into their future prospects if and when they are able to leave the situation of bonded labor.

THE EVOLUTION OF BONDED LABOR IN NEPAL

Since the mid-1990s, the evolution of bonded labor, especially the kamaïya system, has been analyzed from various perspectives (e.g. see Posel 1995, Robertson and Mishra 1997, Kunwar 2000, Pandey 2004, Lamichhane 2005, Chhetri 2005, Edwin et al. 2005, etc.), but these authors seem to suggest that the continuous suppression of lower castes and ethnic groups by the ruling upper castes is the main factor in creating generational bonded labor. Likewise, despite the

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3. A part of this section was published in Journal of Asian and African Studies 44(6), and it is being republished here with permission.
lack of studies on *haliya* practice, advocacy groups claim that “the *haliya* problem is not simply a matter of poverty and indebtedness; it is deeply rooted in the complex caste system which discriminates against groups identified as “untouchable” by higher castes. The majority of *haliya* are “untouchable” and the caste system locks them into a servile status in relation to high-caste Nepali landowners” (CWA Newsletter 13 cit. Giri 2004: 2). It is true that the vast majority of *haliya* belong to lower castes and ethnic groups, but reports have also found higher caste people working under this system. For instance, Sharma and Sharma, who have carried out several surveys regarding bonded labor, have noted that in the Kavrepalanchowk district, which borders the Kathmandu valley, the *haliya* laborers belong to various castes and ethnic groups, including the dominant upper castes (see Sharma and Sharma 2002). Similarly, Tharu adults and their chiefs told me that a section of their people never owned land because they did not mind living a *kamaiya* life (read: engaging in manual labor), and those who later became indebted and had to accept *kamaiya* labor were not simply used by upper castes landowners, but also by members of their own group (see also Gurunatne 1996, Rankin 1999). Therefore, I argue that although the state as well as certain individuals sometimes manipulated the caste system to exploit vulnerable groups, it appears to be class rather than caste or ethnic factors that explains the use of generational bonded labor.\footnote{One may also add that since the early 1990s, Nepal has undergone tremendous socio-political transformation so the extent of the caste-based subjugation of people belonging to various social hierarchies (including Musahar and Tharu communities) needs more research and discussion, which is beyond the scope of this paper.} In particular, the continuous restructuring of the landholding patterns, often enforced by the state, rendered a section of Tharu population landless and eventually compelled them to accept generational *kamaiya* labor. Since the time of the King Prithibi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal in 1768, the state provided land to those who either supported its policy (e.g. military, the nobility), or who collected its revenue. For instance, some researchers (e.g. Regmi 1978, Krauskopf 1989, Gurunatne 1996, Rankin 1999) suggest that many of the so-called *chaudhari* (or tax collectors) from the Tharu community; used *kamaiya* laborers from their own people.

After the eradication of malaria in the 1950s, the value of land in the Tarai region began to increase exponentially, especially for people who had so far ignored the importance of owning it. As noted earlier, the popular Land Reform Act of 1964 was less successful in granting land to the poor because large landowners were quick to redistribute land in excess of the ceiling among their families and relatives. Many of the landless communities (e.g. Musahar and a part of the Tharu people) failed to benefit from the government policy, and their marginalization was compounded by rapid population growth and the inability to get education and skill training to seek alternative means of survival. Having little or no personal assets meant that socio-political support, and especially financial institutions lending to the poor, was (and still is) basically nil. Hence, they had to submit themselves to those who lent them support (in the form of loans, food, work, etc.) in return for their labor, and in predominately rural Nepal, such lenders naturally belonged to the landowning circle (called *jamindar* in pre-1964, or *kisan* post-1964). It is in this sense, I argue, that the condition for becoming a *haliya/kamaiya* laborer “does not generally concern caste, colour, religion or tribe, but focuses on weakness, gullibility and deprivation of people, making a direct relationship between labor bondage, wealth and abuse” (Bales 2004: 11). In fact, it may be correct to suggest that after the 1964 Land Reform Act, the Musahar community and a section of the Tharu people have been used as cheap workers not just by rural *kisan* families, but also by politicians, urban elites, and all sorts of business owners (Rankin 1999, Sharma et al. 2001). As for the *haliya/kamaiya* families, the borrowing of cash or accepting payment-in-kind exacerbated their vulnerability to long-term indebtedness because the lenders make only verbal agreements and they may often cheat on their borrowers (for more details, for instance, see Rankin 1999, Chhetri 2005, Dhakal 2007). It should be emphasized that debt is not always a necessary condition, and in fact, even advocacy groups agree that the vast majority of *haliya/kamaiya* families may not be indebted for generations (Sharma et al. 2001, Sharma and Sharma 2002). As aforementioned, acute poverty, illiteracy and virtual landlessness has severely restricted certain sections of Nepalese people (including Musahar and Tharu) from finding better ways to support their large families, and hence they must accept the practice of *haliya/kamaiya* labor (see Kvalbein 2007).

After the introduction of a multiparty political system in the early 1990s, no major land reform policies have been implemented. A 1995 survey on landlessness reported that around one million farming households owned less than 0.1 hectares of land, and almost half that number could not even build a house on their own property (Robertson and Mishra 1997: 38). On this basis, the number of effectively landless rural people was estimated to be around two million for the whole country (ibid.). Besides the *kamaiya* problem, as discussed elsewhere, many of these people today are known as *haliya* agricultural laborers (or sometimes also grouped as *sukhmbasi* or landless squatters). The amended Land Reform Act of 1997 did little to change the condition of people under both systems (Edwin et al. 2005). Many of the present-day urban elites, including those left-wing politicians “fighting for the proletarian cause” either own land in the Tarai or have family and relatives who are landlords. They receive not just foodstuffs or funds for election campaigns, but also wield unfettered power and prestige in society. To preserve their status they need to be complicit about the status quo of land and landownership regardless of the changes in the political system (ibid.). It may be worth noting that at least a dozen different governments were formed between 1991-2009, and all participating leaders vigorously talked about a “scientific land reform” to uplift the rural poor, but so far nothing concrete
has taken place.

Furthermore, the continued political upheavals since the mid-1990s, especially the civil war (1996-2006), has seriously hampered rural development, and has further aggravated the vulnerability of people (e.g. Musahar and Tharu) who survive on daily wage or on work as bonded laborers. As already noted, the kamaiya and haliya practices were banned in 2000 and 2008, respectively, but the successive governments have failed to properly rehabilitate the families who were “freed” from bondage. Although the local advocacy groups have been cooperating with international donor organizations, including the International Labor Organization, to help the freed laborers living in various camps like the Nayajib settlement in Bardiya district, which I studied, their efforts are bound to be limited due to their agenda of focusing on short-term support, often because of limited resources. As a result, as I noted earlier, Musahar and Tharu families have continued to accept bonded labor contracts, especially by sending their children, in order to receive both cash and payment-in-kind, including adhiya (sharecropping) land.

I would like to stress here that the history of haliya and kamaiya labor practice (as well as the sociocultural constructions of Musahar and Tharu communities) is rather complex (while I have not found any study on the former, see Guneratne 1996, and Rankin 1999 for the latter), and is difficult to discuss in detail in a short paper like this one. My aim here is to give a general idea of how these two similar practices evolved over time, and, in particular, how they affect children in the post-2000 period. What follows is the presentation of field research on two particular communities (i.e. Musahar and Tharu), residing in two different geographic locations, but with similar socioeconomic characteristics (i.e. low caste, extremely poor with a little or no land) and who also work as bonded laborers under similar labor contracts.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study was carried out in Bardiya (for kamaiya) and Morang (for haliya) districts, which were purposively selected. The former is one of the two districts reported to have large numbers of yet-to-be rehabilitated (freed) kamaiya families (Giri 2009). Although Morang does not have widespread use of haliya labor, those who do work there as haliya are overwhelmingly Musahar people (Krauskopf 1989, Skar 1999). Therefore, I felt it would be easier to conduct my study here rather than in other districts like Baitadi where haliya laborers belong to multiple castes and ethnicities (Giri 2004, 2009). Other logistical reasons, including the accessibility of field sites also determined the selection of study locations. In particular, Nepali researchers advised me to consider the travel distances and the volatile political situation and recom-

THARU GIRL AT WORK. 
PHOTO: B. R. GIRI
mended working in those districts that would be less precarious for my extended field research (see Giri 2009 for details).

As with all my research participants, I have used pseudonyms for my research villages, which I call Bayibab and Nayajib, to comply with research ethics. Bayibab is probably one of the largest villages in Morang district in the eastern Tarai. The densely populated village is inhabited by various ethno-linguistic groups, but the Brahmin (both migrants from the hills and from the Tarai itself) dominate all aspects of social life in the area, including land ownership. Many kisan in Bayibab village engage in commercial agriculture so the demand for labor is high. The low caste Musahar people make their living largely from the haliya labor contract. In fact, my survey showed that most Musahar families have been working as generational haliya laborers, and that they appeared poorer than their freed kamaiya counterparts. In fact, a researcher notes that 96.67 percent of Musahar households in Nepal generally do not own any land (Dhakal 2007:4). They live in the margins of the villages, on tiny plots. However, the recent construction of a number of brick-kilns in the nearby villages seems to have encouraged Musahar families to also seek alternative (cash) employment. During fieldwork, I noticed that very few Musahar children attend school; the younger ones (below 16) tend to live and work for the kisan while older children and parents work elsewhere during off-farming periods and accept seasonal haliya contracts particularly during the monsoon season.

Likewise, Nayajib is one of the largest settlements in the Naya Muluk region of the far-western Tarai, where freed-kamaiya families have been living since 2000. Each family has received five kattha (0.169 hectares) of land from the government to build a house and farm, but given their large families, everyone, including children, has to do whatever work they can find in order to meet their daily needs. The unfertile land and isolation of Nayajib settlement from other villages makes it particularly hard for people to find jobs, and many people have to move elsewhere to find work. I was informed by local advocacy groups that local headmen compile all the household data for their respective areas, but when I interviewed these headmen, they were unsure of the total number of children nor were they able say how many had become bonded labor. Data from a household questionnaire I administered indicated that each family had sent at least one child to work for the kisan. Such a survey, among other things, allowed me to plan detailed field research.

My study relied on qualitative approaches (i.e. in-depth individual/group interviews, participant observation, and group discussions) in order to effectively document the history, culture and the economics of haliya/kamaiya practices in Nepal. I conducted field research in three phases, between July 2006-November 2007, and a debriefing of all the fieldwork materials was carried out in May 2008. I discussed the working and living conditions of more than 50 haliya/kamaiya children, and made an in-depth study of over 30 of them. I also interviewed children’s parents, employers, local leaders, and Nepali researchers to include their perspectives on bonded labor. I tried to balance the age and gender differences, but it was not always possible given the sensitive and often clandestine nature of the bonded practice that exists in post-2000 Nepal (see Giri 2009 for details). What follows is the detailed analysis of how haliya/kamaiya children understand their world of work from their own perspectives, but I have also used viewpoints of adults to show how bonded labor practice has changed in the pre-and post-2000 period.

**BECOMING A HALIYA/KAMAIYA LABORER IN POST-2000 NEPAL**

In post-2000 Nepal, as noted earlier, the main reasons that lead Musahar and Tharu families to send their children to work as haliya/kamaiya laborers is their acute poverty, especially shortage of food. Because of their impoverished household circumstances, most children follow parental advice to accept the bonded contract. Like other working children for instance, two 15 years old kamaiya labourers (a boy and a girl) felt that they should help their families in whatever ways they could.

Our family is very big (8 members), but we’ve no land, except 5 kattha (0.169 hectares) given by the government, and my father is the only person working to support us. I didn’t want to leave my family, but I had to think about the shortage of food and clothes at home (Lula).

I’ve to think about my aging parents. They can’t always work. I’ve many young siblings, who can’t start earning yet. Two of my sisters are also working, but their income is not enough to support our large family. My father said, “If you become a kamaiya, we’ll do adhiya [sharecropping] land to work; this would be better than working on a daily wage basis.” So, I started … and I now get food and clothes for myself, and some foodstuffs and adhiya land for my family.

Our situation is a bit better now (Getha).

Both Musahar and Tharu families in the fieldwork sites are either landless or the land is too small to grow foodstuffs for the family. As Lula explained, land provided by the government (2-5 kattha) is just enough to build a “house” and to plant vegetables so they have to mobilize their labor power to make their living, including entering into the haliya/kamaiya system.

If we go for majduri [manual labor], we get NRs.60 per day? This is not enough to feed our large family daily, besides we can’t find regular

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8. As of July 2009, one United States dollar ($1) was equivalent to 77 Nepali Rupees (NRs.77).
work. If we work for a kisan, we get NRs 40 and a kilo of rice [and] seasonal vegetables. When [we] send our children to a kisan, we can ask for a loan in times of crisis, and also adhiya [share-cropping] land (Tedaa, a 63 years old haliya man).

I sometimes think working, as a kamaiya was okay because we didn’t have to go hungry. We had debt, that was bad, but we got land to work, and also loans when desperately needed. Now, a kisan doesn’t want to give us any loan or adhiya land without our commitment to provide labor [i.e. kamaiya]. Now, my two grand daughters are working for two kisan families (Seba a 59 years old ex-kamaiya).

Despite the anti-kamaiya law, the above statements from Tedaa and Seba illustrate that severe poverty still forces many families to view bonded labor as acceptable in the sense that their basic needs were “provided” by their kisan (Kvalbein 2007). They continue to send the children to earn daily food-stuffs for the family.

After the government decree in 2000, advocacy groups (often forcefully) removed thousands of kamaiya families, who had been working as bonded laborers for generations, from their bukura/kothar (a hut within the property of their employer—see Fujikura 2001, Pandey 2004, Edwin et al. 2005 for details). During my field research, despite being happy about their freedom, many of these families reported that they found it hard to live in their new huts away from their “care taker” kisan. Since their lives had been almost entirely controlled by their kisan, they had neither a social network nor any knowledge to manage their lives independently (Robertson and Mishra 1997, Kvalbein 2007). At the same time, government and NGO support has been limited to short-run issues like making a house, providing a water supply, etc. They could not obtain loans from banks since they have little or no land and other property. So, whether “freed” Tharu families like it or not, the only survival network that they can fall back on remains with their previous/current kisan, who are willing to provide adhiya land as well as loans (even if the interest rates are highly inflated). In fact, some adults expressed happiness that they could maintain contacts with their former employers, which now allows them to send their children to work in return for food/clothes, loans and adhiya land. In the case of haliya practice, the anti-kamaiya movement did have an indirect impact in the sense that, for instance, Musahar families of Baylab settlement also started to live in their own huts, and often combined haliya labor with that of other manual work, especially in brick-kilns.

Due to the fear of the anti-kamaiya law and potential exposure to media and NGOs, kisan these days wish to avoid hiring adults (Giri 2009). Since they no longer live in bukura/kothar, “freed” kamaiya adults may also demand wages that are much higher than a kisan is willing to pay. For both parties, however, it is necessary to maintain their relationship, and children have increasingly become intermediaries between parents and kisan.

After government banned the kamaiya system, we received [2-5 kattha] land, but it’s not enough. Most of us [adults] are engaged in seasonal majdari [unskilled labor] to earn daily meals, which I think is similar to being a kamaiya. To support our large family, we still need adhiya land to grow food, and loans to buy clothes or pay for social functions like marriage or illnesses. Except for a few adults, it is children, who work as a kamaiya to get adhiya land and loans from the kisan (Keti, a 43 years old ex-kamaiya man).

As Musahar and Tharu parents struggle to feed their family all year around, the offer of an employer to “take care” of their children along with certain cash/kind remuneration or adhiya land appears to be perfectly acceptable to them (Giri 2009). Additionally, if the kisan “promises” to provide certain years of formal education, it is, as one parent said, like “finding an eye for the blind man” (be khojchas kana aakhlo) for parents and also for children.

Notwithstanding the promise of education, children accepted their parents’ idea of becoming a haliya/kamaiya laborer due to extreme poverty at home. However, a number of children, especially from Musahar families, also left their families because of the difficult relationship they had at home, and becoming a bonded laborer in the nearby village appears to be the only survival option available to them. A ten year old haliya boy said, “I give my earnings to my parents, but they finished in daru/raksi [homemade alcohol] and quarrel with each other” (Beji). A sixteen year old grieved, “there’s no food to eat, but only to hear scolding and be beaten” (Veshi). In some cases the use (or abuse) of daru/raksi was so bad that children had lost their father (or even mother). For instance, a thirteen year old girl said, “my parents were alcoholic and they died when I was six or seven years old; I used to stay with my uncle’s family but got scolded and beaten so I went away to work as a haliya” (Bubha). For children like these, living with a kisan family to work as a haliya/kamaiya was often a better option than staying with their parents or other relatives in an unfriendly environment.

**BEING A HALIYA AND KAMAIYA LABORER**

As already noted, Musahar and Tharu children come from very poor families owning little or no land and few domestic animals. Therefore, their daily workload is minimal at home when shared among many members of the family. Also, having several family members means that the household work can be done rather quickly when shared among them. For instance, two nine year old boys from Musahar and Tharu...
families would be doing the following activities in a day.

I wake up at around 6 a.m., but I don’t do any household work as I’ve older siblings. I go with my friends until the morning meal is ready. Sometimes I go with my parents to help when they are working in kisan’s field or in brick-kilns. I spend the evenings also playing, and sleep around 7 p.m. after dinner (Mesu).

I wake up at around 7 a.m. I drink tea or eat snacks if it available. Sometimes I go to the forest to collect a bit of grass or fodder for the animals. During the day, I attend the nearby school. I play with my friends and do some homework in the evening. At around 7 pm, I go to bed after dinner. As I’ve many older siblings, I don’t do much work at home, and in fact there isn’t a lot work (Letu).

In both group, however, gender discrimination is widespread (cf. Maslak 2003). Especially, kitchen work remains exclusively a girls domain and girls also carry out more tasks than boys do; their chances of studying are very low, and they are likely to be married off much earlier. The following extracts from interviews with two ten year-old girls illustrate the extent of their gendered work.

I get up at around 6 a.m. (and 7 a.m. in the winter), take goats outside the house, and give them some grass or fodder. I sweep both inside and outside the house, and clean the dishes of last night. After that, I cook the morning meal for the family (normally rice, vegetable curry, and lentil soup). In the afternoon, I bring the goats to the forest to graze and to collect some fodder. I prepare the evening meal and go to bed at around 7 p.m. after the food. I follow this routine only if my mother and older sisters are working elsewhere. If I also go for sakhaina [labor exchange with neighbours], then, my routine also changes (Buba).

I get up at 6 a.m. and clean in and outside the house. We don’t have house animals except a few pigs so no need to collect grass I cook food for the family and clean dishes after eating. In the afternoon, I go with my parents to help [i.e. the kisan or at the brick-kilns] for a few hours. I make the evening meal and go to bed at around 7 p.m. after having dinner (Tugi).

Children have to carry out numerous tasks daily once they leave their family to start haliya/kamaiya work. At the beginning, this transition can be particularly overwhelming for the “spoiled” boys, to use Seba’s term to describe the male children of his neighborhood. For instance, a sixteen year-old kamaiya boy reported doing the following activities in a day.

I had to wake up at 5 a.m. to clean animal shed, milk the buffalo, and give fodder and water to cows and buffaloes. Then, I’d go out to collect grass and fodder. I also have to take the bullocks to the field for ploughing and in the afternoon, I’ve to take all animals to graze … If there is no planting work in the field, then I’ve to collect firewood or help construction of animal sheds, tanga [oxen or male buffalo-drawn wooden wagon], etc… At the beginning of our contract, I was told that I just had to take care of the buffaloes and look after the children during their school holidays. When I started to work, they made me do everything, from planting to harvesting Although I entered the home at 6 or 7 p.m. for food, I normally went to bed after 10 p.m. because I had to help with household work and also find out what work will be done in the coming days… They give two quintals of unprocessed rice for my family, and two pairs of trousers/shirts and sandals for me in a year (Getha).

If Getha lived at home, he could at least avoid working in the kitchen, but he has no choice at his employer’s house. Likewise, a fifteen year-old haliya girl spent her day doing the following.

I get up at 5:30 a.m. and make tea for my malik’s family. Then, I cook khole [soup made out of leftover food] and feed it to the animals. I again make the khole for the afternoon and store it. Then, I prepare kuti [fine chopping of grass] and give it to the animals after mixing with bhus [rice skin] and hay. I eat food and leave for school at around 10 a.m. During the short afternoon break at 1:30 p.m., I come back home to give the khole to the animals, and prepare snacks for my malik’s family. Then, I go back to school until 4 p.m. After school, I give food to bhat [lit. small brother, but here she refers to the baby son of her malik], and go to cut the grass. Then, I play with bhai until dinner is ready. After eating, I clean the utensils, and watch television for a while. I study for about 30 minutes before going to bed at around 8 p.m. … I do not get anything extra than lodging, food, and attending school (Rusa).

As discussed below, Rusa agreed to become a haliya because she was promised an education instead of certain cash/kind remuneration. In one sense, Rusa was lucky because she
has some exposure at least to public education. Despite assurance from their kisan, however, many of her haliya/kamaiya counterparts often do not get the opportunity to enter a school. The above interview extract makes it clear that the only thing Rusa does not do is cook food. That too, is due to her “low caste” status that bars her from entering the kitchen. She might not be able to pass her final examinations, which in turn will give her kisan a good excuse to force her to drop out of school and engage in full-time haliya work.

Like Rusa, the vast majority of children are promised an education when entering into a haliya/kamaiya contract. Acknowledging their lack of opportunity to study at home, the idea of studying as well as working appeared to be quite appealing to all children.

Since we have food shortage at home, my father wanted me to become a kamaiya to get food, clothes and study. He said, “if you go to work for kisan, we’ll also get land to farm on the basis of adhiya.” I didn’t want to go, but I have to listen to my parents, and I liked the education offer (Juna, a twelve year-old kamaiya girl).

I accepted to go with my malik because he said, ‘if you help family with household work, then, I’ll allow you to go to school (Pulka, a sixteen year-old kamaiya girl).

Unfortunately, their employers either give them much more work than was agreed to in the contract or do not permit them to attend school at all. The few children like Rusa (noted above), who were allowed to attend a local public school, often found it extremely difficult to sustain the dual load of kamaiya work and study (Giri 2007).

During the day (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.), I attend a nearby school, but I’ve no time to do homework because I must work other times. In the evening, even if I’ve free time, I can’t study because I become so tired from working all day that I want to go to bed as soon as I’ve eaten my evening meal. I’ve barely passed my exams (Xula, a fourteen year-old kamaiya girl).

Although she received no free time to study, Xula was able to attend school, but other children like Jumsa below eventually had to give up the idea of getting an education.

Sometimes they let me go to the school and other times I was not allowed. They often told me to go to cut grass so I couldn’t study. So, I had to stop going to school (Jumsa, a twelve year-old kamaiya girl).

Our malik takes us with a false promise like ‘oh, we won’t send you out to work, it’s just household work.” Once we are at their place, the ground reality is very different. We don’t only do domestic work, but also agricultural work, which is too heavy for our body. They also say, “you’ll be studying and your future will be better if you come with us,” and we can’t even know how the alphabets look like once we start working (Suba, a sixteen year-old kamaiya girl).

Some children like Suba frequently reported that their employers cheated them in terms not only of the types and amount of work, but also flout the promise of education, which is why more than half of all haliya/kamaiya children tried to change their kisan annually. If their hope of having a better employer, who keeps his promise and treats them better, do not become reality, they either continue changing or eventually abandon the bonded labor contract provided that they owe nothing to their employers and are able to find other unskilled jobs.

I do not claim that all working children have the same or similar life experiences because some also worked just for food/clothes and/or other remuneration for their families.

I’m the oldest child so my father found a kisan as soon as I was able to do some household work. I didn’t want to go, but I had to think about the poverty in my family and go to work. Besides food, I get two pairs of clothes and my parents take three quintals of unprocessed rice in a year (Lula).

My parents are getting old so they can’t do outside work (i.e. farming or manual labor), and I’ve many siblings to take care of. We don’t have enough food to eat or clothes to wear. I didn’t know where else to go so I followed my father’s advice to become a kamaiya in the nearby village to earn foodstuffs [three quintals of unprocessed rice] for my family (Pego, a fifteen year-old kamaiya boy).

Although they were having a hard time, children like Lula and Pego often hoped that their efforts would not only ease the daily needs at home, but would also allow some of their siblings to attend school for a ‘better future’ for the whole family.

In terms of food and living conditions, as interviews show, haliya children appeared to be slightly more content than their kamaiya counterparts were. Most of them claimed that the food and sleeping place they were given was much better than at their own home.

We can’t always eat enough food at home and also we’ve no bed or sleeping materials. We’ve
to sleep on a mat with a torn blanket. Here, I
eat the same food as my malik’s family and sleep
on a bed with warm clothes in the ground floor
(Mesu, a ten year old haliya boy).

In contrast, a 15-year-old kamaiya girl complained, “I of-
ten had to eat leftover food; my sleeping place was near the
kitchen so it was very cold in the winter” (Jura). Of course,
what children say about their food and living condition is
directly influenced by how well they are treated by their kisan
compared to the treatments from their own families. Despite
having to work hard and eat dal bhat (a very basic Nepali
meal, consisting of cooked rice and spicy lentil soup), most
haliya/kamaiya children were generally happy with their em-
ployers, who treated them positively. Likewise, if they had a
difficult time at home (e.g. scolding, beating), they also tend-
ed to favour their workplace. For instance, a thirteen year-old
kamaiya girl stressed, “the food and the sleeping place are
much better than what I get at my parents’ home” (Muka).

Since the vast majority of haliya/kamaiya children com-
bined household work with that of agriculture, it was not sur-
prising that they often received physical injuries. Studies have
indicated that agriculture is one of the most dangerous sectors
for children, and may account for up to half of all work re-
lated injuries or even death (Ennew et al. 2003). It was clear
for children, and may account for up to half of all work re-

Like Bubha, the majority of haliya children talked about
positive treatments, and hence their working and living con-
ditions did not seem to bother them too much. Although
their kisan scolded them using derogatory names (e.g. dog,
donkey), most of them reported no serious punishments like
beating. In contrast, many kamaiya children spoke of being
scolded badly.

My malikia [woman boss] always murmured, and
she never believed in my work though I worked so much. She’d say, “you’re not doing
what I’ve asked you to do” and get really an-
gry. My malik [male boss] doesn’t stay home so I
couldn’t prove that I’m not as bad as she thinks.
She also gave me one task after another to keep
me busy for the whole day. I think being ka-
maiya is the worst thing, but I’m still doing it
to support my family (Gubha, a sixteen year-old
kamaiya girl).

Unlike Bubha, Gubha also makes it clear that it is the at-
titudes of their kisan rather than the working conditions that
make them dislike bonded work, but she also accepts it, as
she has no better choice to go elsewhere. In Nepali culture,
being scolded or shouted at is generally taken as a normal
part of social life, be it at home, school, or at work. Indeed,
children seemed to feel humiliated only when they were
slapped, or worse, badly beaten. For instance, a fifteen years
old kamaiya girl shared her experience:

My malik used to come home drunk late at
night, and whenever my malikia complained
about my work or behaviour, then he’d beat
me up by tying my hands behind my back to
the point that I’d receive bruises and wounds.
I’d also be smacked for cooking slowly or if the
meal wasn’t tasty enough. Many times, I was
slapped on my face, and once he poured hot tea
over my body. This kind of treatment made me
cry when I recalled my parents and home (Jura).

Besides work related injuries, the majority of haliya/kamaiya children do not recall being seriously ill from natural
causes. As aforementioned, however, minor injuries and ill-
nesses were reported frequently, and most of them received
varying degrees of care from their kisan. A sixteen year-old
kamaiya boy had this experience when he became ill:

My malik took me to the health post, costing him rupees 180 for
a check up and medicine. In the evening, my
malikia heard about it and she quarrelled
with him by saying, “why did you spend so
much for others?” (Getha)
While Getha’s *malik* appears to be more supportive than his *maliknia*, a fifteen year-old *haliya* girl explains how positively her *maliknia* treated her:

> When I had cut my fingers, my *maliknia* joked, “if you lose one of them, you will not be able to join the police force” [because she knows that my future aim as to become a policewoman], and she gave me medication, including tetanus injection. Then, she used to cut the grass and clean the utensils until my wound was healed (Rusa).

Besides medical care, children felt even more happy and satisfied if their *kisan* allowed them to be in contact with their friends and families in times of sickness. Although a few children were able to maintain this kind of relationship, it still did not mean that the workload was reduced or a fixed free time was allowed. Whether children worked within the house, in agriculture or in both arenas, there were no scheduled working hours or better conditions.

As far as girls are concerned, some of them not only had to sustain scolding and slapping, but also faced sexual abuse. Previous studies have shown that girl workers seem to be “massively abused” worldwide (Black 1997, Ennew et al. 2003), which is why the Nepali government has included domestic work as the worst form of child labor. During the course of extended fieldwork, it was possible to gain the trust of some girls to talk about their experiences. A number of girls reported that they were sometimes touched indecently or called to sleep in the same room as their male employers.

While I’d be sleeping alone in my room, my *malik* would come in. He’d start trying to persuade [phakauna] me to let him sleep with me. He’d offer me money, but I refused… I think my *maliknia* knew his behavior towards me, but she didn’t react even when I talked to her about it (Pulka).

It is interesting to note that Pulka’s *maliknia* failed to say anything even when she informed her. Of course, it is nearly impossible to know about the actual cases of rape. Some girls reported a few instances when they were asked to tell any impossible to know about the actual cases of rape. Some girls anything even when she informed her. Of course, it is nearly impossible to know about the actual cases of rape. Some girls anything even when she informed her. Of course, it is nearly impossible to know about the actual cases of rape. Some girls anything even when she informed her.

> Last year, we heard that a Tharu *kisan* raped a fifteen year old *kamaiya* girl, and forced [her] to get married with someone else when he found out that she was pregnant. The girl told other people about the rape only when her husband beat her up and compelled [her] to leave him. Although the villagers caught the *kisan* and made him “pay a fine,” the girl was probably so ashamed of herself because she has disappeared from the village ever since (Lula).

Lula, who had worked as a *kamaiya* laborer since the age of nine, further implied during our informal conversation that it is not easy for girls to open up their internal pain (of sexual abuse) because society will only stigmatise them instead of punishing the culprit. This kind of problem has been widely reported by other researchers writing about the daily circumstances of working children (e.g. Black 1997, Woodhead 1998, 2004, Blagbrough and Glynn 1999, Janak 2000, Montgomery 2001, Janak 2000, Jacquemin 2004).

The analysis so far shows that both *haliya/kamaiya* children leave their families before their teenage to assume economic responsibility towards their natal households. They worry about the poverty in their families and being unable to attend school while staying at home. While some *haliya* children were happier working elsewhere than living with their alcoholic/abusive parents, others reported that they are sent away to work as bonded labor even when they are beaten or abused by their *kisan*. Except for those without a family, all children gave their earnings to their parents (though a few also spend a part of their cash income for alcohol and cigarettes). At times, situations and behaviors like these seemed to affect psychological health more than did their work related injuries.

**POSSIBILITY OF EXIT FROM BONDED LABOR**

As noted above, Musahar and Tharu children seemed to start forging *haliya/kamaiya* contract from the age of about eight and continue up to eighteen (or more, as it depends on their personal circumstances and availability of other alternatives to bonded labor). While a few may work throughout their lives, many start to leave their *kisan* around the age of fifteen, provided that they do not owe anything to their employers. My field data showed that how long children work really depends on how their employers treat them. They accepted scolding and minor beatings like one or two slaps, but when they were beaten up, they would often change their work place or sometimes leave the bonded labor agreement altogether. A few girls had left also because of sexual abuse.

In general, most girls leave bonded work much earlier than boys do because both Musahar and Tharu families arrange their daughters’ marriage quite early (sometimes, as early as twelve years old). It appeared that most parents send their daughters to work as a *haliya/kamaiya* laborer to learn both household and agricultural skills, which are essential aspects of their adult life, rather than to earn family income per se. Likewise, even when girls complain about difficult working/living conditions at their *kisan’s* home, it seems that they often get better food because they seem to be healthier than those who are working elsewhere. Once girls leave bonded work and are married, their own parents do not expect any income from them, but of course, they must take care of their husband’s family.
After working as kamaiya for six years, my parents asked me to come back home. I didn’t know that they were arranging my marriage. I couldn’t refuse so I moved to my husband’s family. Since his parents are also poor like mine, we decided to go to the city to become construction laborers. My daily work involves carrying bricks, sand and cements just for 150 rupees. I don’t know how long I can work here, but if I’m pregnant, then, I’ve to go back and live with my husband’s family to carry out daily household activities like cleaning, cooking and rearing animals. My life will be all about taking care of my husband’s family (and later my own children), and may be working nearby as a seasonal farm worker (Suba).

I stayed with my employer for five years, but had to leave because my parents arranged my marriage. Now, I’m staying with my husband’s family. I continue to do halia work, but now more on a seasonal basis or sometimes even for a daily wage. This is going be my life (though my husband wants to go to the city or to India to earn more money) and in fact, most girls spend their lives like this (Mura, a fifteen year-old “ex-halita” girl).

On the other hand, many of the boys must take on the role of household head and find whatever work available to continue supporting their family. For a boy, bringing a wife home is one way to help his family because she carries the household work. She may also earn something from seasonal labor while he is free to look for better paid work elsewhere.

I worked as a kamaiya for nine years, but I wasn’t able to pay the debt incurred in my marriage. So, I decided to move to the city to become a rickshaw peddler. If there are no violent strikes, then, I earn about 200 rupees a day, excluding rupees for renting the rickshaw. Peddling is very hard, especially during the summer heat and monsoon rain, but I’ll continue to do it for the next few years… I don’t know what I’ll do in the long-run (Getha).

As Getha noted, continuing political instability coupled with lack of jobs also forces post-halita/kamaiya boys to move around different cities or even to India with their friends or relatives for unskilled jobs. For some, working in India seems to be a better option because the income is slightly higher than in Nepal, and moreover, they come home only once every six months or a year, which also allows them to save (though not for the future). Like their parents, however, they are likely to be struggling to make their living since they fail to save anything for the future.

I worked as a halita for seven years. After getting married, I’ve been working in brick-kilns as well as seasonal halita for the last three years. It’s necessary to combine two types of hard work otherwise the earnings won’t be enough to buy daily needs. However, I don’t like working in either place. I want to become a driver, but I don’t know who to contact and especially how to get the licence. If I can’t, then, my life will continue like that of my father and elder brothers (Edhbi, an eighteen year-old “ex-halita” boy).

Without external support, both Musahar and Tharu children of Bayibab and Nayajib villages do not seem to see any other way to escape the halita/kamaiya labor contract. All research participants stated in the in-depth interviews that if they could be helped, they would be able to attend school and to learn certain locally useful skills like tailoring or masonry, carpentry etc.

CONCLUSION

This paper makes clear that the generational family-based halita/kamaiya agreement has increasingly shifted towards children. When their children work for the kisan, Musahar and Tharu parents are able to receive in-kind income like unprocessed rice, besides loans and adhia land. On the other hand, kisan families are also eager to employ children after the promulgation of the anti-kamaiya law in 2002, which has made it difficult to hire adult bonded workers, who may now bargain for higher payment. It is in this sense that the promise of education becomes so attractive to parents and kisan as well as children. This allows both parents and kisan to bypass the government law and the possible exposure to advocacy groups and newspapers. The idea of providing opportunities to study and work is openly accepted by the communities and is also tacitly approved by the government.

Like the claims of advocacy groups, my study also suggests that the daily household and agricultural activities carried out by halita/kamaiya children are often quite heavy. Besides long working hours, some were not well treated by their employers, some work for low payments (e.g. a few quintals of unprocessed rice, on top of food/clothes), and many could not get the education promised. Nonetheless, it was the only work available to Musahar and Tharu children, and they tried to help the family in whatever ways they could. Some children succeeded in meeting a more generous employer (in terms of payments, treatments, and/or schooling), but many also either stayed with one kisan or tried changing several times until they could migrate (if at all) to the cities or to India. Once they were married, girls had to leave bonded labor to take care of their husband’s family.

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9. It is often due to the Indian Rupee having a higher value than its Nepali counterpart (i.e. IRs.100 = NRs.160).
Musahar and Tharu children believed that they might be able to move out of haliya/kamaiya contract if they were helped to obtain education, and, especially, skills training. Otherwise, they may have to continue bonded labour, or, if situation permits, find unskilled work as rickshaw peddler or in brick-kilns – the latter is often worse than working for a kisan. Meanwhile, the systematic rehabilitation programme, albeit playing an important role, still appears to be less successful in offering sustainable livelihood alternatives for “freed” bonded labourers.

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