

4.2 Modern Bonded Labor: The Plight of Haruwa-Charuwa in Madhesh

Introduction

Haruwa Charuwa, a widespread practice of agricultural bonded labor in Nepal, has had severe consequences for numerous Dalit families. Despite the outlawing of bonded labor, individuals continue to endure controlled, unrestricted, and forced labor, often receiving insufficient wages. Stemming from the remnants of the *Zamindari system*, more than 100,000 *Haruwa* in eight districts of Madhesh face exploitation, frequently failing to meet minimum labor standards. According to the Comprehensive Nepali Dictionary, “*Haruwa*” is a term used to refer a person who plows the land, and “*Charuwa*” to a person who grazes cattle for their landlords. These landlords employ people from socially disadvantaged and poor groups, mainly from the Dalit community as *Haruwas* or *Charuwas*. It is customary to pay wages/grain annually or monthly to the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* by the respective landowners.

Individuals from low-income families and members of the Dalit community take loans from landowners, they end up working as their *Haruwa* and *Charuwa*, as they fail to pay said loans back on time. Additionally in a family, if the father fails to pay back and has been working to pay off the debt, the son is required to work for the landowners as repayment.

The then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba made an announcement declaring Nepal as the *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* free country on 18 July 2022. However, their human rights continue to be violated in absence of the implementation

of the declaration. Most of their children are also forced to work as bonded laborer

Haruwa and *Charuwa* individuals face numerous challenges, including caste and social discrimination, lack of access to education, healthcare, and employment rights. They are often forced to work enduring harsh conditions without rest or basic amenities such as shelter and water.

Status of *Haruwa-Charuwa* in Madhesh Province

Even after 23 years of declaration of freedom of *Haruwa Charuwa*, the situation of *Haruwa Charuwa* in Madhesh Province persists. They continue to endure poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, leading to labor exploitation with minimum wages or food grains. The state’s policies on social justice and inclusion, highlights for the identification of farmers, landless individuals, by providing them with arable land and livelihood sustenance options (Paswan, 2013).

When working on the landlord’s land, *Haruwa and Charuwa* individuals receive a fixed amount of grain annually, as well as a daily portion of grains. If the allocated grain is insufficient to meet their needs, they may have to borrow from the landlord and work for them for a year to repay the debt. However, if they cannot repay the debt due to insufficient grain allocation throughout the year or the inability to find additional work, they face difficulties in sustaining their livelihoods. Without being able to pay off the debt and its interest, *Haruwa and Charuwa* indi-

viduals may find themselves trapped in a perpetual cycle of debt.

Labor Exploitation, and the Vicious Cycle of Debt

Among the agricultural laborers employed by landlords in Madhesh Province there are those who cultivate the fields, the *Haruwas*, and those who look after cattle, the *Charuwas*. There are two types of *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* those who work for the landlord: those who work throughout the year and those who work seasonally.

The seasonal *Haruwa Charuwa* are engaged in work other than plowing the landlord's fields during the farming season. However, those who live at the landlords' place and work for them throughout the year do not have alternative sources of income. They must work on the fields every day, while their children work as *Charuwas*. There also are *Charuwas* who graze cattle for entire villages for which they earn some grain annually.

If someone has taken a loan from a moneylender and has been unable to repay it, the children will have to work as a *Haruwa* or *Charuwa*. The poor, mainly Dalits, have no land and often borrow money from landlords for livelihood expenses. In return, they work as *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* primarily to repay their debts.

Haruwa find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt, unable to break free due to their financial obligations to support their families. They lack the bargaining power to demand fair wages from the landlords who employ them. This issue is prevalent across all Districts, although the specific circumstances of living as a *Haruwa* vary. Traditionally, *Haruwa* would live in the same household for generations. However, this practice has become less common in recent times.

If the *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* are not happy with their current landlord, they obtain loans from other landlords

to pay off the debt. They end up with the same type of employment, albeit for a new landlord. The wages or payments received by the *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* and the payment process have not changed. They are often fired when they demand an increase in wages. Most of these individuals live along roadsides and river banks as they do not own their land, and therefore have no options but to continue working for the landlords despite exploitative conditions.

Haruwa Charuwa: Dalits and the Poor

There is a lack of reliable data on the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* in Madhesh Province. According to a study conducted in Dhanauji Rural Municipality of Dhanusha, Sahidnagar and Ganeshman Charnath Municipality led by Dalit Society Welfare Committee, 90% of *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* lack adequate food and medicines, and therefore obtain loans which they cannot repay, forcing them to work as bonded laborers. Similarly, 72 % of *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* are unable to work elsewhere even though they may receive higher wages as they need to work for their landlords.

According to the study, only 27% of the production share of the *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* lasts for over three months, and 88% of them live in huts. Further, the practice of doubling or tripling the interest of loans for failing to repay is another widespread practice that works against the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas*. They are also barred from working for anyone else. The daily wage in 2023 was 1.5 to 5 kgs of paddy per day, which when converted into cash comes out to about NPR 100-200. There is also a difference in wages between men and women. Men receive up to 5 kgs of grain daily, while women receive around 2.5 kgs (equivalent to roughly NPR 500 for men and NPR 250 for women). Despite national and international laws stipulating an 8-hour workday, *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* work for

much longer hours. During the harvesting seasons, their work commitments extend to the late hours of the night.

The Majority of Haruwa are Dalits

The largest population of *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* come from the Musahar community, followed by Ram, Khatwe and Paswan communities in the Terai (Dhakal, 2007). According to a study, seven Districts of Terai- Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Sarlahi, Rautahat, and Bara, had an estimated number of 69,738 *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* households (ILO, 2013).

How many *Haruwa Charuwa* are there?

Among the eight districts of Madhesh province, Saptari, Siraha and Dhanusha have the highest number of *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* laborers. These districts also have dense Dalit settlements.

In a discussion organized by National Dalit Network on 24 December 2022 in Janakpur, representatives of *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* Rights Forum presented data on *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* in their respective districts. According to the survey conducted in 128 local bodies across eight districts, including Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi,

Rautahat, Bara, and Parsa - 160,452 *Haruwa Charuwa* were recorded.

Policy and Reality

According to Bonded Labor (Prohibition) Act, 2002 “Bonded laborer” has been defined as someone working under the colloquial names of Bhisawar, Gaiwar, Bardikar,, Chhekarwar, Haruwa, Charuwa, Hali, Gothlo kamalariya or by any other similar name.. This Act was enacted to enforce the prohibition of bonded labor. However, due to a lack of efficient state enforcement, the basic rights of the *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* are violated daily.

The *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* of Madhesh Province have been organizing various protests since 2003 and have presented their demands to every Prime Minister since 2008. However, no solid action has been taken to address their problems.

In 2011/12, there were plans to collect data on Kamaiya, Haliya, Kamalari, and Haruwa-Charuwa for supporting their employment and education, and providing them with concessional loans. However, these programs did not reach those without adequate identification. This is because the budget allocated for the *Haruwa-Charuwa* cannot be implemented unless the government identifies them, and provides identity cards as it

Table 4.2.1: Situation of *Haruwa-Charuwa*

Social Group	Estimated Total Number of Households	Estimated Haruwa Charuwa Households	Percentage of Haruwa Charuwa Households (%)	Percentage Haruwa Charuwa within the group (%)
Terai Dalits	196,014	45,941	65.9	23.4
Terai Tribes	149,191	4,607	6.6	3.1
Muslims	52,717	3,509	5.0	6.7
Other Terai Hindu Jati Groups	315,593	14,265	20.5	4.5
Mountain group/ community	54,168	1,416	2.0	2.6
Unidentified Castes	2,388	0	–	–
Total	770,071	69,738	100	9.1

Source: *Forced labor of adults and children in the agricultural sector of Nepal, ILO, 2013*



Table 4.2.2: Recent data on *Haruwa* and *Charuwa*

Districts	Municipality	Estimated No. of Haruwa Charwa
Saptari	18	33,894
Siraha	17	6,870
Dhanusha	18	31,400
Mahottari	15	8,048
Sarlahi	20	7,290
Rautahat	18	14,750
Bara	13	53,000
Parsa	9	5,200
Total	128	1,60,452

was done for Kamaiya, Haliya and Kamalari.

On 11 April 2023, people from *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* communities staged a protest to demand their basic rights to

land, education, health, employment, and social security. The demonstration, organized in coordination with the National *Haruwa Charuwa* Rights Forum and National Dalit Network, was held in Birgunj in Parsa, and Rajbiraj in Saptari. Their main demands included government identification cards, and the rehabilitation of Haruwa and Charuwa, Haliya, and people with no land by providing them with arable land and livelihood sustenance options.

The Forum also submitted a five-point list of demands to Shailendra Prasad Shah, the Minister of Land Management, Agriculture, and Cooperatives, Madhesh Province, on 16 February 2019, in Janakpur. Additionally, the *Haruwa*

Box 4.2.1: Challenges faced by the Haruwa Charuwa communities and Madhesh Province Government policies to support

Challenges faced by the Haruwa Charuwa communities:

1. Many of the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* do not have decent house to live. Most of the house they own are on land owned by their landlords or public property, with many not even owning land.
2. They are forced to borrow money from moneylenders to meet livelihood expenses, and most lack alternative life skills to take up other vocations.
3. Most of these people do not have citizenship certificates and other documentation required for accessing social security services from the state, including health insurance.
4. Most people from these communities are illiterate, poor, and have low access to politics.
5. They lack the skills and employment opportunities necessary to earn a livelihood.

Madhesh Province Government policies to support *Haruwa* and *Charuwa* communities

The Madhesh provincial government and local governments do not have reliable data on the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas*. The federal government's national policy plan for 2023-24 states (Point 51) its commitment to implement a special integrated program for their development.

The provincial Agriculture and Co-operative Minister Govinda Bahadur Neupane said the Madhesh government will collect data to help free *Haruwas* and *Charuwas*, issuing them with identification cards in coordination with local governments. (See: point 179 of the policy and program, 2023/2024). The government of Madhesh province has also committed to support uplifting their livelihoods. The provincial government also plans to provide NPR 2.4 million to each local government body for programs to support livelihood upliftment for the *Haruwas* and *Charuwas*.

Charuwa, under the leadership of the National bonded Agricultural Workers' Struggle Committee, submitted a letter of concern to the Nepal government through the National Human Rights Commission."

Conclusion

Poverty, lack of proper housing and arable land has caused *Haruwas* and *Charuwas* to borrow for meeting livelihood needs. The inability to pay back these loans causes many to end up as bonded laborers for landlords.

Despite the government of Nepal's announcements regarding the liberation of *Haruwa* based on recommendations from committees and commissions, there has been a lack of statistics and identification for these individuals. Furthermore, concrete policies and programs addressing the plight of *Haruwa charuwa*, who continue to face poverty and illiteracy, have not been established by the government.

The *Haruwa Charuwa* system, persists in Madhesh province, presenting a contemporary challenge for its inhabitants. With the advancement of agricultural technology, traditional livelihoods such as farmers and *Haruwa Charuwa* working on the lands of landlords and property owners have become scarce. Many

farmers now find themselves unemployed and confined to their homes. The landless individuals or families residing in *Ailani land* (landless people settlement) face the looming threat of displacement.

Generations of *Haruwa Charuwa* have been trapped in a cycle of bonded labor, compelled to struggle endlessly to repay loans obtained from local landowners for basic sustenance. Employment arrangements between the *haruwa* and the landowner are typically informal, devoid of any written agreements. Compensation, whether provided on a monthly or yearly basis, often consists of a share of the crops cultivated on the land tended by the *Haruwa Charuwa* for the landowner.

Many *Haruwa Charuwa* rely on loans for survival, yet a significant number of them lack citizenship certificates. This prevents them from accessing state-provided benefits and land ownership rights. The *Haruwa Karuwa* system forces individuals to dedicate their lives to serving landowners without receiving adequate compensation. Despite their hard work, *Haruwa Charuwa* is denied land rights, reflecting poorly on the state's commitment to democracy. Thus, this issue extends beyond the plight of *Haruwa Charuwa* alone and becomes a national concern.

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