

Livelihood Options for the Landless in an Agrarian Society: A case study from far western Nepal

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The livelihood options of landless households of far western Nepal are wage labor, farming and seasonal migration to India. Food sufficiency is barely enough for 0-3 months a year for most. When food is scarce, they cope by borrowing money, buying food, occasional wage labor as domestic servants, less popular and cheaper or wild food, skipping meals and eating less. These options are embedded with social relation in terms of class, caste and gender and social institutions. This paper argues that this situation is a product of, and regulated by, local age-old feudal social institutions like Khalo Pratha, Haliya Pratha, share cropping, etc which exhibit positive and negative relationships as well as structural constraints in land holding patterns, the existing caste system and gender disparity. Most of these institutions are discriminatory and exploit the land poor by giving them unfair wages, burdening them with debt and treating them inhumanly like semi-slaves.

Introduction

Land is a productive, livelihood asset in Nepal. About 32.1% landless households (CBS, 2002; UNDP, 2004) face livelihood insecurity in varying degrees and intensity due to lack of or negligible land entitlements. Such households are devoid of productive resource entitlement and face various socioeconomic deprivations. Landless households have no basis for further livelihood and socioeconomic security. Landlessness is the cause as well as effect of rural poverty in an agrarian society because other means of sustenance are severely limited. Landless people are also not in a position to benefit from development interventions by state or state's service delivery. This enhances increasing gaps and inequality between the haves and have-nots.

Previous studies (Müller-Böker, 1981; Chambers and Conway, 1992; Stemann, 2005; & Subedi, 2007) reveal that landless households have adopted livelihood strategies or options such as share cropping, agricultural and non-agricultural labor and temporal or seasonal migration to Nepal's cities or different

parts of India. The poor and landless are always subjected to violence and systematic discrimination. Despite these studies on livelihood, few studies on structural aspects of livelihood especially institutions and power focusing on caste and class dimensions have been undertaken.

Some have addressed the issue of institutions and organizations in relation to resource entitlement, livelihood and power relation (Giddens 1984, Scoones 1998, Bebbington, 1999, Ellis, 2000). A person's asset such as land is not merely a means by which he or she makes a living; it also gives meaning to that person's world. Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999; Shahbaz, 2009). They are assets that give them capability to be and to act. Assets should not be understood only as things that allow survival, adaptations and poverty alleviation. They are also the basis of an agent's power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources. Access to means or resource is required to undertake activities that secure livelihood. It determines a certain level of well-being. Access to resources is socially mediated or shaped by social institutions that enable people to construct meaningful livelihoods.

This paper examines the livelihood options of landless people of Far Western Region of Nepal and attempts to explore social structural constraints that produce social inequalities in relation to livelihood. This investigation helps in understanding the way people make their living; what they do and which resources they rely on; and how this is organized. There is also a question of why people can access certain resources and not others or what makes certain activities feasible. For this, it is necessary to analyze structural and institutional constraints and capabilities that enable or hinder the achievement of a desired livelihood outcome.

The works of Scoones (1998) are relevant. He emphasizes rules of legitimacy as social institutions that influence sustainable livelihoods. He explains it thus:

“Given a particular *context* (of policy settings, politics, history, agro ecology and socioeconomic conditions), what combination of *livelihood resources* (different types of capitals) results in the ability to follow what combination of *livelihood strategies* (agricultural intensification/ extensification, livelihood diversification and migration) with what *outcome* ? Of particular interest in this framework are the *institutional processes* (embedded in a matrix of formal and informal institutions and organizations) which mediate ability to carry out such strategies and achieve (or not) such outcomes” (p, 3).

Research Methodology

Three districts namely Kailali (Plain), Doti (Hill), and Bajhang (Mountain) covering all three ecological belts in the far western region of Nepal were sampled. 625 respondents were sampled i.e. 37.10 % (230) from Kailali, 31.84% (200) from Doti, and 31.05 % (195) from Bajhang to get a balanced representation of three ecological belts which could truly represent this region. These three districts have different socioeconomic characteristics along three ecological belts due to variations in altitude, available natural endowment and respective livelihood opportunities.

Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to complement each other to produce synergy. Survey methods were used for collecting factual information whereas case studies, group discussions, field observation, and key informant interviews were used to gather qualitative information. Data were processed, coded and analyzed through the use of *Statistical Package for Social Science* (SPSS).

Research Results

This section describes the general situation of landless people in the sampled districts, livelihood options and their relation to social institutions that hinder or foster the way people live.

General Situation of Landless People

Land is a broad indicator of socio-economic status in an agrarian society. Land entitlement provides command over assets or resources. One can derive socioeconomic gains from land. There are about one-third (30%) landless households (Table 1). Landless is an aggregate of households with no land entitlement. Shrestha (2001) explains landlessness as a process with the help of concepts such as *natural and social monopoly* which come under the political economy of man-land relations. This percentage was highest in Doti (39.5 %) followed by Bajhang (24.61 %) and Kailali (24.56 %). The Chi-square test (value 14.603 and p=0.001) showed a significant relationship between ecological variation and land ownership. It means that land ownership varied with ecological belts. It is attributed to the natural monopoly of land as explained by Shrestha (2001). The percentages of landlessness in the study area are higher than the national average which is 24.44 % landlessness in Nepal (CBS, 2002; &UNDP, 2004).

Table 1: Land Entitlement by Ecological Belts

Ecological Belts/Districts	Land Ownership					
	Yes		No		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Kailali (Plain)	173	75.43	57	24.56	230	100
Doti (Hill)	121	60.5	79	39.5	200	100
Bajhang (Mountain)	146	75.38	49	24.61	195	100
Total	440	70.65	185	29.34	625	100

(Survey, 2007/08)

In the case of caste dynamics, *Dalit* landlessness was 86.88 % against *Non-Dalit* landlessness (13.11%). The Chi-square test with value 26.765 and p value 0.000 indicated that relationships between caste and land ownership were significant. Caste membership determines land ownership. It is explained by the social monopoly of land distribution in which privileged castes owned more and vice-versa.

In three sampled ecological belts, women's land entitlement was only 4.1% against men's land entitlement (95.70%). Women's land ownership is less than the national average (about 8%) (CBS, 2002). Looking at disaggregated data by ecological belts, Kailali, Doti and Bajhang have 5.57, 2.00 and 4.61% women's land ownership respectively. It is similar to social monopoly (in terms of gender) and prevailing gender discrimination and subordination within households based on patriarchal norms and values (Bhasin, 1993; Cameron, 1997; 2004; Tiwaash, 2008).

Following a seminal work done by Sen (1981) on resource entitlement and capability failure, landlessness causes several socio-economic deprivations in society and affects the livelihood of landless households as discussed in succeeding sections.

Livelihood Options and Social Institutions:

This section begins with an overview of livelihood of landless people and then describes key characteristics of social institutions that regulate livelihood options in the study area.

Overview of Livelihood

This section describes livelihood options, coping strategies and food sufficiency based on empirical data and observation.

Livelihood Options or Strategies: Livelihood options denote a wide range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals. They include productive activities, investment strategies and productive choices. These strategies are composed of activities that generate means of survival. The categories and sub categories are potential components of livelihood strategies. Further, they are a dynamic process. People combine activities to meet their various needs at different levels and on different geographical or economic levels.

Generally they adopt a wide range of activities in diverse ways. Wage labour in farm and off-farm activities was the most common, similar to the findings of Akanda and Ito (2008) in rural Bangladesh. When respondents were asked which was the main activity for their livelihood, more than two-thirds (66.66%) households said farming. They are engaged in wage labour such as crop production and livestock rearing but all at subsistence level. This was followed by off-farm activities (29.44%) (Ibid) where rickshaw pulling, small shops, wage labouring, migration to India and carpentry were pertinent examples. Similarly, with Dalit caste-based occupations (5.76%), black smithy, leather work, tailoring and gold smithy were the main jobs. (Ziyauddin and Sanghmitra, n.d) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Livelihood Options/Strategies by Ecological Belts

Ecological Belts	Available Livelihood Options
Mountain District 'Bajhang'	Farming, Caste-based occupation (tailoring, black smithy, gold smithy, leather work, shoe making etc.), <i>Hallodo</i> (leather rope), <i>Chalno</i> (leather screener) & shoe repairing), Wooden pot making (<i>thiki</i>)- <i>Chandara</i> caste, carpentry, Prostitution (sex profession), <i>Khalo</i> , <i>Haliya</i> , stone query, wage labour, fixed contract farming, seasonal migration to India, sand screening, and carrying soil for construction purposes. Jobs- school teacher, NGO activist, Employee of community managed electricity system, Livestock keeping-goat raising, business,
Hill District 'Doti'	Farming, Sharecropping, Wage labour at Silugadhi and Pipalla bazaar bus park, Caste-based occupations (tailoring, black smithy, gold smithy, playing musical instruments etc.), <i>Khalo</i> , <i>Mate Bandaki</i> (land mortgage, Stone query, Porterage, <i>Haliya</i> , Seasonal migration to India, Pension,

		Carpentry, etc.
Plain District 'Kailali'		Farming, <i>Adhiya</i> (Share cropping), Contract Farming, Cutting and sale of firewood, Wage labourer, Wage labourer at brick industry, <i>Kamaiya</i> , <i>Haliya</i> , Caste based occupation (black smithy, gold smithy, tailoring), Share rearing livestock (goat <i>adhiya</i>), Seasonal labour migration to India (Luwaghat, Utrachal-working there at road construction and portering), <i>Haliya</i> , Business, <i>Mate Bandaki</i> (rare), Stone query, Screening sand for construction, Alcohol (beverage) making and sale (locally), <i>Dyari Majduri</i> (Wage labourer)

(Field Study, 2007/08)

Coping Strategies: Coping strategies simply means ways people adapt in food deficit conditions or livelihood crises. In such periods, about three-fifths (60%) usually took loans from money lenders (local land owners) and bought grain. Interest rates were generally 60-80% (sometimes 100%). This was followed by occasional wage laboring but not the usual. They worked as domestic servants temporarily for their neighbours especially large land owners. They considered share cropping a coping strategy in that it helped to cope with food deficit for 2-3 months a year. In addition, migration to India for labour work was also a coping strategy.

Qualitative observations also revealed that the most commonly adopted coping strategies were borrowing money and purchasing food on credit. Reliance on less preferred food was widely adopted as a coping mechanism. An increase in the number of people and spending less on non-food items was an indicator of a worsening situation. Relying on less expensive food, wild food, skipping meals and eating less were other examples.

Food Sufficiency: It is one of the good measures of livelihood outcome. It is understood as availability of food with own farm production in a year. The food sufficiency of three sampled districts was 2.9 months in a year on an average. Kailali, Doti and Bajhang had food sufficiency up to 2.6, 2.5 and 3.5 months in a year respectively. F-test revealed that food sufficiency ($p=0.001$) varied across the ecological belts. In terms of caste, *Dalits* had 2.4 months in a year but *Non-Dalits* had double i.e. 4.01 monthn a year. Statistically, it was highly significant ($p=0.000$). Food deficiency in terms of ecological belts and caste were directly associated with landlessness.

Social Institutions in relation to Livelihood Options: Described in this section are the prevailing social institutions such as *Khalo*,

Pulo, *Balighare*, *Haliya*, *Kamaiya Pratha*, and Sharecropping (*Adhiya Pratha*). A brief description on how these institutions affect the available livelihood options is given below:

Social structures determined by class, caste and gender have implications on power and social relations in society by virtue of resource entitlement and social belonging/positioning. Power relations and social relations appear in society through the interplay of informal social institutions, such as *Haliya*, *Kamaiya*, *Khalo*, *Balighare* and *Pulo Pratha*. By and large, it is characterized by patron-client forms, possessing three characteristics viz, i) social structure especially class structure determined by land holding, ii) caste system and continuation of traditional systems like *Balighare*, *Rithi*, *Pulo*, *Khalo Pratha*; and iii) economic reciprocal interest and dependency for their livelihood.

These institutions have positive as well as negative social relations. Positive relations are mutual sharing of productive resources (e.g. land) and labour/skills, good employer and employee relations, mutual help and trust. On the other hand, a negative relation is characterized by unfair wages, semi-slavery, serfdom labour management, debt bondage, physical exploitation, mental torture (harassment) and social discrimination (gender and caste). Hence it possesses feudal characteristics and respective social relations.

The abovementioned informal social institutions have some relationship (either fostering or hindering) with livelihood options. A few illustrations are presented below:

Wage labour is an important livelihood option for land poor households who are paid in kind in the form of *Khalo* is regulated by *Khalo Pratha* in which landless Dalits provide their service (labour or caste based skill) and in turn are paid in kind (e.g. grain). For example, in Doti, people generally worked for at least

seven days (2 days for tillage, 1 day for transplanting, 1 day for weeding, 1 day for harvesting, 1 day for threshing, and 1 day for storage) and were paid grain equivalent to NRs 150 (about 2 US dollars). It was less than the usual rate (NRs 100). They were forced to do this because of the lack of productive resources/land (landlessness) and no availability of other livelihood options in an agrarian society.

Under this *Khalo Pratha*, they adopted caste based occupations and they had to go to threshing floors (*Khalo*) to collect *Khalo* (grain) at the time of harvest. They were paid lower rates. However, they were not in a position to bargain as they had little or no land and no other livelihood options. This system is also called *Balighare Pratha* in Kailali and in eastern Nepal. If husked or unthreshed grain in bundles is given, it is called Pulo Pratha. Most Dalits adopted *Khalo*, *Rithi*, *Balighare*, and Pulo Pratha for many centuries. Hence, the caste system and its hierarchy were at the centre for their operation and regulation.

Haliya and *Kamaiya* are semi-bonded agricultural labour found strongly associated with subsistence livelihood and characterized by semi-bonded (e.g. debt bondage with higher interest rate), semi-slavery, unfair wage, economic exploitation and social discrimination. These institutions appeared in society in varying forms and intensity. Basically, *Haliya* and *Kamaiya* were landless and even sometimes homeless. Due to dispossession or lack of ownership of resources, they fell to the bottom of the agrarian structure. The caste system made them even weaker as mentioned above in *Khalo Pratha* in caste based occupations.

Share cropping (*Adhiya*) was also considered a source of livelihood ensuring food sufficiency for 2-6 months depending upon household size. Though it is equal sharing of cost and benefit in principle, it is different in practice. Being landless households, they had to rent the master's land and were supposed to undertake extra household work. If they did not follow the master's instructions, there were possibilities of ad hoc eviction leading to loss of livelihood. Under the *Adhiya* system, they had to do hard work for their livelihood but did not get good economic returns. In rare cases, they had to work for $\frac{1}{2}$ *bigha* (0.33 Ha) land free, if there was 1 *bigha* (0.67 Ha) land under share cropping without any economic return.

As they cannot get wage labor all around year, they were forced to do this. Share croppers were supposed to help land owners in household spheres, such as firewood collection, ceremonies like weddings and rice/wheat milling. Share croppers had to help plant winter crops like maize, mustard plantation for free. Only the harvest of summer crops like paddy was divided between them equally. In exceptional cases, share croppers were satisfied because it was considered one way of accessing land for land poor households and contributed to their livelihood to a greater extent.

Women-headed households are considered physically weak and not preferred for such livelihood options (share cropping because of patriarchal norms and practices). They did not keep bullocks or oxen to plough and women were not allowed to plough. They had to provide additional services to household spheres like cleaning houses, washing kitchen utensils and working at *Bari*/kitchen gardens to please their masters.

This empirical evidence shows that sharecroppers were not free. They were tied up with land owners. With no other viable livelihood options, their whole sociopolitical affairs were controlled by land owners despite their interests and preferences.

Khalo Pratha, *Haliya Pratha* and *Adhiya* systems not only contributed to the livelihood of land-poor households, but were also social institutions that shaped their lives. Land rich households influenced and controlled landless households which suffered from unfair payment i.e. partially paid and under employment. In fact, it was against their interest. Furthermore, share cropping did not seem gender friendly because women headed households (de facto) were not preferred to provide access to land for share cropping. Similarly, the findings of Agrawal (1994) suggested that lack of ownership makes women powerless and affects their further empowerment.

As land is a structural variable, land holding patterns create social structure and landless households are always at the bottom and supposed to undertake various activities for their livelihood despite their interests and satisfaction..

Discussion and Conclusion

Being an agrarian society, land based livelihood options are prevalent in Nepal. However, landless households are devoid of such productive assets and are dependent on subsistence agriculture in different ways. Landless households enhance their access to land by share cropping and work as agricultural wage laborers.

Landless households cannot get employment in farming all year so they also do wage earning in non-agricultural sectors like building and road construction. But these opportunities are severely limited in rural areas. Migration to Nepal's city centres and different parts of India is also common. Migration has become the most important economic means of support in this region (Mueller-Boeker, 2003; & Thieme, 2006).

Migration to India is an important livelihood strategy for two reasons: i) agricultural production is insufficient; and ii) an absence of other viable alternative sources of income. They cope with these conditions with remittances (Solvia, 2003 et al). They work as watchmen in a colony or *bazaar*, and women and children work as housekeepers. Migration to India is closely related to indebtedness. Earnings from India are used to pay debts and then spent for livelihood. It is associated with *Haliya* who suffer from debt bondage.

Dalits, who have their skills in caste-based occupations like black smithy, gold smithy, tailoring and leather work, provide services to *Non-Dalit* and *Dalit* clients. In turn, they are paid in kind or cash. Hence they adopt livelihood options under *Khalo Pratha*. Research done by Solvia et al (2003), and Dahal et al (2002) also found that the discriminated situation of women and *Dalits* is problematical. Landlessness, marginal and small land holdings, and food deficiency for more than six months are typical economic features of *Dalits* in Nepal (Ibid). Their livelihood strategies are controlled through traditional institutions and clientele systems. A traditional patron-client relation still exists between *Dalit* and *Non-Dalit* (Cameron, 1995; 1997).

These livelihood options do not exist in isolation but are regulated by informal social institutions such as share cropping, *Khalo Pratha*, and *Haliya Pratha*. Landless household's livelihoods are shaped and regulated, by these social institutions and

structural constraints (Seddon and Hussain, 2002). Landless people do not have influence and control in the process and are bound to face exploitation and discrimination by land owners. Though the share cropping mechanism revolves around the principle of mutual interest, the power relation between land owner and share cropper appears in different forms (Tripathi and Wajih, 2003). It is similar to socio-economic deprivation as argued by Sen (1981) under resource entitlement and capability failure. Hence, land ownership (resource entitlement) remains at the centre and land holding patterns determine agrarian structure.

Differential land ownership structures have implications on caste and gender (Müller-Böker, 1986; Cameron, 1997). In reference to caste membership, Müller-Böker (1986), through her article 'Interpretation of Cadastral Maps and Land Registers- Examples from Kathmandu Valley and Gorkha' states that all Birta land is granted to high caste people i.e. Chhetri, Thakuri and Brahmin. All other castes are excluded from receiving Birta land. Most landlords are from those higher castes. Hence, social hierarchies and caste systems are endorsed by possession and ownership of land. Similar situations were also observed in *Khalo*, *Balighare Pratha* and *Share Cropping*. Empirical evidence also shows multidimensional inequality i.e. caste and gender (Khan and Moon, 2008). Such membership (caste and gender) restricts the deprived from accessing livelihood options and opportunities in society.

Formal and informal institutions (understood here as rules of game) (North, 1990; Eniminger, 1997 cited in Solvia et al 2003) are crucial in influencing rural people's livelihood strategies. (Backer and Ostrom, cited in *ibid*). There were various local institutions, namely, *Riti Bhagya* system, *Haliya*, *Rin Khane*, *land mortgage (mate bandaki)* (Cameron, 1997). By ways of employing and modes of payment, these institutions seem to possess feudal characteristics, such as unfair wages, debt bondage and socio-economic exploitation. Byers (2009) noted that, under feudalism, peasantry is viewed as a single class. All sections of peasantry live in servile conditions i.e. tied to the land, subject to an array of feudal restrictions, with surpluses appropriated via extra economic coercion. In feudalism, they are subject to increased exploitation, putting them in conflict with feudal

lords. There are three strata - rich peasantry, middle peasantry and poor peasantry. Rich peasantry hire labour, especially at peak season and this is from landless peasants. Thus there is the possibility of class struggle within the peasantry.

Scoones and Wolmer (2003) emphasized poor people's livelihood in which there is a complex institutional arrangement and key relationship between livelihood, power and politics. Scoones (2009) argues that poor people's livelihood is very complex and that one should be able to understand the locally embedded context and place-based analysis. It is essential to rethink, retool and re-engage, and draw productively from other sources of inquiry and experience to enrich and reinvigorate livelihood perspectives for new contemporary challenges. Livelihood options have interwoven structural and complex relationship with prevailing and existing social institutions in an agrarian society.

In conclusion, we would like to state the key role of social institutions (formal and informal) to shape and re-shape livelihood options as given by Scoones (1998) and Davies (1997):

"Institutions may be formal and informal, often fluid and ambiguous, in different forms. Power relations are embedded within institutions forms, making contestation over institutional practices, rules and norms always important. Institutions are also dynamic, continually being shaped and reshaped over time" (Scoones, 1998, 12)

"Institutions are social cement which link stakeholders to access to capital of different kinds to the means of exercising power and so define the gateways through which they pass on the route to positive or negative (livelihood) adaption" (Davies, 1997, 24).

Informal social institutions such as *Khalo*, *Balighare*, *Pulo*, *Haliya*, and *Kamaiya Pratha*, and Share Cropping look discriminatory and exploitative to a varying form and extent and restrict accessibility to livelihood resources and respective livelihood options with a negative effect on the ability of an individual or household to pursue available livelihood options. During possible combination and

trade off among access to resources, institutions (social norms or rules of game) and livelihood outcome, social relationship, institutional forms and structure (formal and informal) and power dynamics appear in different forms and intensity such as unfair wages, disguised forms of employment, socioeconomic exploitation and debt traps.

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