

# From subordination to “own work”

## Perceived life changes of former Haliya bonded labourers after their liberation

*Camilla Lohenoja*

The article discusses the perceived life changes of former *Haliya* bonded labourers in Nepal after their liberation. It concentrates on the subjective perceptions of the labourers, a field that has had little attention in literature to date. Nineteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews of former Haliyas, were conducted in a rural village in Baitadi, Far-Western Nepal in the summer of 2013. These were then analysed, using qualitative content analysis. The paper is constructed on the concept of social status, more precisely subordination, and it suggests that diminishing subordination, such as caste discrimination, dependency and forcing, is more important in former bonded labourers' lives than the lack of improvement in material benefits. Therefore it can be argued that the literature on bonded labour stresses too much the quantitative data and the meaning of material conditions, and fails to see the importance of the personal experience and improved social status as the most important change in their lives. This suggests that it might be useful to examine the importance of social status when tackling inequality questions as well.

Keywords: Nepal, bonded labour, subordination, rural areas, ethnography, content analysis

**A**lthough slavery has been officially abolished, this ancient social institution that has occurred almost everywhere in the world has not yet ended: different forms of contemporary slavery still exist. The most known forms are probably human trafficking, child labour and so called sweatshops, where people work for insufficient wages and in unbearable conditions. Another form, bonded labour, is found to be common in South Asia. Bonded labour has many forms, but the most common feature is that a person works in slavery-like conditions in order to pay back a loan. In most cases the work doesn't reduce the actual debt and therefore the labourers become bonded to the employer for the majority of their lives. One type of bonded labour is the *Haliya pratha* in Nepal, a caste-based semi-slavery system in the country side where often a low-caste labourer works in the field of a high-caste landowner without proper payment in return for a loan.

After the official abolishment of the Haliya sys-

tem in 2008, many organisations reported about the continuing plight of the former Haliya workers. Due to the lack of quantitative measures and the complicated political situation in Nepal, the condition of many Haliyas is reported to have become worse since their freedom. Therefore it would seem that the liberation has had negative consequences. This impression caught my attention towards the former Haliyas. I wanted to find out how the Haliyas themselves perceived their life changes after finishing Haliya work. That way this study becomes part of the subaltern studies that gives a voice to one of those groups in society that are socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure (see e.g. Spivak, 1988). I use qualitative content analysis for an interview material that I collected in Far-Western Nepal in summer 2013.

### Who are haliyas?

Haliya in Nepali language means literally a ploughman, but it is understood more generally as a low-caste rural labourer who works in

someone else's field to pay back the debt he once took from the field's owner (K. Upadhyaya, 2004, 119). The Haliyas are considered bonded labourers since they get either only food or a very small fee for the work they do. Furthermore, the work done does not decrease the debt but is considered to cover only the interest. The original sum, which can be in some cases less than one hundred euros, will be collected from other sources. The result is often that the debt remains or even grows and the person is obliged to work his whole life as a Haliya. Often the debtor's family, such as wife and children, work in the landowner's field as well, and the debt is inherited to the next generation. The Haliya system, that has also been referred to as semi-slavery (CSRC, 2014), is prevalent especially in Mid- and Far-Western Nepal. The exact number of Haliya's is unknown and estimates vary. According to the Nepali government and some NGO's this ranges from 19,100 to 60,000 people. (CSRC, 2014; NNDSWO & LWF Nepal, 6; RDN & CO-LARP, 2012, 1, 19).

The Haliya system is strongly linked to the caste system since most of the Haliya workers are low-caste Dalits. Their landlords, who are the creditors, are classed as high-caste. The reason for this is cultural. Unlike Dalits, high-caste people are not considered suitable for fieldwork – ploughing is considered polluting in a ritual sense. For example Kami (known as Lohar in Western Nepal), Damai and Sarki, all Dalit castes, have traditionally been working as Haliyas. (NNDSWO & LWF Nepal, 6; K. Upadhyaya, 2004, 119). It has also been suggested that the relationship between a Haliya and his landlord is not purely a coercive slavery-relationship but clientelist in its nature: the relationship is considered voluntary and beneficial to both parties (see e.g. Kumar KC, Subedi, & Suwal, 2013, 15).

The majority of Haliya work is typically done during the agricultural peak seasons, sowing and harvesting times. During the off season the Haliyas have typically gone to other places such as India to work, since the landlord offers food only when there is work to do. The Haliyas are still obliged to return as soon as the landlord

needs them again. (NNDSWO & LWF Nepal, 7). The Haliyas living in the hilly area of Nepal are said to have a partly better position than the ones living in Terai, since the previous often have a piece of land on their own. (NNDSWO & LWF Nepal, 7).

### **Theoretical and methodological framework for bonded labour**

The majority of the literature on bonded labour states that the official abolishment of the system has brought new difficulties for the labourers. It is often thought that since the labourers enter the bonded relationship voluntarily, the abolishment might diminish their welfare. Carmichael (2001), Anker (2004, 3), Bhandari et al. (1996, 19), Basu et al. (2004, 209), Daru et al. (2005, 138, 143) and Chhetri (2005, 40-1) argue that some of the former bonded labourers live in worse conditions than before the liberation. Futher, Giri (2012; 2009, 599–601) and Upadhyaya (2008) state that the bonded labour system might transform into something new after the official abolishment but it won't disappear.

The opposite view argues that the abolishment of bonded labour systems has improved the situation of the liberated labourers. Kvalbein (2007, iv) argues that although the annual income of the former Kamaiyas, another group of bonded labourers, vary more nowadays, their average income has risen. Genicot (2002) and Hatlebakk (2006, 20, 26) state that although the bonded labourers enter the bondage voluntarily, the official abolishment makes other employment and loan opportunities possible and therefore enables the improvement of bonded labourers' condition.

Between the two extremes, there is a view to which the impacts of the official abolishment are neither purely positive nor negative. According to Engerman (2003, 187) the liberation doesn't mean improvement in material conditions among the poorest. Ramtel (2008, xii) argues that although the nature of the Haliya work has changed from debt, tradition and land into a psychological socio-structure, still the system exists.

Furthermore, Akerlof (1976) points out that the effects of the abolishment are dependent on other people's actions: if one quits the bonded labour relationship it is harmful to all, but if the whole system is finished, everyone benefits from it. Likewise, Conning and Kevane (2007, 110) state that the freedom of the former bonded labourers is increased but the increase in income depends on whether the landlords have other ways to suppress the former bonded labourers. Basu and Chau (2004) state that the way of liberation matters: paying back the debt to the landlord might bring temporary positive change, but it won't change the vulnerability of the former bonded labourer in the long run. Similarly, tighter legislature on bonded labour might lead to children ending up in worse labour conditions. According to them, cheaper loans from official sources decreases bonded labour, but if borrowing is too cheap, the risk is to become indebted again which might result in child labour.

The above stated arguments for and against the liberation focus mainly on comparing objective, material conditions. The research on bonded labour lacks almost totally the level of subjective experiences: the voice of the bonded labourers themselves. Much of this has to do with methodology: While most of the studies focus on quantitative data and questionnaires (see e.g. Villanger, 2006), few of them have done ethnographic research, meaning in-depth interviews and participant observation. Therefore, I see it as important to gain an understanding on the grass-root level. My study focuses on the personal thoughts and perceptions of the group of people whose views are not normally heard outside their own community. The concept that the analysis is built on is social status. Social status could be interpreted as social opportunities, one of the crucial instrumental freedoms of Amartya Sen's (1999, 4, 38–40) notion of freedom. Sen argues that social opportunities such as education and health care are important for the basics of development, such as to avoid early death, but also for people to be able to participate in society. For example illiteracy as a lack of social opportunity might be an obstacle for participating in the economic but also in the political life.

In the analysis below, I suggest that the most important change regarding the social status of former Haliyas is reduced subordination. Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998, 37, 147) propose that there are two forms of subordination of Dalits: ritual subordination, that is cultural and social by nature, and economical subordination, which means poverty in short. Poverty is visible through the lack of food, income and property, ritual subordination is produced through restrictions of freedom and social exclusion. These two sides of subordination are related to each other and they are manifested through, for example, enslavement of low castes by high caste people.

### Former Haliyas' experiences in Baitadi

My data set consists of nineteen in-depth interviews and participant observation over a five week period of former Haliyas in a rural village in Baitadi, Far-Western Nepal. In the interviews, I concentrate on the former Haliyas' experiences on the changes in their lives after finishing the Haliya work.

When most of the literature stresses the weakened position of former bonded labourers, my data doesn't support these findings. Former Haliya's perceptions are much more positive. According to them, the quality of life has increased remarkably after finishing the Haliya work:

**Camilla Lohenoja (CL):** *If you think about your life, let's say when you were working as Haliya, how has it changed?*

**Interviewee (I):** *It's different.*

**CL:** *How is it different?*

**I:** *I don't have to go there, I left that work and I worked myself in my house and leading my life, so it's good. I left that work so now it's good.*

**CL:** *What about economically, when was it better, then or now?*

**I:** *It is similar, I don't have anything to like earn much, so it's similar. There is no difference.*

(P18, M 33 years)

The above quotation captures well the for-

mer Haliyas' perceptions about the difference compared to the former: there is change, but counting only rupees does not represent the real essence of the state; we have to dig deeper in order to understand the change more thoroughly. Sentences "I don't have to go there", "I left that work so now it's good" reveal a little bit of the crucial experience of the former Haliyas.

Using the principals of qualitative content analysis (see Schreier, 2012) I separated different dimensions that seemed important in the interviewees' speeches concerning the experienced change. I labeled these dimensions as changes in material welfare such as work, food and livelihood as well as changes in the social status such as suppression. The change in the social status of the former Haliyas is, according to my analysis, the most important dimension for the interviewees. Although the changes in the material welfare are not that big, the diminished subordination and exclusion as well as increased experience of freedom outweigh the lack of material improvement.

The most remarkable change in the social status is the reduced level of subordination. Decreased caste discrimination, dependency and forcing are each dimensions of the diminishing subordination of the former Haliyas:

*Now we are free, we can do anything, we can go anywhere, anytime, sort of like, we are free now and, before we have to, we were in suppression, pressio--, like force, we always have to do the work they want us to do, they always call us do this work, do that work but now it has been good, we can do anything, now we have our own choice.*

(P 8, F 26 years)

The answer praises the finishing of forcing and the rise of freedom. It follows Genicot's (2002) and Hatlebakk's (2006) argument that the abolishment makes other employment opportunities possible. Also caste discrimination is seen diminished after the liberation:

*Talking about caste discriminations,*

*like yeah, we are not allowed to go to house, enter the upper caste people's house, like... even we are not allowed to go even near the, near the house, like there is ground, even there, but after Maoist movement, and, (.) there was, (.) it's okay now, it has diminished. Before even to buy something, before go to shop we have to stay outside and they give and we take that and come back. But now it's okay.*

(P5, M 39 years)

The quote reveals that although caste discrimination has not ended, it has decreased since the Haliya work has ended. Mendelsohn and Vicziány's (1998, 37, 147) division of caste discrimination into ritual and economic subordination seems appropriate here: just like they suggest, the ritual subordination has diminished more than the economic. However, an important remark is that the economic situation has not become worse either according to my interviewees' perceptions.

### **Interpretations: Importance of "own work" and the role of Maoists**

Concentrating on objective measures and external indicators only, we gain knowledge that doesn't look too promising for the former Haliyas. Incomes haven't risen, and still life is an everyday struggle for survival. However listening to the experiences of the interviewees, develops quite a different picture. Although there is still a lack of sufficient income, the huge change in the minds of former Haliyas is apparent. They feel themselves free to eat whenever and whatever they want, work as much, where- and to whom- ever they want. They don't feel the suppression and pressure to work for others, but instead they can choose to do work on their own:

*Before we used to work for them, only for them and there is no other work but after that when we stopped from there we got chance to do our own work and we got chance to grow our own goats.*

(P19, M 51 years)

Therefore it seems that the possibility to be more

independent is a crucial part of former Haliyas' experience.

The impact of Maoists is important to acknowledge in the opinions of the former Haliyas. Since the village was under heavy Maoist influence during the Maoist war in 1996–2006, and the Maoists are still the most popular party in the area, it seems that the responses are strongly influenced by the Maoist discourse. One of the respondents puts it clearly:

*H: Yeah, Maoist people just forced us to not go the field of landlord, like don't go to plough the field of others, so, that's why we didn't go to work. Most of the people don't say this, because of... fear of things. -- Still I'm also afraid, we are afraid to work as a Haliya because Bishnu [name changed] is here, he might report... us and even still we are maoist people now, we can't also work for, as a Haliya, --*  
(P5, M 39 years)

The comment exposes the power the Maoists still have in the village – Bishnu, one of the village leaders, might report if someone worked as Haliya. The fear of Maoists is therefore a strong incentive not to work as a Haliya anymore. On the other hand the interviewee regards himself and the other Dalits in the village as Maoists. Since one of the Maoist objectives was to liberate Haliyas, the interviewees' responses fit well with the Maoist idea. This is supported by the remarks on the village nearby: there the Maoist influence was much weaker, and the attitude towards Maoists is much more negative.

## Discussion

The findings above are somewhat in disharmony with the majority of literature dealing with abolishment of bonded labour system as discussed in the literature review. There might be many reasons for this. For example, most of the literature focusing on Nepal's bonded labour systems deals with Kamaiyas. Literature about Haliyas is very limited due to their more recent liberation. Kamaiyas' situation is somewhat different - most of them used to live in their landlord's lands and

house, when Haliyas often had a piece of land to themselves and a house on their own. When the bonded labour relation finished, the Haliyas' landlords couldn't send the Haliyas away from their own lands, unlike in Kamaiyas' cases. Furthermore, since the village where I conducted my fieldwork is situated close to the Indian border, many former Haliyas have good opportunities to work in India. They also have other means of income such as preparing utensils, carrying loads, working in road construction and cutting wood, so that finishing Haliya work has not meant finished livelihood opportunities.

However, the most important reason for the difference between the interviewees' experience and the literature is, according to my interpretation, the difference in the methodological approaches. As stated above, ethnographic research hasn't been popular when studying the changes of liberation. Therefore, when focusing on the subjective level, the results seem almost opposite to the research using mostly quantitative methods and indicators focusing on material changes.

Based on my data it can be argued that the impacts of abolishing the Haliya bonded labour system in the village of my fieldwork have been strongly positive in former Haliya's perceptions. Although material welfare hasn't improved very much, the diminished subordination is the most important experience according to the interviewees. Therefore, we may suggest that material welfare is not always the most important measure when discussing the impacts of abolishment of bonded labour. This is an interesting observation when discussing welfare questions even on a more general level, instead of focusing solely to the material improvements when tackling inequality, it might be useful to examine the importance of social status more thoroughly as a feature of welfare.

---

**C**AMILLA LOHENOJA University of Helsinki,  
Master of Social Sciences. E-mail: [CAMILA.LOHENOJA@HELSINKI.FI](mailto:CAMILA.LOHENOJA@HELSINKI.FI)

ASIA IN FOCUS

## References

- Akerlof, G. (1976). The economics of caste and of the rat race and other woeful tales. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 90(4), 599–617.
- Basu, A. K., & N. H. Chau (2004). Exploitation of child labor and the dynamics of debt bondage. *Journal of Economic Growth*, 9(2), 209–238.
- Bhandari, J., & M. Bhattacharya (1996). An appraisal of the rehabilitation of bonded labour in the Jaunsar-Bawar area of Uttar Pradesh. *Man in India*, 76(1), 19–34.
- Carmichael, E. (2001). Two hours from freedom: An examination of NGO involvement in the "kamaiya" liberation movement of Nepal. Honors Theses, paper 364. Colby College. Thesis. <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorsthesis/364/>. Accessed 16.4.2014.
- Chhetri, R. B. (2005). The plight of the Tharu Kamaiyas in Nepal: A review of the social, economic and political facets. *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology*, 9, 22–46.
- Conning, J., & M. Kevane (2007). Freedom, servitude, and voluntary contracts. In A. Appiah, & M. Bunzl (toim.), *Buying freedom: The ethics and economics of slave redemption*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 108–140.
- CSRC (2014). Haliya rights campaign. <http://www.csrcnepal.org/index.php/campaign/haliya-rights-campaign>. Accessed 28.9.2014.
- Daru, P., C. Churchill, & E. Beemsterboer (2005). The prevention of debt bondage with microfinance-led services. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 17(1), 132–154.
- Engerman, S. (2003). Slavery, freedom, and Sen. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2–3), 185–211, DOI: 10.1080/1354570032000078033.
- Genicot, G. (2002). Bonded labor and serfdom: A paradox of voluntary choice. *Journal of Development Economics*, 67(1), 101–127.
- Giri, B. (2012). The bonded labour system in Nepal: Musahar and Tharu communities' assessments of Haliya and Kamaiya labour contracts. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 4(2), 518–551.
- Giri, B. (2009b). The bonded labour system in Nepal. Perspectives of Haliya and Kamaiya child workers. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 44(6), 599–623. DOI:10.1177/0021909609343414.
- Hatlebakk, M. (2006). The effects on agrarian contracts of a governmental intervention into bonded labor in the western Terai of Nepal. CMI working paper 2006:6. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.
- Kumar KC B., G. Subedi, & B.R. Suwal (2013). Forced labour of adults and children in the agriculture sector of Nepal: Focusing on haruwa-charuwa in Eastern Terai and haliya in Far-Western hills. Kathmandu: ILO Country Office for Nepal.
- Kvalbein, J. A. (2007). Liberated bonded laborers: Are they better off? Welfare and efficiency implications of an agricultural reform in Western Terai, Nepal. CMI Report 2007: 11. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.

- Mendelsohn, O., & M. Vicziany (1998). *The untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. Contemporary South Asia 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- NNDSWO & LWF Nepal (2003). Haliya survey in far western development region. Kathmandu: Lutheran World Federation.
- Ramtel, K. B. (2008). *Livelihood situation of Haliyas and landless peoples of Dalit community*. A case study from Saraswatinagar and Laxminagar VDCs of Doti. Lalitpur: SNV Nepal.
- RDN & COLARP. (2012). Research report on ex-haliya and dalit community in the Far-Western region of Nepal. Kathmandu: RDN & COLARP.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Lontoo: Sage Publications.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In Nelson, C & L. Grossberg. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 271–313
- Upadhyaya, K.P. (2004). Bonded labour in south Asia: India, Nepal, and Pakistan. In Anker, v. d., C. *The Political Economy of New Slavery*. New York: Palgraves MacMillan, 118–136.
- Upadhyaya, K. P. (2008). Poverty, discrimination and slavery: The reality of bonded labour in India, Nepal and Pakistan. Anti-Slavery International.
- Anker, v. d., C. (2004). Introduction: Combating contemporary slavery. In Anker, v.d., C. *The Political Economy of New Slavery*. New York: Palgraves MacMillan, 1–14.
- Villanger, E. (2006). Is bonded labor voluntary? Evidence from the liberation of the Kamaiyas in the far-western region of Nepal. CMI working paper 1006:16. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.

e