

A Bonded Parrot Flies in the Sky (6)



Laxmi Maharjan and Anita Rai

Kamaiyas are exclusively from the Tharu community, an ethnic group in the Terai in the southern part of Nepal. Traditionally, this community has solely depended upon agriculture for their livelihood, and their lifestyle and culture, as well as their economy and almost all other aspects of life, have been dependent on farming. The Kamaiya communities are not exceptional from other members of the Tharu community in this respect. Kamaiyas are widely known as hard-working male tillers of the land, but currently, the term means a male bonded laborer working for landlords. The Tharu community in Bardiya District for a long time have been suffering from an unequal exchange of their economic surplus derived from agriculture as they continually face exploitation of their labor, low wages, jirayat in which a small part of land is to be



cultivated exclusively for their landlord, sharecropping and high interest rates on loans, few or no job opportunities, being cheated and remaining a Kamaiya in the landlord's house. Overall, Kamaiyas are the most victimized and exploited section of the Tharu population. As a result of the concentrated efforts of Kamaiya activists and Nepalese and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the government, through a cabinet decision dated July 17, 2000, outlawed the practice of bonded labor that was prevalent under what was known as the kamaiya system over a period of centuries. The announcement also declared saunki—a loan taken from one's landlord and the most binding element to one's landlord—illegal.

Although it was a remarkable decision in favor of the Kamaiyas, the government has failed to rehabilitate them as there have been inadequate arrangements for housing, food security and other required needs, even those for which the government bears the sole responsibility for ensuring and implementing. Although the kamaiya system was outlawed, thus liberating the Kamaiyas from this oppressive and exploitative system, they have not encountered, however, any improvement in their lives. Moreover, while the above-mentioned labor practices are illegal, they are still being practiced. Consequently, the status of the Kamaiyas, instead of progressing, is regressing day by day. There is thus an urgent need to enhance their quality of life and pull them up from the depths of starvation and poverty. The government and Nepalese and international NGOs are still facing challenges to settle a large number of Kamaiyas who have been freed as proper preparations need to be made for housing, food, alternative income opportunities and other basic requirements for their rehabilitation. Furthermore, there are still freed Kamaiyas who have not received land on which to settle, and they are consequently occupying public land illegally in order to survive. In addition, adequate education, health care, sanitation and livelihood support under their rehabilitation programs have not been implemented by the government and NGOs, which have been guided by the perspective of providing relief due to their empathy for the pathetic conditions of the freed Kamaiyas. Although these communities have felt relief, to some extent, it has not been enough to realize their rights and meet the basic needs they have to sustain their livelihood and empower them. They are thus still facing problems of illiteracy, unemployment, starvation and poor health—the roots of their exceedingly disadvantaged and vulnerable condition. Consequently, a top-down process of program implementation that merely offers relief through the implemented projects thus far has limited the Kamaiyas to remaining confined to the status quo rather than seeing their living conditions improve. In this critical situation, there is a desperate need to support and sustain their livelihood by making them well informed about, and increasing their access to, as well as fully using locally available resources and opportunities. Moreover, there is an urgent requirement to organize a self-reliant community with the capacity to utilize and mobilize the locally available resources and opportunities in order that the Kamaiyas can become rights-holders rather than service-receivers. The Society for Participatory Cultural Education (SPACE) observed these realities of the grim lives of the economically poor Kamaiyas of Bardiya District who have been freed but who still face severe hardships as outlined above. Hence, in response, SPACE felt the need to implement such programs as community organizing, capacity-building, vocational and income generation programs, education, awareness-raising about their legal rights, advocacy and networking to increase access to organizations with other resources. SPACE launched the initial phase of a project to address this difficult situation by focusing first on community empowerment and fostering a sustainable livelihood in the five village development committees (VDCs) of Bardiya District in October 2009. Phiriya Tharu is a member of the project supported by Shanti Mahila Samuha Self-Help Group that was formed on Jan. 1, 2011, with 16 members. Phiriya, 37, has lived in Sorhawa-2 VDC in the village of Birendra Nagar since 2001 with one son, one daughter and her husband. Before coming to this community, she was a bonded laborer in her landlord's house with her husband for seven years. When the Nepalese

government declared that the Kamaiya were free, they left their landlord and came here. The government provided them five kattha (about 1,700 square meters) of land, which, however, was not enough for her family. To support themselves, her husband used to go to Nepalgunj to try to find work as a daily laborer and pulling a rickshaw, and she began to run a small retail shop to meet their basic needs. She could not make any profit though as a small retailer.

Consequently, when she got a chance to participate in a three-day entrepreneurship and market development training program organized by the SPACE project in 2010, she enrolled and gained knowledge about local market development, the characteristics of entrepreneurs that are needed to succeed as well as skills and knowledge about expanding her business. She was determined to develop her business after she received this training. She also encouraged her husband to become involved in the business as well. Now that both of them have been engaged in the work together they have been able to boost their business by three times. They operate a galla business of sales and distribution services along with running a tea and snack shop in their home. They have also begun rearing nine goats that they bought from the money they earned after selling a pig provided by the project. They have now started to earn an average of 7,000 rupees (US\$97) per month.

In 2011, Phiriya leased 10 kattha (approximately 3,400 square meters) of land from a landowner by giving him a deposit of 70,000 rupees (US\$969). She earned this money from her business under the local Bandhaki land lease system, and now she is cultivating land. "How did you expand your business to the present scale?" she once was asked. "I have participated in trainings organized by this project," she replied, "and then gained knowledge and skill to promote my business. I have also shared learnt lessons with my husband, and we both are agreed, and we both are involved in the business." "Since the business gives quick income, we decided to give first priority to the business," she added, "and if we get further financial support, we have enough confidence to expand the business more than now." Their three children are now going to school, and they have invested the earnings from their business for their children's tuition, school uniforms and educational materials.

Phiriya and her husband symbolize the bonded parrot in the open sky; for when they were Kamaiya, or bonded laborers, they were confined to the landlord's property. There were no opportunities and freedom as other human beings enjoy. All of their life was limited to labor for their landlord like animals. Now, although they are free, they still face difficulties to compete with others to earn a living (**Published; Faith &Peace, Interfaith Cooperation Newsletter- May 2012**)