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LIVELIHOOD OF LANDLESS PEASANTS: A STUDY OF EVICTED RESETTLERS

Tulsi Ram Pandey

HMG-USAID-GTZ-IDRC-FORD-WINROCK PROJECT

STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY IN THE

FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN NEPAL

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LIVELIHOOD OF LANDLESS PEASANTS:

A STUDY OF EVICTED RESETTLERS

Tulsi Ram Pandey*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the justification for evicting landless tenants from a sociological standpoint. It also investigates the ways in which resettled, rural people try to make a living from activities other than farming and what is being done to help them. It draws conclusions from data gathered in the field from a sample of 60 households, and makes recommendations based on those conclusions.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1977 the National Planning Commission (NPC) reported that ten percent of the rural households in Nepal were landless and per family landholdings in the mountain, hill and Tarai areas were 0.56, 0.74 and 1.63 ha respectively; 64 percent of the total farm households in the country were small and marginal peasants. Landlessness and the marginal status of the great majority of peasants is a paradox in an agrarian country where agricultural land is privately owned The situation was further eroded by a six percent unemployment rate in the labor force and the 63 percent underemployed working days of all rural households. In a country where more than 90 percent of the population are engaged in agriculture these facts mostly affect the peasants.

Causes of Landlessness

Landlessness, unemployment and underemployment among rural households in Nepal stem from a number of underlying causes. The land tenure system, fragmentation and separation of family land, population growth and the nature of non-agricultural employment are the major ones. The land tenure systems before 1960--such as birta rajya (privileged ownership of land granted to individuals as gifts), and jagir (land given to government employees in lieu of cash)--had created a privileged class of landowners from a small section of society (Regmi, 1976). There was no limit on the amount of land that could be amassed this way. The remaining majority became their tenants and as such had no security. Landowners had the legal right to evict them at any time. (HMG, 1965 (2022):38). Leases were valid for only one year (Regmi, 1971:89). Ijardar (tax collectors on contract), could evict them in favor of a higher bid (Regmi, 1971:24-41). State tenants--cultivators of raikar land (state landlordism: the registered owner pays taxes to the state)--were in an equally bad position, until the land they cultivated was registered in their own names.

The introduction of tenant registration on raikar land in the cultivator's name gave them independence and it also opened up the prospect that they could eventually buy the land with money they had saved. However, from the late 18th century the system of taxation on irrigated land in the eastern and middle hill areas and in Kathmandu Valley was replaced by a system that obliged cultivators to pay the

stipulated amount of tax even when they had a bad harvest. Where rent had been payable in kind, tenants now had to pay cash. Tenants of jagir land were obliged to pay advance rent in the form of loans if their landlord desired (Regmi, 1971: 98-9). In the nonmonetized and nonmarket hill economy, this increased the problem of raising money to meet rent and tax obligations. Tenants and small farmers had to sell grain to middlemen who could exchange it for money in the market or use it as security to borrow cash. In either case, the effect of introducing this cash requirement was to reduce the farmer's already meager resources and effectively drive him into bondage and slavery (Stiller, 1976:194).

The problem of landlessness or marginalization only received official recognition in the 1950s. From that time various land reform programs were put into action. Unfortunately, they did not have the desired effect. There was a lack of landholding records and those that existed were often falsified. The series of ineffective land reform acts up to 1964 only caused the big landowners to transfer their land to fictitious persons (Zaman, 1973:30). The effective implementation of the 1964 Act still forms the basis of Nepal's economic policy (NPC, 1985:123).

The growth of consumerism did not affect the failure of the land reform programs. While the population of Nepal has grown from 9 million in 1961 to 15 million in 1981, the employment pattern did not change in terms of the percentage of agro-based population (CBS, 1985:13, 103). Small and marginal peasants, faced with increases in food demand and regular and contingent expenditure, were compelled to sell or mortgage their land. This led to marginalization and landlessness (Caplan, 1970). Now more than 40 percent of Nepal's population is below the poverty line (NPC, 1983).

Land reform was not the only way to address landlessness. In the late 1950s resettlement programs were introduced in the Tarai. This led to a massive migration of peasants from the hills. For those capable of buying land there were no major problems of settlement. Others had to wait their turn in settlement programs. The programs could not, however, accommodate everyone. Until 1977 the Government Resettlement Company could resettle only 7691 families. A few others were resettled by other agencies. The remaining developed a number of forest settlements on land stolen from the ownerless forests (Ojha, 1982; Pandey, 1984).

Some forest settlements were the result of individual political interests (Ojha, 1983:34) but whether politically motivated or not, they resulted in a great loss of forest. It was officially estimated that 56,000 ha of forest was encroached upon by spontaneous resettlement between 1964 and 1972 (Ministry of Forest, 1976:5) and the process continued.

Forest resources have a multidimensional importance in Nepal and have been used for many purposes. In 1961, in a move to further support the new panchayat political system, many pradhan panchas allowed forest settlements to grow (Ojha, 1983:34). This also served during the 1980 national referendum in 1985 to reaffirm the viability of the panchas.

Objective

An assessment of the justification for evicting landless tenants is an important sociological issue. Equally important is a study of the ways in which landless peasants make a living. In April 1983 HMG/N evicted the resettlers in many forest settlements around Kawasati Nawalpur. This paper is an examination of that situation, and the resulting way of life left to those who were evicted.

Methodology

The study is based on information gathered from 60 households in and around Kawasati Nawalpur. Four settlements were chosen: three were groups of evicted peasants who had not been transferred out of the area and were living on the land of their original neighbors. The remaining settlement was in Rewareta, a newly arranged resettlement site. Fifteen households were chosen from each settlement.

The initial purpose was to examine the justification for the evictions and the new livelihood of the peasants. Information regarding the scene of settlement and the process of eviction was collected through observations and interviews. Statistics were compiled regarding sources of income, land ownership history, level of debt and method of payback, and strategies employed, using a questionnaire.

DEVELOPMENT OF FOREST SETTLEMENTS

Company Program and Forest Settlements

In 1964 the Nepal Resettlement Company started its first project in the Nawalpur region of Nawalparasi district. It had a policy of free allotment of cultivable land to landless families and planned to establish social facilities such as a central market, health post, police post, postal unit, cooperatives, rice and flour mills, agricultural extension service, and schools (Kansakar, 1979:87-88) which attracted many farm families. The Nawalpur Resettlement Project was completed in 1977 by which time it had accommodated 1504 families in 30 resettlement villages (Paudel, 1980). Many others who failed to get land in program areas settled in nearby forest settlements. Examples of these include Hattisar, Bhattola, Purhabhattola, and Hasaura. All the people who settled in these places were evicted by the government in April 1983. Kharkatta, Vishnunagar and Loka were the three evicted settlements selected for this study. The fourth was Rewareta as mentioned above.

Kharkatta was on the northern fringe of Pithauli village panchayat between two official company resettlements, Vishnunagar and Loka, in Shivamandir and Pragatinagar panchayats respectively. The three villages were within half an hour's walking distance. Although the settlers came from a variety of areas and ethnic groups, there was no observable distinction in their geographical and social settings.

Rewareta was in the Parasi belt of the district, on the western bank of Narayani river and near Indian border. In social terms it was similar to the others: a group of evicted peasants from different backgrounds, but topographically, the area was sandy and without vegetation. The others were on forest land but many of the trees dried up during the study period because the settlers stripped them of their bark. All the settlements lacked irrigation facilities.

Politics and the Fate of Landless Resettlers

The forest settlements gradually developed as the government neither expelled people effectively nor allowed them to live in security. In 1978-79, the Bhu-Upayogita Bamojim Ban Kshetra Kayam Garne Samiti, a committee whose task it is to delineate the boundary of the forests accord-

ing to land use, decided to move them to official settlements, and provide them with homes (Pandey, 1984). This was backed by a high-level commission dealing with the problem of forest settlement. The people were informed of this decision through panchayat agents just prior to the national referendum. They were assured that they would be resettled if they cast their votes for the panchayat system. The decision could not be carried out before the referendum due to time constraints. Meanwhile, the forest communities expanded as more evicted peasants tried to settle.

Immediately after the referendum, a process of establishing the new formal settlements began. At the beginning of 1981, the committee ordered the Regional Resettlement Office and the Conservator's Office to register their land in their own name (Pandey, 1984). Up to August-September (Bhadra) of 1981, groups of officials deputed from the Lumbini Forest Division (Conservator's Office), the Regional Resettlement Office and the Resettlement Company were in the area demarcating the forest, assigning land for settlement, surveying fields and assigning plots to households.

However, the commission ceased functioning without completing what it had undertaken. The Lumbini Forest Division then ordered the forest guards to burn the huts of the people on the eve of the first general election in 1981. This opportunity was taken by election candidates to mobilize people's votes in their favor. The landless were again assured that they could settle on specially assigned land in the event of their election. They began to rebuild their huts in the same field and the settlements continued to expand and the government kept silent.

The panchayat system was voted in, and forest conservation appeared high on the list of post-election activities. Various high level committees for the conservation of forest land were established, each for a different part of the country. The committee for Rupandehi and Kapilvastu made a final eviction of the settlers in the study area. About 500 families were transferred to the sandy land around Rewareta.

These landless peasants, whether in Rewareta or in the forest settlements, lived at pen-like huts. They were a mixture of Bahun, Chhetri, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Tharu, Khumhal, Kami, Sarki, Damai and Sunar groups. They had come from Gulmi, Lamjung, Kaski, Syangja, Parbat and the hills of

Nawalparasi itself. A few of them were also from the old settlements near the place of eviction (Table 1).

Table 1. Ethnicity and Place of Origin of Sample Households

Caste	Number	Percent	Origin	Number	Percent
Bahun	11	18	Nawalparasi*	13	22
Chhetri			Tanahu	6	10
			Dhading	5	8
Magar	30	50			
Gurung			Gorkha	3	5
Tamang					
Newar			Palpa	6	10
Tharu					
Kumal	3	5	Gulmi	4	7
			Lamjung	5	8
Kami					
			Kaski	5	8
Sunar	16	27			
Damai			Syangja	12	20
Sarki			Parbat	1	2
Total	60	100		60	100

* These figures are not a basis for estimating the number who migrated from Nawalparasi to areas not under study.

LIVELIHOOD OF EVICTED RESETTLERS

Not all the forest encroachers in Nepal are landless. Studies have shown that some influential and better off people, including politicians, have set an example. Some become professional settlement organizers and then appropriate most of the better land for themselves (Ojha, 1982). Considering that 2.5 percent of households in the western hills are landless (NPC, 1983) and the contribution of political events to the development of forest settlements (now evicted), this may be true even in the study area.

The living conditions of the landless peasants are poor. The National Planning Commission (NPC) reported that for 57 percent of working days in a year the peasants in the study area were underemployed. Most of the landless began as

tenants or small and marginal land farmers. To understand their plight after eviction, the general economic conditions in the forest settlements are discussed, and compared with their place of origin. The reason and motivation for their migration to the Tarai are analyzed. The economic indicators used to measure their economic situation are: agricultural landholding, livestock numbers, business investment, employment in governmental and non-governmental organizations both in Nepal and abroad, wage levels, ethnic occupations, and level of indebtedness. First, some background data is given.

Demography

The 60 selected households in the study area comprise a total of 347 people: 175 men and 172 women. Average family size is therefore about six. Of the total, 167 were below the age of 15, and seven were over 65. Taking the 16 to 65 group as the economically active portion of the population, one half of the population is dependent on the other half.

The Evicted Settlement

While the landless in the evicted settlement were clearly motivated by land acquisition when they moved onto forest land, none of them took more than one hectare, the area officially allowed by the Resettlement Company in 1978 (Paudel, 1980). Surprisingly, most of them took less than the regulation area (Table 2).

Table 2. Land Area Taken from the Forest

Land in bighas	Households	
	Number	Percent
0.0 - 0.5	5	8.3
0.5 - 1.0	45	75.0
1.0 - 1.5	10	16.7
Total	60	100.0

Source: Field Survey

Most households did not have enough land to make a subsistence living. In addition, the insecurity of their position put a constraint on their ability to produce a decent crop. Only two households in the study area produced enough to live on. The rest suffered, either because their

crops were destroyed by the cattle of indigenous farmers (those living on registered land) or from frequent harassment from the police or creditors.

An alternative source of income was livestock raising. Thirty-seven of the 60 households owned 122 animals among them before their eviction. Their instability prevented them from maintaining this level, and of those they had, only the goats and buffaloes were economically productive.

Six households had members in military or non-military employment in India. One set up a tea stall in the settlement. Four others sold some edibles in weekly markets. Two followed their traditional caste occupation (tailoring and blacksmithing). However mostly these activities had little impact on the settlement economy.

All households contributed agricultural labor. Thirty-two (53 percent) households also worked at carpentry and construction to make huts and sheds for people and cattle, felling trees in the forest, chopping them into manageable logs, and transporting them to the houses of employers or making utensils from the wood; two households did bricklaying; one pulled a rickshaw, carried headloads, made baskets, or volunteered for household duties in the houses of the richer farmers; those who established a patron-client relationship were even employed on a contract basis. Only eight households (14 percent) worked in agriculture alone.

Carpentry, construction and other work was uncertain in the area. Therefore, only 17 (28 percent) households were able to meet their food needs through the various sources of income discussed above (Table 3). The others depended on loans and supplemented their diet with tubers.

The need to eat tubers is a sign of extremely serious economic conditions in Nepal. The tuber that they used was a type of yam (bhyakur) with a somewhat bitter taste. It was generally disliked and those households that could avoided them. But for the landless it was the difference between living and dying of starvation.

A total of 49 households were in debt (Table 4). Analysis of the debt pattern and the system of payback reveals the mechanisms operating to erode their prosperity even in the case of land distribution.

Table 3. Making a Living

Household Classification	Number of Households	Dependency Ratio (%)	Mean family Size
Capable	17 (28.3)	70.7	4.6
Incapable	43 (71.7)	111.0	6.2
Total	60 (100.0)	100.5	5.8

* Parentheses indicates percentages.
Dependency Ratio is the ratio of economically inactive to economically active members of the community, expressed as a percentage.

Source: Field Survey

Table 4. Debt in the Forest Settlement

Purpose of debt	Households Number	Percent
Bribe for land only	22	45.3
Bribes for land and to meet family needs	20	40.4
No relation between debt and land/food requirements	7	14.3
Total debtors	49	100.0

Source: Field Survey

When the Forest Settlement Committee began its activities in 1981, rumors circulated among the landless that every household that wanted land should present at least NRs.500 to the Committee Chairman. Priority would be given in registration and land area on the basis of the amount paid. The source of the rumor is still unknown, but at the time it created the problem of having to raise money.

Twelve households refused to pay any money. Two raised it through the sale of property such as wives' jewelry. Another four saved their wages. The rest depended on loans from local money lenders. Whether the chairman received the money or not is also unknown, but 48 households noted some

payment to local agents. Table 5 shows the number of households and the amount of money they paid out.

The method of payback of loans is interesting. Before giving loans, the money lenders determined the potential price of land after it had been registered. Then they prepared a bond of debt in such a way that each NRs.100 of loan could claim one katha (20 kathas equals 1.68 acres) of land if the debt could not be paid on time. All the sample households, except two, were put under such an obligation. Thus a bond was created between the money lenders and the land even before it officially existed. Any chance of prosperity that the resettled peasants may have had was taken from them before they even acquired land in their own names.

Table 5. Money Paid to Officials

Amount paid (NRs.)	Households Number	Percent
Nothing	12	20.0
200	3	5.0
250	4	6.7
300	1	1.7
400	3	5.0
500	29	48.2
600	1	1.7
750	4	6.7
1000 + *	3	5.0
Total	60	100.0

* A few non-sample households paid more than NRs. 1000.
Source: Field Survey

Livelihood in Place of Origin

The landless were willing to bear economic hardships in the study area rather than return to their places of origin, perhaps because the situation was worse in their places of origin. Of the 60 households, only 32 (53 percent) had held land, mostly ranging between 0.5 to 5 hals (1 hal of land is that area which can be ploughed by a team of oxen in one labor day) (Table 6). There were not more than three households with more than five hals of land. All

except two had pakho (dry) land. Of the two exceptions one had only khet (wet) and another had both khet and pakho.

Livestock raising was also limited in the settlers' places of origin. Eighteen (30 percent) households had a total of 39 animals--six young female buffaloes, 18 cows, bullocks and calves, and 15 goats. Two cows and three buffaloes were not owned by the peasants who raised them. Livestock farming was an insignificant source of income.

Four Newar households conducted some business as an alternative source of livelihood. They were involved in buying or selling food at public fairs. They also had a tea stall in their homes. One had no land and the others had not more than one hal. Their business efforts could never be really successful due to lack of capital.

In terms of education, 43 heads of households were illiterate and the rest had been educated only up to lower secondary school. Poor physical condition and a lack of knowledge prevented them from joining military and non-military service here or abroad, where they may have made a living. Only six members from five households were involved in such activities before migrating to the Tarai. After a few years of employment they all had to return to the lives they had before. One of the households that was not involved in wage labor had abundant land and cattle. The other two did not specify their occupation (Table 7).

Caste occupation provided income for some households. Nine households supplemented their incomes through such activities. They were Kami, Sunar, Damai, and Sarki activities. Others did not because they did not have skills or equipment.

All these activities, because of their seasonal and uncertain nature, were not adequate to maintain the livelihood of 29 (48.3 percent) households. They were in debt in their place of origin as well as in the new settlements, just to fulfill their daily needs (Table 8).

Table 6. Land Ownership and Households in Place of Origin

Land Area (hals)	No Land	Own Land	Own & Share-cropped	Own & Serma*	Serma	Total
Nothing	28	-	-	-	-	28 (47)
To one	-	11	-	-	4	15 (25)
To two	-	8	-	2	-	10 (17)
To three	-	2	1	-	1	4 (7)
Over three	-	3	-	-	-	3 (5)
Total	28	24	1	2	5	60(100)

* Serma was a rent system in the form of gifts to the owner. The cultivator had no rights and was at the owner's mercy.

Source: Field Survey

Table 7. Paid Labor

Types of works	Number	Percent
Agricultural Labor and Other	52	86.6
Masonry, Construction and Carpentry	2	3.4
Construction & Carpentry	28	46.7
Construction, Carpentry and Others	11	18.3
Others	1	1.7
Agriculture Labor only	10	16.6
Household Servants	5	8.3
No engagement in labor	3	5.0
Total	60	100.0

Source: Field Survey

Table 8. Methods of Repaying Loans

Ways of payment	Number	Percent
Sale of land and cattle	16	26.6
Working as servant in creditors house	11	18.3
Sales and Working	1	1.7
Income from other sources	1	1.7
Total	19	48.3

Source: Field Survey

Motivation for Leaving Place of Origin

As was mentioned earlier, only 27 (45 percent) of the households owned land in their place of origin. Seventeen (63 percent) had to sell this to repay debts. This means that landlessness became a major problem for 50 (83 percent) households at the time of their migration. One household's land was washed away in the monsoon. These are the reasons why so many people migrated when they heard that there was land available in the Tarai. Also mentioned were unpayable debts, land sales, inadequate land, lack of job opportunity, low income, and natural calamities.

Why did they go to the Tarai? Twenty-four households mentioned their hopes of finding land through resettlement programs in the area. Twenty others stayed because they saw land being distributed to landless peasants when they worked as road construction laborers near the area. Some others, arriving after the program's activities, encroached upon the forest area and hoped to be able to register it as their own one day. Three just followed their friends (Table 9).

Table 9. Reasons for Moving to the Tarai

Factors	Households	Percent
Hope of achieving land through resettlement program	24	40.0
Saw Company distributing land to road construction workers	20	33.3
Because their friend did so	3	5.0
All the above	11	18.3
Not specified	2	3.4
Total	60	100.0

Source: Field Survey

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Many rural households in Nepal are underemployed, unemployed or landless. This is due to historical land tenure systems and related agrarian misconduct coupled with population growth, land fragmentation and little chance or scope in extra agricultural employment. In the 1950s, HMG/N initiated land reform and resettlement programs in an attempt to improve the situation. However, land reform has been ineffective, and resettlement schemes have not resolved but induced the inflow of marginal and landless peasants from the hills to the Tarai for land. This was the case with the studied households. The outmigration of these households from their original settlement was due mainly to the lack of employment opportunities to support their meager agricultural or other income. They came to the study area hoping to get land through the Company Resettlement Program.

The incapability of this program to resettle all the land hungry peasants led them to encroach upon the forest developing a number of forest settlements. At times they were scrutinized and assured of resettlement by government officials for political reasons but the families were evicted, and their houses burned, after the referendum and subsequent general election. A small portion of them were transferred to Rewareta and area around for resettlement.

The land area taken from the forest was too small to support the people settled there. Crops were often destroyed or stolen and they had no recourse because the land was unregistered. These households, whether in forest settlements or after eviction, had to pursue other activities to maintain themselves. The highest sector of employment opportunity for them was agricultural labor but its seasonal nature and the small area of farm land owned by their patrons left them with limited opportunities. Livestock raising was hardly possible for the landless. Other employment opportunities were insignificant in terms of the income they would yield. Therefore, the peasants took loans. Because they lacked property it became harder for them to find willing money lenders. Because the forests are being gradually destroyed the availability of tubers is falling. The conditions for those transferred to Rewareta for resettlement were no better because the land was sandy and

without vegetation. Landlessness of peasants has increased with the increase in population.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward on the basis of the above conclusions:

- Resettlement alone will not solve the problem of landlessness. Migration to the Tarai should be stopped by generating more employment opportunities in the hills. Traditional techniques should be strengthened and modified so that peasants are more competitive through skill. Industries based on agriculture, livestock and horticulture should be encouraged. This will help to change the belief that agriculture is the only stable source of a livelihood.

- Those who have already migrated cannot be taken back to the hills. It is here that resettlement policy has to be clear and specific. If they are to remain, resettlement should be arranged on productive lands but not like that in Rewareta area. If they are to be moved, it should be to an area where alternative employment is available: where large scale government construction works operate, and taught new skills that would ensure their survival in the future.

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