

# NEPALESE INDIGENOUS LABOUR RELATIONS

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The first part of my argument you may be familiar from researchers studying "local knowledge" (Kloppenburg 1991), "indigenous knowledge" (Howes 1980; Brodentsha 1980) or sustainable agriculture (Berry 1977; Chambers 1983, 1989): local or indigenous knowledge is neglected but valuable resource. Like many researchers in environmental and sustainable agriculture studies, anthropologists complain that development planners neglect the role of local knowledge in Nepalese agricultural production. Such neglect of indigenous systems of agricultural production, especially relations of agricultural production, slow Nepal's development goals. I will elaborate on this theme as it applies to Nepal and my research sits in western Nepal in Jajarkot District shortly.

The second theme of my presentation involves the role of women in local knowledge. Researchers writing about labour relations practices fail to involve women in written description and analysis. A quick review of the literature on *jajmani* for South Asia will convincingly demonstrate that we have little understanding of what *jajmani* duties fall upon female potters, tailors, pipemakers, grain threshers, and leatherworkers.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps these women make artisanal crafts, collect payments for services and decide whether to continue traditional craftwork, learn a new skill or migrate seasonally to India for labour. But since no one has concentrated on their work and lives, we just don't know.<sup>3</sup> Judith Shapiro (1982) points out the 'perils of markedness': since it is the male sex which writers use as the referent, women's roles are subsumed under descriptions of Men's work (see also P. Caplan; A. Weiner; M. Strathern). Women in rural Nepal perform many tasks outside of their homes, such as artisanal work, food processing, and caring for livestock. Before we can understand the socioeconomic situation in Nepal, we should focus less on the work and roles of high caste males and more on the work and contributions to the economy women and low caste. If development experts neglect both women's productive contributions and indigenous knowledge, they are bound to come up with a wrong understanding of a proper Nepalese development agenda.<sup>4</sup>

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Finally, I make my third point before discussing labour relations in Jajarkot District. *Jajmani* is not a "system." In Jajarkot, "*jajmani* system" is not a self-contained institution but merely one important part of a network of labour exchange practices (see Guillet 1980; Erasmus 1956). The practice of *jajmani*, where grain from landlords is given to artisans in exchange for their wares and services, is bound up with other labour exchange practices which in English gloss as "reciprocal labour" (*parima*), "sharecropping" (*adhiya* or *kuT*), "labour parties" or group labour (*baure, nogar*), "unfree labour" or "debt labour" (*hali*), "free labour" which can be wage or non-hyphen wage (*jyaala*), "gift labour" (*sahayog* or *madat*), governmental conscripted or obligatory labour (*sramadhan, begar, hanseri*), and slavery or a period of indentured servitude (*kamara, kam garaune*). My third point is this: It is these distinct yet overlapping indigenous labour relations which contribute to the definition of Nepalese social statuses.

TWO TYPES OF LABOUR RECIPROCITY:  
*PARIMA* "SIMPLE LABOUR RECIPROCITY" AND *BAURE* "GROUP  
LABOUR"

One of the interesting things about Nepalese labour reciprocity (*parima*) is the inability of researchers to come to a clear consensual definition. Hiroshi Ishii, for example, states that "*Parima* is a form of one to one labour exchange" (1982: 48), while other researchers imply that labour reciprocity is a group effort, a form of cooperation, or a means of combining forces during peak labour periods. Barry Bishop states that *parima* is a strategy of combining "forces in a system of reciprocal or exchange labour" and notes that careful scheduling has to be done in order to assure that the supply of the number of women (literally "planter" or *roparni*) equals the amount of work needed (1990:192). L. Caplan too, says, "At peak season, moreover, to cope better with these (agricultural) duties several households combine their labour to work in large teams on a direct exchange basis (here called *hade-parima*)" (1975:119). In addition to Hindu caste farmers, Magar ethnic groups also use labour reciprocity (Hitchcock 1965; Molnar 1980). Hitchcock begins a chapter in his monograph on Magar life with the opening paragraph about *porima* or *orima porima*: "The most common kind of work group is formed on the basis of what is called *porima* or *orima porima*..." (1966:85). Hitchcock's assertion is based on fieldwork done in 1955-56 and represents one of the earliest accounts by a Western researcher.<sup>5</sup>

The semantic boundaries constituting labour reciprocity (*parima*) are open to interpretation. In Jajarkot District I have heard *parima* defined and practiced in a number of elastic variations depending on the needs of the practitioner.

At various times *parima* is a relationship of one to one, or household to household, or it can constitute a village work gang. *Parima* and *baure* stretch to the boundaries of their definitional space among other forms of labour such as free labour (known as *jyaala*) and bonded labour (known as *haliya* or the *kamaiya* system).

I define *parima* as a practice where at least two households engage in a relationship of simple reciprocity which is marked by egalitarianism and no other in-kind or cash exchange. The relationship ideally endures for at least several years and households engage in *parima* practice with their neighbors during rice transplanting and other labor intensive periods. Neighborhood participants first coordinate *parima* fieldwork in an effort to determine the order of fieldworks and amount of days each family donates.

For a definition of group labor (*baure*), in the next section I analyze a conversation with a farmer from northern Jajarkot. I want to first explain that *baure* in Jajarkot appears in several different manifestations. In one form it appears like daily wage labor. High caste landowners call workers and pay them food and money on a daily basis. In another form it appears as delayed reciprocal labor. One family will call neighbors and they are only given food with the expectation that the workers can call on their neighbors for labor in the future. And in another area of Jajarkot *baure* acts essentially like bonded labor. The *baure* worker labours a specified number of days per month and receives a small percentage of the harvest plus daily food.

### SEMANTIC OVERLAPPING BOUNDARIES OF RECIPROCAL LABOUR, GROUP LABOUR, AND SHARECROPPING

Turning to an ethnographic definition, Mr. Gharti<sup>6</sup> in northern Jajarkot District explained the difference in his region between *parima* and group labour (*baure*). In group labour (*baure*) labour is donated for large labour intensive projects. Mr. Gharti explains his definitional boundaries in the following conversation:

G: ....We do labour reciprocity (*parima*) for only 1 or 2 days. For [big] work, there's *baure*. We call one person and their people come and on a daily basis we use *baure*....We don't use *baure* for small work but for big work. When they work they eat, they just eat and leave ...we give *baure* workers only food and not money.<sup>7</sup>

There is noticeable overlap between labour reciprocity and group labour. In a field of labour forms, group labour (*baure*) takes up from labour reciprocity when the household needs help that takes many days, requires no skilled

labour, does not need to be repaid immediately, and where food not money is the proper remuneration. In addition, group labour (*baure*) is caste and gender specific, meaning that low caste men work typically for high castes and division of labour by gender follows traditional Nepalese form. There is not such a caste rule surrounding simple labour reciprocity.

J: Last time [you used group labour (*baure*)] did many people come? Who are they?

G: Blacksmith caste families come here and Leatherworker caste members also; low castes come for *baure*. If we get them work for 5 or 10 days then they will take wages [not just food] ...we give them alcohol (jaR: fermented grain to drink), bread (*roTi*: bread/chappatis), and cooked pulses or vegetables (*tarkari*). Curd also, but we don't give curd to Blacksmith and Leatherworker caste families<sup>8</sup>.

In this region of northern rural Jajarkot "wages" refer to payment in grain at about two to four pounds of unhusked grain per day or to cash wages between \$.30-.75 per day depending on the work.

The types of work common to group labour (*baure*) take a noticeably masculine form:

J: What work did they do as group labour (*baure*) work?

G: They do plowing, digging (*gorne*), roofing (*ghar dhune*), cutting wood (*khaat kaatne*), carrying stone (*dunga bokne*).

Men tended to perform group labour (*baure*) while women undertake labour reciprocity, doing labour intensive tasks such as rice transplanting, weeding, and setting corn stalks, and even cooking for crews of workers. Mr. Khatri, a tenant I interviewed during rice transplanting, needed 15 women for rice transplanting, 6-8 men and 4 pair of bulls for turning the soil, and 3 women to cook meals.

The relationship between labour giver and receiver rarely is equal, yet owner-worker relationships are the bedrock of Nepal's development process. The lands on which development projects take place are often tenured properties with low castes and women engaged in labour exchange practices.

In the following excerpt I asked M. Khatri about sharecropping. I requested that he join myself and his new landlord for drinks and snacks. The meeting was unusual in that I normally did not interview a landlord and tenant together. The conversational exchanges between tenant and landlord highlighted the unequal relationship in subtle ways.

- Researcher: Even though you're sharecropping, do you also pay fieldhands? How do you accomplish this? Through *parima* or?...
- (Embedded question by landlord: Why do you spend the rice so quickly?)
- Tenant: Because we eat too much. If we eat 7 or 8 *rotis* then we might eat up to 2 kilograms (*mana*) of grain.)
- Tenant: No, I needed to get help through *parima* in the past, but this year I couldn't get any help through *parima*. I say here truly, I had Rs. 1000 before the planting, but after ward I found I had only Rs. 300 left.
- Landlord: How did you call the women for planting our rice land?  
[Question went unanswered.]  
(Embedded question by Landlord's Friend: Who *paid* the *roparnis*? We or he [tenant]?)
- Landlord: We paid them Rs. 10 plus tip (*hilauri*).

Rs. 27 = approximately U.S. \$1.00 in 1990

I called the sharecropper to discuss how he managed to do sharecropping and hire workers. The domination - subordination of the landlord - sharecropper relationship influenced the conversation, with the sharecropper defending himself. In reply to the Landlord's first question, the sharecropper said that he eats "too much ...," yet he contradicts this statement by saying they eat 'up to 2 manas of rice' per day. This is not overeating but accepted the standard amount a farmer should eat per day. Thus the tenant is actually defending himself by saying that he doesn't waste grain for consumption.

In the second embedded question, the landlord's friend questions the truthfulness of the tenant. After the tenant says he spend Rs. 700 in the recent transplant of rice, the landlord replies that it is he, not the tenant, who pays the *roparni*, female transplanters (fourteen female planters working for five days amounts to Rs. 700). It is doubtful that the landlord paid for the workers, however. Normally it is the sharecropper who will pay workers since the sharecropper assumes responsibility for all expenses. The sharecropper hires bullocks, labour, collects and applies fertilizers, plants, weeds and plows, and harvests the crop. The only input the landowner normally gives is one-half contribution of seed reserved from harvest for the next seasonal planting.

Mr. Khatri responded that he couldn't get help through *parima* that season due to a recent switch in labour exchange relations from "*parima*" to daily labour. Farmers chose to work for wages rather than reciprocate their labour

with Mr. Khatri. There are several reasons for this. There are many commodities to be purchased, such as clothes, liquor, paper, and medicines. Workers, especially women (the majority of *parima* workers), have fewer opportunities to earn cash since most don't migrate or trade on a large scale. There are increased opportunities in the economy to purchase goods portered from the Nepalese lowlands and India, whereas grains only can be grown, consumed, stored or fed to guests. Cash represents surplus; grain merely subsistence.

My choices of ethnographic example highlight two points. First, Nepalese agricultural work relations are holistic and overlapping. I start out talking to Mr. Khatri, for example, about his *adhiyan* sharecropping arrangement. Within our talk we find that *parima* is bound up within the sharecropping practices. Second, the *adhiya* example highlights the fact that women use work relations in agriculture, since they do a host of field work, food processing artisanal work, and labour exchanges such as simple labour exchange and gifts of labour. Researchers need to recognize women workers in their discourse about land and labour relations.

## QUANTITATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Quantitative data highlights patterns of labour relations such as plowing, hiring plow hands, wage labour, hiring wage labourers and migrating for labor. As a generalization, low caste households work in high caste homes and fields. In my Rural Socioeconomic Survey (SES) 1990, in a sample of 57 households from northern Jajarkot District, 84% of low caste households (N=21) had members who were free or bonded laborers, compared to just 9% of high caste households (N=5). In reverse, 47% of high caste households (N=27) employ laborers, but no low caste households responded that they had hired laborers. Low caste households occasionally also need to obtain extra-familial labor. When low cast households need labour, they resort to *parima* (44% of sample) and gift labour (*sahayog*) (72%).

Labor reciprocity (*parima*) and gift labor (*sahayog*) are egalitarian and employ no money in the work relationship. Low caste families rely on simple and delayed reciprocity (*parima*, *sahayog*), partly because they cannot afford to pay others to work in their fields and partly because their fields are only about 5-6 ropani (.25 hectare) on average. High caste families rely on reciprocity, and in addition, group and daily wage labor, since they can afford to pay workers. Thus both low and high caste neighbors obtain extra-familial labour, though they tend to do so in two different ways.

**Table 1: Selected Standards of Living  
Comparison by Caste Strata in Rural Jajarkot Region<sup>9</sup>**

Category of Data	Caste Strata		Unit of Measurement
	High N = 32 households	Low N = 25 households	
<b>I. Household</b>			
Household Size	6.53	7.88	Persons in H.H
Deaths 8.75	2.90	4.08	Under 5 years/h.h.
Education- Male	2.50	0.04	Total # yrs of males
Education-Female <i>household</i>	8.75	2.88	or females <i>in</i>
<b>II. Agriculture</b>			
Land Holding	13.84	5.57	Ropani irrigated/non
Grain Production	17.31	7.89	Muri
Vege/Fruit Production	13.09	7.76	No. species grown
Large Livestock	11.06	5.16	Adult cow, buffalo, pig goat, or sheep
<b>III. Income</b>			
Grain/Livestock	2122	522	Rupees per year
Labour	1699	5014	1989/90: Rs.28 =
U.S.1			
Trade	10397	1208	Rupees per year
Gov't/ Other	2740	433	Rupees per year
Total	16958	7167	Rupees per year
<b>IV. Labour Practice</b>			
% Ploughs	6.3%	68.0%	
% Employs for plough	21.9%	0.0%	
% Bonded/free laborer	9.4%	84.0%	
% Employer of labour	71.9%	44.0%	
% Does exchange labour	71.9%	44.0%	
% Does gift labour to neighbor	56.3%	72.0%	
% Does migrant labour	28.1%	52.0%	

Standards of living in general are quantitatively poorer for low caste than for high caste households throughout Nepal. In Jajarkot, households are

larger, yet there is higher infant mortality, less education, less land, less livestock, less production of vegetables and fruit, and less income. Unfortunately, in my summer 1993 reevaluations of the village in the northern region of Jajarkot, it appears from preliminary survey analysis that low caste household incomes are decreasing.

In order to survive, castes rely on not only patronage in the traditional *jajmani* or *bista* system but on *baure*, *parima*, and other indigenous labour relations. If real incomes of low castes do decrease, there should be an increasing dependence on non-monetary labor relations.

### Conclusions

David Guillet wrote in an analysis of Andean labour, "Observers of the Andean countryside never fail to be struck by the persistence of 'co-operative' forms of labour recruitment among peasants" (1980:151). In Nepal, labour exchange practices, including simple labour exchange, group labour, labour gifting, bonded and free labour, and *jajmani*, are all practiced in rural regions because they are integral to agricultural production.

The problem is that development planners come from foreign countries, like the United States and even India, where they know little or nothing about indigenous labour relations. As a result indigenous labour relations don't enter into the development project or even into their ideas about what constitutes good development for Nepal.

Development planners are taught that Western standards of development are appropriate, although this assumption is not explicit. If western ethnocentric development standards are the norm, Nepal has been subjected to decades of misguided and inappropriate foreign aid.<sup>10</sup> Could this be the reason Nepal's development history has been such a struggle? Could it be that Western styles of development failed to see the real relations of agricultural production and instead constantly imposed an individualistic cost and benefits approach only appropriate in a capital intensive society dominated by capitalist relations of agricultural production? I believe this is the case.

It wasn't until the last decade or two that anthropologists and other interested social scientists began to understand the nature of Eurocentric concepts of what development stands for (Davis 1977; Higgot 1981; Brodensha 1980). I believe it stands for a belief in the farmer as a male provider for a nuclear family, a person who can read and think logically about alternative choices, a person who has access to potentially unlimited amounts of information, a person unconstrained by caste or even class position, a person willing to give up old inefficient practices for such modern practices as producing a cash crop, a person preferring the use of cash over grain and labour transactions because it is more efficient and precisely accountable, a



person unconstrained by political factions and willing to work for the good of his (I say "his" intentionally) community and country. And why is this all Eurocentric? Do not Nepalese share some of these same beliefs? Yes and No. No, because Eurocentric concepts of a perfect world, of Utopian development style, stems from centuries of European and American histories, the renaissance or "burning time" as it is also called, from Latin classes and Latin rules or etiquette such as Cicero's *De Officiis* (meaning 'About Social Responsibility') which enjoins its audience to put 'God first, country second, family third and thyself fourth.' The Eurocentric project of development aims at efficiently transforming nature.

Our goal in the 1990s is not to take Eurocentric 'hands off' and leave Nepal to its destiny, or a policy of isolationism. Rather I advocate using and appreciating Nepalese indigenous labour practices as basic alternative starting points in their own managed development projects. As D. Guillet and others around the world have shown, sharecropping, free and bonded labour, simple labour reciprocity, loan giving and other relations of agricultural production are universal. They occur everywhere, they are ubiquitous. But the local manifestations of sharecropping, group labour, reciprocal labour, and so forth are entirely and uniquely Nepalese. It is this legacy, pre-dating the eighteenth century unification of the state of Nepal, which must inform Nepal's development process. Farmers know what *adhiya* is: sharecropping. And they know how to incorporate it into a development project. They know what *parima*, simple labour exchange, is and they will incorporate it into development projects whether it is knowingly or unknowingly part of the development plan. I therefore advocate using an approach where development planners are cognizant of the role of indigenous labour relations and women's roles in agricultural development. The next Nepalese Small Farmer's Development Plan or Integrated Rural Development Plan which actively pursues the use of local knowledge and women's work, and which acknowledges an indigenous system of labour practices will be more successful.

### Notes

1. For support of this research I am grateful to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Fulbright-Hays program at the U.S. Department of Education.
2. In India and regions outside Nepal the following researchers have studied or commented on *jajmani* with little accounting for women's *jajmani* work (see Bibliography): Baboo, Bailey, Benson, Breman, P. Caplan, Epstein, Gough, Harper, Kolenda, Lewis, Mencher, Miller

- (mentions that pottery caste females 'paint the pots'), Neal, Opler, Orenstein, Pocock, and Rowe.
3. C. Wiser gives good anecdotal information on low caste women's duties in *jajmani* (1963 [1930]). Mary Cameron focuses on low caste women's work and recently finished her dissertation.
  4. The question of why development in Nepal has largely been difficult and some say a failure is an important but tangential point to this paper. Bista 1991 has one of the more recent holistic explanations, citing *afno manche* (nepotism, patronage in general) and fatalism as two endemic ethics which hinder Nepalese development.
  5. Hitchcock reported that "porima" means to "lend an arm" which contradicts the meaning given to me, "after me" (from *pachhi ma* [*> pari ma*]). Personally, I think that when villagers are asked for a translation, sometimes they make educated guesses. Perhaps both glosses have historical significance as meanings for *porima* and *parima*.
  6. I use the English "Mr." to denote the Nepali post-position "-ji". The Hindi "Shree" is not commonly used in Jajarkot and sounds awkward to me.
  7. Mr. Gharti's definition of *baure* differs from descriptions of *baure* further south in Jajarkot, where landowners pay workers Rs. 10-25/day. This makes *baure* more like daily wage labor, *jyaala*.
  8. A Nepalese variation of Hindu caste laws on food restriction: high castes won't give low castes pure foods such as curd.
  9. The subset of 52 households comes from a larger body of 120 rural socioeconomic surveys. The 52 households are geographically located within three *Gaun Bikas Samiti*, or sub-sections of Jajarkot District. The 68 households in the rural SES come from a western region of the district with slightly different socioeconomic conditions.
  10. In Jajarkot the earliest development arguably begins with the building of the District Offices (*Darbar*) in A.D. 1894. The next building project of distinction, using Scottish engineering expertise, was the suspension bridge to Rukum District, built circa 1927/28 A.D. The question of what constitutes the beginnings of modern development in Nepal, and according whose definition, is an important question though tangential to the elaboration of indigenous labour practices.

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