



The Landless Sharecroppers of Dumraha Village: A Case Study on Food Sufficiency among Tharu Community

Lalit Chaudhari

Field Researcher, The Nielsen Company Nepal, Ravi Bhavan, Kathmandu

Email for correspondence: lchaudhari@gmail.com

Abstract

This research analyzed the situation of sharecroppers and their food sufficiency level in forty Tharu community households in Dumraha village of Sunsari. Household interviews, focus group discussions, key informants survey and observations are led to fulfill the research objective. Among ninety-one landless sharecroppers forty households were selected for the study applying the equation. The landlessness Tharu people are compelled to do agriculture or non-agriculture labor besides farming. The Tharu communities are engaged as sharecropper to face the challenges of food self-sufficiency. Some of the sharecroppers are found to be the previous owner of the land. The practice of sharecropping is fully based on mutual relationship between landlord and sharecroppers, where they agree in sharing the output equally. Sharecropping has helped the landless Tharus to be food self sufficient.

Key words: Tharu community, landless, sharecropping, food sufficiency and copying strategy.

Background

The dominant occupation of Nepal is agriculture. So, the major population of rural, urban is involved in agriculture associated with forest and water conservation. The majority of Nepali population depends on land for their livelihood. People access to good land is being difficult on one hand and land prices are increasing day by day on other. Unequal socio-economic condition, growth of population and little availability of unoccupied land make access to land difficult (Karki, 2002). Though the GDP from agriculture sector has dropped to 31.6 percent from 36.6 percent, non-agriculture sector has gone up from 63.4 to 68.3 percent (MoF, 2016). Still in average 65 percent of population is occupied in agriculture. The average land holding of 0.65 ha indicates the skewed land distribution among the poor leading to landlessness and the study of landlessness remains an important aspect of national agenda (CBS, 2011). Landlessness caused by various reasons has now become an acute problem in remote areas contributing to the urban poverty. About 24.5 percent households are absolutely landless and about 32.1 percent households are agriculturally landless. Out of 54, 23,297 families, 65.6 percent rely on agriculture for their living. 5 percent farmers do not own any land but still are involved in farming (CBS, 2011).

The total land distribution in mountain is 15 percent out of which 11 percent is agricultural land. Similarly, 68 percent of hilly area consists of 40 percent agricultural land and the 17 percent of Terai region consist of 49 percent of agricultural land. As Terai hold prosperous land with easily accesses area and agriculture facility like irrigation, tractors are readily available. The distribution of population in Nepal is 16.6 percent Kshetri, 12.18 percent Brahman, 7.12 percent Magar, 6.56 percent Tharu among others. Tharu is in the second largest among indigenous group. They mainly inhabited in the Terai belt. In the past, "Terai was relatively isolated and abundant due to malaria. Tharus were the aboriginal settlers of the Terai" (Majumdar, 1942) Then, sifting

cultivation was the main feature of livelihood, which helps them to possess a lot of land. The findings showed that they are living there for 330 years and had spent average 5 generations. The landless Tharus follow the sharecropping for their livelihood as they possess only agricultural knowledge. On the other hand, the landlords do possess land but cannot manage the farming due to scarcity of labor and other managerial hassles. So, sharecropping is win-win situation for both landowner and the land less farmers.

Sharecropping system had different terms and conditions between landlords and sharecroppers. In the past, the agricultural production was divided as 2/3 proportion to the land lord and 1/3 proportion to the peasant. But, the Land Act 1964 did not allow the landlords to take more than half of the total agriculture production where the output was to be shared equally. The most common form of agreement was found to be under this legal provision. The agreement also mentioned the equal sharing of byproducts however; it was found that they were used according to the circumstances incurred. Sometimes, the grain products were not only shared equally but also the byproducts. In some cases, if the landlords did not want the byproducts like hay, then all the agricultural byproduct was used by the peasant.

Literature Review

Before the 1950's, Terai was heavily infected with malaria. At that time, Tharu were only the people who cleared the forest and rehabilitated the settlement. That is why Tharu are considered as "Pioneer of civilization in the Terai" (Chaudhary, 2008; Panjiyar, 2000). Tharu have great contribution in the eradication of malaria from the Terai region. They have spent generations in the area that is why they have seven times more malaria resistance than any other people of Nepal (Modiano et al., 1991). They are the aboriginal people of Terai extending from Jhapa in the east to Kanchanpur in the west facing different problems regarding landlessness in varying degree. After the eradication of malaria, the Tharu people became landless. It is due to the cheating of Pahari people, linkage of Pahari with the government officials, shy nature and innocent behavior of the Tharu and state policy (Guneratne, 2002). Tharu have lived in Nepal's Terai for more than 600 years and were probably the first inhabitants of the region (Cox, 1994 as cited in Karki, 2002). The findings from the scholars, indicate that were living in the Terai for the centuries and they were the ancestors of present Tharus of Nepal.

Tharus are spread in 22 districts from Jhapa in the east to Kanchanpur in west and in the inner Terai district. Tharu are second largest indigenous community of Nepal and constitute 6.56 percent of the 28 million populations (CBS, 2011). Tharu mostly live in Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari, Saptari, Bara, Parsa, Chitwan, Rupendehi, Kapilvastu, Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur districts. There are also several sub-groups within the Tharu population with variations in language, dialect, culture and religion (Dahit, 2009, p. 29-37). Tharu also live in Nepal's Bhitri Madhesh (Inner Terai) such as Udayapur and Surkhet districts (Dahit, 2009, p.13; Gunaratne, 2002, pp. 26-27). Before the unification of Nepal, Chaudhari were assigned from local Tharus as Jamindar of the village to collect the land tax (Regmi, 1976). At that time, Chaudhari enjoyed the land grants and the judiciary power as well. The Chaudhari were loyal and responsive to customary practice and receive several land grants. Hem Chaudhari of Saptari district had alone received 21 Lal Mohar (red seal) during Shah Dynasty (Panjiyar, 2000). But during the Rana period, Chaudhari were subsequently replaced by hill migrants as Jamidars with the land grants as

birta and jagir. Birta- the rewarded land to an individual who is allowed to collect land tax and manage land with his/her birta and need not to pay taxes to the state. Jagir - the granted land to individual who serve to the government in lieu of their remuneration. Taxes were paid and the state had the right to forfeit the grant. Land is considered as important productive resources and it also determines the social hierarchy and political power (Karki, 2002; Regmi, 1976).

Research Objectives

- To analyze factors affecting debt and landlessness in the study area.
- To examine status and impact of sharecropping practices in the study area.
- To assess coping strategies of the landless farmers against household food insufficiency.

Methodology

This study follows both exploratory and descriptive methods. The survey method was conducted for the collection of primary data with mostly closed-ended questions and few open-ended questions. The secondary data is collected from government officials of VDC, DDC, Office of Land Reform Management and other concerned organizations. While collecting data personal observation; key informant surveys (KIS), focus group discussions (FGD) and informal talk with stakeholders is done. Dumraha village was selected purposively as the study area as highest number of landless Tharus among nine wards was settling there. They had a meager land for the house only, which was not registered; some had built the houses on public land, others at the road side or river banks. Besides agriculture livestock rearing is an important feature of subsistence agriculture in the research site. Random sampling technique was used to identify the landless farmers. The sample size, for this study was determined by using the formula as mentioned below. A total of 40 landless households were determined with the formula among 91 landless household. The sample was determined at 5 percent significance level or 95 percent confidence level.

$$\text{Sample size (n)} = \frac{NZ^2PQ}{NE^2 + Z^2PQ}$$

Where,

N = total number of landless households (91)

Z = the value of standard variant at 95 percent confidence level (1.96)

E = acceptable error (0.05)

P = the expected rate of occurrence of the attributes (95 percent i.e. 0.95)

Q = the expected rate of non-occurrence of the attributes (100 – 95 = 5 percent i.e. 0.05)

$$\text{Sample size (n)} = \frac{91 (1.96)^2 \times 0.95 \times 0.05}{91 \times (0.05)^2 + (1.96)^2 \times 0.95 \times 0.05}$$

The Field

The research area, Dumraha VDC extends between 26°23' north to 26°29' north latitude and 87°5' east to 87°7' east longitude at an altitude of 243 meters above sea level. Its elevation extends between 205m to 244m from sea level. It falls in the central part of Sunsari district. This VDC covers an area of 3509 hector (CBS, 2011). Household size was found to be varied in the study area from 3 to 8 members. It is found that average family size was 5.4 which were more than

the national figure 4.9 (CBS, 2011). Economically active populations of 15-59 years were selected for the study which made 90.2 percent of the households. About 72.5 percent of the respondents among the sample households were illiterate. Only 27.5 percent were literate. Agriculture is the major occupation of the people and they were also involved in different non-farm activities for the livelihood. Livestock rearing is also a common feature. The main cereal crops (rice, wheat and lentil) were divided equally between landlords and the sharecroppers. In some cases, except the main crops, the sharecropper takes away other crops.

According to Tenancy Right Acquisition Act (TRAA) 1952, land was given to those people who had the record of paid tax. Similarly, some Patwari who had got the record of tax payers also got some lands. Tharu who had good relations with Mukhiya, were assigned as Patwari to facilitate the tax collection tasks and got the land but those who did not have access to power remain landless. After eradication of Malaria in 1950 and launching of resettlement program, people living in hilly region started to settle in Terai.

Findings: Debt and Landlessness

The community based organization, BASE (Backward Society Education) survey claims that “every bonded laborer in far-west Nepal is Tharu and that approximately 97% of the landlords are Brahmins, Kshatriyas or Thakuris” (Cox 1990, p. 11). According to McDonough (1984), “where in the 1912 revenue settlement most of the landlords were Tharu, by the late 1960s the great majority of landlords were hill migrants”. Moreover, around 90 percent of land cultivated by Tharu tenants belonged to hills people (Gunaratne, 2002). The study exposed that the average time span of being landlessness was about 40.6 years. The landless Tharu lived in public land for many years as they were only the settlers in the ancient time. They were involved in sifting cultivation due to which they had a lot of land. For those who had registered land where they lived on, gained the land ownership under the land reform program.

On the other hand, landlords registered the land on the name of sharecroppers later to be re-registered in the name of landlord, to hide from the land ceiling determined by the government. The legal provision of land ceilings did not become effective. The determining factors of landlessness vary from society to society. However, attempts were made mainly on the basis of information obtained in the field to find out the principal causes of landlessness in the Tharu community. Lack of education is a major cause of being landlessness among the Tharu of Dumraha. Among the respondents 30.0 percent said that illiteracy was the cause of landlessness. Similarly, 25.0 percent said that the unequal distribution of land is the cause of being landlessness. About 22.5 respondents said that they became landless as they have to sell the land to fulfill the daily needs. Similarly, 17.5 percent respondent said that distribution of land among brothers was also causes of being landlessness. However, 5 percent said that low production which ultimately forced them to sell the land to fulfill the daily expenses made them landlessness.

Status and Impact of Sharecropping

“Food security exists when all people at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (WFS, 1996). According to one estimate; worldwide around 852 million people are chronically hungry due to extreme poverty, while up to 2 billion people lack food security intermittently due to varying degrees of poverty. Food security has been taken as the basic element

of human rights. The Constitution of Nepal has also given recognition to food sovereignty, as a basic human right (NPC, 2015).

The major crops grown in the study area were paddy, wheat, lentil and potato. The mean productions of crops are found to be 74.5 mt. From paddy, the sharecroppers received 104.1 metric ton (mt) whose values amount to NRs 1,505,000. Rice was consumed mostly by all the people in the study area might be the cause of producing paddy in large amount. Similarly, they received 31.2 mt of wheat amounts to Rs 458,400 used for making bread, 7.9 mt of lentil amounts to NRs 558,600 used as Dal (pulses) as well as cash crop and 5.8 mt of potato amounts to NRs 138,720. The mean shared received from all these crops was 37.7 mt amounts to NRs 665,180. In the study area, the landlords provided land and all the labor input and the animal power was borne by the peasant. Any kind of labor needed for canal preparation, ploughing field, harvesting to storing was done by the sharecropper. But the shares of other agricultural inputs were different. Generally, there was equal share of seed. The use of compost fertilizer was not valued in monetary form. But the use of chemical fertilizer which has to be bought is shared in equal basis. Threshing costs were divided equally between landlord and the tenant. The landowner paid both water tax and land tax. The study shows that 94.0 percent of sharecroppers were having only one landlord. It might be due to the good relation between landlord and the sharecropper as both of them were from same Tharu community and sharecropping large part of land. Similarly, 4.0 percent of sharecroppers were engaged with two landlords and 2.0 percent with more than 3 landlords.

About 85 percent of the respondent are involved in sharecropping on others land whereas 15 percent in their own land which belongs to them previously. About 22.5 percent of respondent stated that main cause of sharecropping is that they had no other options than agriculture. About 37.5 percent respondents said that they were surviving through sharecropping. Similarly, 35 percent were doing sharecropping to get extra income for educating their children, health and other purpose. Likewise, 2.5 percent, 12.5 percent, 25 percent of respondents were involved in sharecropping for their livestock survivable, remaining time utilization and no other options than agriculture respectively. They could get agriculture byproduct like straw through sharecropping, which was useful for their animal husbandry and also made 15 percent profit by selling of hay, straw, etc.

Copying Strategies for Household Food Sufficiency

About 2.5 percent could survive up to 6 months with the production from the fields. Similarly, 7.5 percent could survive up to 9 months and 15.0 percent up to 12 months. Most of them could survive for more than 1 year which represents 75.0 percent of the total respondents. That landless farmer who was involved in sharecropping helps them to fulfill their basic needs through sharecropping. The food deficit household had to depend on extra source of income for their livelihoods. The level of food sufficiency is result of sharecropping. Access to sufficient land was seen as a determinant of the food sufficiency for a household. The more land is accessed by the sharecroppers, the production will be rise and the probability of food sufficiency is high. Chinta Narayan Chaudhary (46 years) one of the respondents had sharecropped for about 30 years. He had acute food insufficiency before his involvement in sharecropping. However, after sharecropping he had sufficient food and cash crops to support his family. With the bulk of money saved, he has bought 0.2 ha of land.

The coping strategies differed according to the status of the households. Those households who were relatively rich in resource endowment could adopt measures to increase in agriculture and livestock products through use of improved technology. But the poorer ones were dependent on measures such as casual labor and migration; internal or international, to fulfill the household's demand. This study showed that about 62.5 percent of respondent choose wage labor as coping strategy to meet food sufficiency. However, 40.0 percent of the respondent reported that they were engaged in animal husbandry to earn their livelihood. Similarly, 12.5 percent of respondent were engaged in small business and 20.0 percent in agriculture commodities to meet their food demand respectively. Mostly, landlords rent out land to those peasants through whom they feel safe or who might not claim for the land right according to law. So, the contract duration depended with the relations of the landlord and peasant. Peasants had to provide free labor to the landlord to please them. It is found that 77.5 percent of respondent had the oral contract for more than 5 years whereas only 2.5 percent had the tenure contract for 1-2 years. Similarly, 10.0 percent had the contract for 4-5 years followed by 5.0 percent for both 2-3 and 3-4 years respectively.

Conclusion

Agriculture was the major occupation of the sharecroppers of Dumraha. The main cereal crops were rice, wheat and lentil. Mustard was also grown for household use as well. Some of the farmers planted jute in summer in Bari for it's by product (Santhi) and cow-dung for making cakes (Guitha) were used for cooking meal. Sharecropping provided access to land resource through which they sustain their livelihood. For some sharecroppers, the agriculture productions were not sufficient to meet the year round to fulfill their needs. This sharecropping system helped to increase food sufficiency for the sharecropper which helped them in educating their children in private school and boosting their health. Those households who had the condition of food deficit, different coping strategy were found to meet the food in their deficit months. They managed food by working as a casual laborer, sale of agriculture and livestock products, small business, and agriculture commodities.

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