

The Tharus of Nepal: An Ethnic Community in Turmoil

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ABSTRACT

Tharu, an ethnic group in Nepal has been living in utter poverty and misery and this is due to the Kamaiya system, a form of bonded labour prevalent in Nepal. After long years of persecution under this system the law came to the rescue of the Kamaiyas. However it has failed to relieve the Tharus from the clutches of the Kamaiya system. What is worse is that the rehabilitation process of the so-called freed Tharus is also much short of being satisfactory. Vested interests of those in power, the nexus between the rich and the strong has perpetuated the Kamaiya system despite its abolition on paper. The paper highlights the state of the Tharus with the aim to sensitize the scholars, planners and the executors to wake up to the plight of the Tharus.

THARU: ORIGIN AND SPREAD

Tharu is an ethnic group of low land Nepal. They have been living in the Surkhet valley, Chitwan valley, Dang valley, Deukhuri valley, Sindhuli and Udyapur in Inner Terai Valleys of Nepal well as in the Terai plains on the border of Nepal and India. The Terai denotes the 'transitional' region stretching from west to east across the border of India from Mahendranagar in west to Darjeeling Nepal Neighbours area Kakarbhitta in Nepal. The region is located between the lower part of the Himalayas of the North and the Gangetic plains to the South (Tucker 1998). The Tharus constitute 6.5% (1533879) of the total population of Nepal (Source: Kendriya Tathyank Vibhag. Rashtriya Yojna Aayog Sachivalaya, Thapathali, Katmandu, 2064 B.S.). They come only after Hill Brahmins, Chhetris and Magars in terms of total population by caste/ethnic groups in Nepal (Chetri R.B in www.nepjol.info/index.php/OPSA/article). The concentration of Tharus in

India is mostly in Champaran district of Bihar and in Nainital district of Uttarakhand. The Tharu consider themselves to be Kshatriyas tracing their ancestry to Nepal's Rana Tharu (Divakar 1959; Kraskopff 1998). The Tharus also claim descent from the Sakya, the lineage of Gautam Buddha (Fuhrer 1972). The oldest reference concerning the Tharus is given by the Muslim scholar, Alberuni. He mentions "Taru people of very black colour and flat nose like the Turks" who lived in Tilwat (Tirhut or Mithila). Later, a Persian historian cited the 'th'rw' near the Meche and the Kooch but more towards the east in Kamrup or North Bengal. It is very much possible that people called Tharu have been living in the Terai for at least a millennium (Kraskopff, G: 1998). In the colonial period references to the Tharus are found in the works of Nesfield (1885), W.Crooke (1896) and S.Knowles (1889). The latter's 'Gospel in Gonda' (1889), contains first-hand information on the Dangaura Tharus of Gonda district by a Christian missionary. In India the tribes - Bhoksa and Tharu trace their history to a common origin. They both believe that their roots can be traced back to royal family on the female side. The Tharus believe that the ruler of Tarai was defeated by some invader in the ancient past. After the defeat the women of the royal family in order to save their honour from the invaders took shelter in the forests. They were accompanied by their attendants who were 'chamars' and 'sais' (low castes in the Hindu caste hierarchy). Intermarriage with these men gave rise to two distinct groups - Tharus and Bhoksas. The Tharus are the descendents of the 'chamars' and the Bhoksas descended from the 'sais'. The Bhoksas believe that their ancestor was Raja Jagatdeo of Rajasthan. He had two sons - Chittaur and Nandhaur (Hasan 1979.21). Tharus are believed to be the descendents of Chittaur and the Bhoksas the descendents of Nandhaur. The Tharus and the Bhoksa are of the view that Raja Jagatdeo and his followers came to Tarai to seek shelter from the Mughals after being defeated by them.

The spatial spread of the Tharus goes beyond the territorial divisions between the two nations of India and Nepal, and the two independent constituencies of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarkhand), within India (Srinivasan and Ranjan 2003-04:201). Political boundaries may have separated the two countries of Nepal and India but for the Nepalese Tharus and the Indian Tharus it is the Terai region that bears the roots of their

common identity. Terai in the past was an inhospitable tract. With its marshy climate and dense forests it was a breeding ground for the deadly mosquitoes. Amir Hasan writes – “In the Terai too, though the land is fertile and the rents are light, nothing can overcome the terrible nature of the climate. In the east the Tharus and the Bhuksas who alone seem able to stand its effects are generally in prosperous circumstances. The immigrants from the plains would no doubt be able to amass considerable wealth if they only had time but unfortunately few of them can live to enjoy the fruits of their labour as their health invariably gives way after a short residence and their condition is generally most unenviable. Everything possible is done to keep these valuable tenants (Tharus and Bhuksas) satisfied for they are the mainstay of cultivation in parts of the Terai in which no plains man could possibly live.” (1979: 183)

Tharus have been the brave inhabitants of this dense malaria - infested region. They are predominantly farmers. Medical studies prove that having lived in the marshy Terai area for centuries; the Tharus have developed resistance to malaria and which can be attributed to an unidentified genetic factor (L.Terrenato et al: 1988). They speak their own Tharu language. These aboriginal people have long been dispossessed of their land and made serfs by wealthier migrants who entered the Tharu inhabited area in the past. As nearly as everywhere else, land in Nepal is scarce and fertile agricultural land even scarcer. For a less developed country, scarcity of cultivable land has opened up possibilities for deceit and the use of unfair means. Tharu, a group living in near isolation for long has been soft target of cheat and misuse of power. The Tharus of Nepal are honest, simple and hard working people. Their main plight is that they are victims of the Kamaiya system.

THARUS AND THE KAMAIYA SYSTEM.

The literal meaning of the term Kamaiya in Tharu language is a hard working man. For the Tharus, “the word Kamaiya and Kamalahari mean male and female hard working persons respectively. Kamaina literally means to earn” (Dhakal et.al.2000:28). Another general meaning of the word kamaiya is the person who cultivates the land of others. However, in practical parlance the word Kamaiya smacks of the economic, social and

political exploitation of the Tharus. The Kamaiya system is the result of debt relationship. Tradition and social acceptance has perpetuated this system. Becoming a Kamaiya or a bonded person is the end result of a process that involves the following steps- a poor and illiterate folk takes debt, fails to pay the loan in cash within the stipulated time and eventually comes into bondage to the lender, a local landlord. The debtor then offers his labour as repayment of the debt taken. However the value of labour is so less that a complete repayment of loan becomes impossible. The delay in repayment goes on increasing the total amount to be returned. With time the debtor comes under complete control of the creditor, he becomes bonded for life. The contract between the kamaiya and the landlord is for one year. The renewal of contract takes place during 'Maghi' - a festival of the Tharus. A very low wage rate and shortage of food compels the Kamaiya to take more loans from the landlord. The new loans received are added up every year at the principal amount known as 'Saunki', which increases every year. "He marries in bondage and dies in bondage" (Kattel: 2000) Death does not relieve him of the debt incurred. It goes on the shoulders of his wife and children and thus generations come under the never loosening grip of bondage. The Kamaiya system is mainly found in five districts of the Nepal Terai- Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur and more than 95% of the Kamaiyas are Tharus.

Compared to other caste/ ethnic groups of Nepal, the Tharus are very poor, lagging behind literacy and awareness which makes them even more vulnerable.

Entrance of the powerful outsiders in the Tharu inhabited territories and the usurpation of land of the Tharus has been a common phenomenon for the Tharus of Nepal and those of Uttarakhand. In the fourth decade of the twentieth century the Government of the state of Uttar Pradesh in view of high productivity of the Terai decided to develop it. With the aim of meeting the food shortage cultivators were invited from Punjab to come and settle in the Terai. Steps were taken to eradicate Malaria here. The refugees from Pakistan, the Rai Sikhs and the Punjabis entered the Tharu area. They forcefully occupied the Tharu land in large measure pushing the meek Tharus towards less fertile areas. The Government went out of its way to appease these trespassers by regularizing their illegal possession (vide G.O.No. 1 - 35 (12) 66, dated July 6, 1967 Of the U.P. Government).

The Tharus of Nepal were also the masters of the Terai. The exact year of the emergence of the Kamaiya system cannot be traced but it is believed that it had started to develop since 1950 from Dang. Prior to that the Tharus had been working hard to cultivate the lands here (Upadhyaya 2001) The Kamaiya system existed at this time also, but it bound a Tharu Kamaiya to a Tharu Kisan (cultivator). Both were Tharus, sharing a common culture and held together by strong kinship ties (Rankin 1999). Then it was a labour system which involved a peasant cultivator (Kisan) and a labourer (Kamaiya) in which in exchange for the Kamaiya's labour the cultivator took upon himself the responsibility to feed, clothe and house him and his family (Gunaratne 2002 : 96). However the nature of the Kamaiya system changed with the passage of time. It became more oppressive when the migrants, the non- Tharus usurped the land from the Tharus by force and foul means and the Tharus became the Kamaiyas on the land they once owned. Peter Lowe (2001) conducted an intensive research on the Kamaiyas and brought out the tragedy of transition of these once upon a time landowners to landless bonded labourers – the Kamaiyas. Several studies report that foul play of the affluent non Tharus, the elites in alienating the Tharus from their land within 100 to 200 years. (Bhandari,1985; Krauskoff,2000; McDonough;1997).

Malaria prone Terai tracts of Nepal used to be painstakingly cleared by the Tharus. Others did not dare to enter the area easily although the rulers at that time awarded large chunks of land to the members of the royal family, government officials, army officers and priests in return for their services. The decade of the 1960 saw the efforts made to eradicate malaria from the Terai which now became more open and accessible to the enterprising fortune hunters and ambitious agriculturist who had sharp business acumen. These smart migrants gradually started to capture the land of the Tharus. The difficult area of the Terai had been made fertile by the sweat and soil of the Tharus. It was these patches of land which were snatched by the outsiders. Thus the displacement of the Tharus took place in large measure. Dispossessed of their land the Tharus continued to fall deeper in the dungeon of poverty. The axe of land tax, basic needs of food and day to day expenses, repayment of loan and celebration of life cycle rituals fell heavy on their shoulders and they started selling their lands at

very low prices to meet out these expenses. The result was that most of the small land owners among the Tharus became landless and started working as landless laborers on their own land. To make both ends meet the Tharus took loan from the landlords which they could not return. Their condition became even weaker and their dependency on loans borrowed from the landlords increased even further. Repayment of loan became quite impossibility due to minimal source of income. Thus the next step was that they were forced to become bonded laborers (Kamaiyas). Not only the individual, rather his entire family is Kamaiyas, each offering their 'service' to the landlord. Thus the chain of bondage continued from one generation to the next and after.

Kamaiya system differs from other systems of permanent wage labour and this explains why it is the worst form of human labour. Under the other systems the wage is paid in cash, kind and share cropping. The rate for share cropping is almost the half of each crop. The wage paid in cash or kind is normally the same that is prevalent in the local market. The wage workers are provided all the necessary inputs but these have to be managed themselves by the workers in case of share cropping. Under such systems of wage labour workers get extra remuneration for additional work; however this is in accordance with the nature of work and social practice. Unlike the Kamaiya system, in such systems all family members are free to work wherever and with whoever they want. There are no restrictions on their mobility and they are not under and bondage. Every member of the worker's family is entitled to get separate wage for the work he or she has done.

In contrast to these conditions prevalent in the other systems of permanent wage labour, the Kamaiya system entails other characteristics. In this the wage is paid in cash, kind and as produce of a proportion of land and share cropping. The rate of share cropping is far less, maximum being one-third of the total output and minimum ranging from 10% to 20% . Wage whether in cash or kind is very low in comparison to the existing local market rate. The necessary inputs to cultivate land such as Halo, Kodalo, oxen, seed and other things are provided by the land owner. A Kamaiya not only works on the agricultural land of the landlord but also has to do domestic work and various other tasks as ordered by the land

owner in the same wage. The family members of the Kamaiya are bound to the same land owner as the Kamaiya and work for him without any wage. Their mobility is restricted and they cannot work outside without permission from the landowner. Some landowners also send their Kamaiyas to work for others but they take away their earnings earned from outside. "On the average a Kamaiya works about thirteen hours a day. He gets only around eleven rupees at the maximum. Using the legal minimum wage of rupees 60 (US \$ 0.80) for eight hour work per day, he should be getting 102 rupees for the thirteen hour work. Instead he loses around 90 rupees a day to his master. Annually, a master makes a surplus of 32,500 rupees (US\$ 450) per Kamaiya. This amount is multiplied several times more based on the number of the members of the Kamaiya family engaged in the work." (Kattel 2000). Thus the Kamaiya system has reduced the Tharus to abject poverty and squalor. Robertson and Mishra (1997:17) mention that in this "veiled slave trade" (1997:15), the landlords kept the Kamaiyas to work on their land in the same way as they kept oxen or other animals to work on their field. Sexual exploitation of their women by the land owners and their children becoming child labourers has further made the Kamaiya system most torturous.

CHILD LABOUR

The Tharus became easy victims of the Kamaiya system due to lack of awareness on account of negligible exposure to the outside world. This has led to the chain of bondage becoming even stronger as the debt passes on from the father to the children and the latter silently accept that as a part of their culture and as a natural step of transition in their own lives. Moreover lack of education has caused the unavailability of alternative employment opportunities for them and following in the line of their fathers and forefathers, they too become Kamaiya to survive. The Kamaiya children are the poorest of the poor, lacking basic primary education and minimum health care provisions. Those who do attend school fail to continue due to lack of money. Moreover, their utility as cheap source of labour makes the whole idea of pursuing education takes a back seat. The landlords encourage the poor Kamaiya parents to train their children in agricultural and domestic work instead of sending them to school. More hands to work means more

money – The land lords try to drive home this formula to the Kamaiya parents. Children of 6-7 years and above, work for the landlords along with their parents. They do not receive any wage for their hard service to their master. Getting two meals a day makes these poverty stricken children more than happy. They toil all the day round collecting firewood and fodder, cooking, washing utensils and cleaning clothed and assisting in agricultural work during cropping and harvesting season.

BANNER OF REVOLT

Having been the victims of ruthless suppression for long, the Tharus finally started raising their voice against the Kamaiya system. This happened as a result of the revolutionary change being witnessed by Nepal when the Communist party of Nepal (Maoist) motivated the people's war against injustice and tyranny. For a people who were the sole masters of their habitat in the past, to live in servility and in a down trodden state was torturous. Their depressed voice gained strength when they were supported by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) which called for the seizure and redistribution of these lands. The party aroused a great deal of enthusiasm among the Tharus who became revolutionary and readily joined the Maoist cadres and became fighters of the People's Liberation Army. The slogans of the party like "Land To the Tillers" and "Land to the Landless" encouraged the Tharus to stand up for justice. The movement was further supported by the social and human rights organizations, the media and the international aid organizations and networks. As a result a decade after the 1990 Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal prohibiting "traffic in human beings, slavery, serfdom or forced labour in any form" (Article 20) took effect. The cabinet decided that the engagement of the Kamaiya labour is illegal and the Kamaiyas be freed straight away. Any written or verbal contract made between the landlord and the Kamaiya or a family member is null and void and its enforcement punishable by law. Further the debt (saunki) under the Kamaiya system is illegal and should not be paid back. In 2002, the Parliament under the king, declared the Tharu people free from the Kamaiya System. The parliament's declaration smacked of vested political interest. It was a nexus between the imperialist powers and the government to take the Tharus away from the Maoist revolution. They

promised small pieces of land to the Tharus. Land was given to a few selected Tharus and the rest were given the assurance for the same. The regime has been keeping the Tharus hoping in vain that the rest of the land would be distributed among them. Thus the Tharus have become the victims of the political games being played between the political parties of Nepal. What has come across is that there is little semblance between the promises made on paper and their implementation in practice. One major reason is this that the landlords or the landowners have access to political power. They hold important positions in the bureaucracy, the army and also control the purse strings of trade and commerce. They are the elites, the all powerful who have for long been the feudal lords carrying the halo of omnipotence which is nourished by the servility and helplessness of the Kamaiyas.

Thus after waiting for the fulfillment of the promises and the assurances given, the Kamaiyas are forced to go back to their landlords to become bonded again. The New York Times (6th February 2004) brings out a case of Phool Kesari, a Tharu Kamaiya whose husband was arrested by the Royal Army as a suspected Maoist was planning to go back to her former landlord as she was convinced that she will never see her husband alive again. The present scenario is that even after the Tharus have got the legal freedom from the Kamaiya system, the real freedom is yet to come and be felt. Efforts for the rehabilitation of the freed Kamaiyas are meeting new challenges. Finding alternative means of livelihood in an already saturated market has been an uphill task. Now with no land of their own many Kamaiyas are leading miserable lives in squalor as refugees. Disease, hunger and frustration are forcing them to again seek shelter in the service of their patriarchs- the affluent landowners. The struggle is going on.

Among the champions fighting for the Kamaiyas rights the name of Dilli Choudhury deserves special mention. He was awarded by the Anti - Slavery International for his continuous efforts for seeking justice for the Kamaiyas. In his award acceptance speech he draws the attention of the people to the heart wrenching problems of the Kamaiyas. He reiterates that the government's rule declaring the freedom of the Kamaiyas has far from solved the problems of the Kamaiyas. This is mainly because there are many Kamaiya families which are not considered as Kamaiyas by the government. There are over 4000 Kamaiya families waiting to be recognized

as Kamaiyas. Their agony continues as they are waiting to be actually freed from the yoke of bonded labour. Furthermore many of those who have been officially identified as Kamaiyas are still waiting to receive their land for their rehabilitation. This wait is taking a toll on them as they have become victims of abject poverty and squalor. Their children were dying of hunger and many Kamaiyas were forced to commit suicide. To bring about an end to the never ending seeming exploitation of the Kamaiyas, Dilli Choudhury set up an organization to empower the Tharus. He founded the Dumrigaon Club along with 34 members to spread education and awareness among the Kamaiyas so that they are equipped to fight against exploitation. Classes were held to impart education to the illiterate Tharus. This whole exercise met with stiff opposition by the local landlords who harassed the Tharus by threatening them of dire consequences if they continued to attend the classes like refusing to extend loans to them for such basic necessities like food and medicines. The strong nexus between the high caste landlords and the local government officials was at play to tighten the stranglehold over the Tharus. Instead of persecuting the landlords the government officials persecuted Dilli Choudhury and his associates. They were accused of planning terrorist activities against the government and this deprived them of foreign funding and legal protection. Despite growing persecution of the organization Tharu membership of that increased steadily. By 1989 the organization conducted 80 literacy classes covering 40 villages. In 1991 the name of the organization changed to Backward Society Education or BASE. The movement to fight for the right of the Kamaiyas spearheaded from Dang, the headquarter of BASE. For two months the Kamaiyas in five villages refused to work unless they received 50 rupees per day. BASE drove home to the Kamaiyas the information about their legal and human rights and they were introduced to several income generating programs.

As stated earlier the law to abolish the Kamaiya system has been abolished yet the problem is far from over. Thousands of Kamaiya continue to be enslaved as bonded labour. The landlords in such cases should be punished by law. BASE has been preparing cases against these landlords to drag them to the court. It continues to fight for the protection of the Kamaiya women and children who have been subject to atrocities for a long time.

CONCLUSION

Research on the Tharu Kamaiyas of Nepal draws attention to a valid point – the community in question is a tribe, an ethnic community. If on one hand it is necessary to understand the real meaning of the words like ‘tribe’ or ‘aborigines’ in order to wipe away the erroneous notions about these being exotic people with weird lifestyles, it is equally important to get sensitized about them and their problems. They are not museum pieces to be observed and enjoyed. However it is also necessary to understand and accept that they have a history, a culture different from the so called mainstream society. Study of culture is vital to know how a Tharu Kamaiya is different from the non- Tharu Kamaiya and why are the Tharus main victims of the Kamaiya system. Such issues need to be addressed specifically and not carpeted by generalizations about problems like bonded labour and the like. Bonded labour is a problem prevalent in India and among those in other countries. The nomenclature of bonded labour in Indian states varies. It is called Hala and Muliyas or Nag Muliyas in Orissa, Nit – Majoor in Bengal; Harwais and Baramsiyas in North Bihar; Kamiya in South Bihar and Chotanagpur; Harwaishee in Madhya Pradesh; Sewak and Haris in Uttar Pradesh; Adiamons in Travancore; Cherumas in Malabar; Holyas in South Konkana; Pannyals in Tamil Nadu; Palerus in Andhra Pradesh; Hali in Gujarat; Sagri in Rajasthan and Jeetha in Kamataka. (Mohanty: 2002). Efforts have been in progress to abolish this system. Social activists, Non Government Organizations, Human Rights Commission and the like bodies and agencies have been have been raising their voices of concern for the victims of this system. Yet the problem is far from over. There are indeed culture specific reasons yet the common reason which has perpetuated that is the polarity between the law on paper and its implementation in practice. Corruptions at the grass roots level and above, lack of awareness on the part of the aggrieved parties and a general apathy of the people with authority for those under human bondage are the core factors that hinder the actual abolition of bonded labour.

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Table- I
Tharu population in Nepal

| Development Region | Population in % |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| Eastern | 19.6 |
| Central | 15.0 |
| Western | 14.9 |
| Mid-western | 26.7 |
| Far-western | 23.9 |
| Total | 100.00 |

Source- Shiva Sharma, *Nepalma, Kamaiya Pratha* (in Nepali) ILO, New Delhi, 1999, p.12.

Table 2

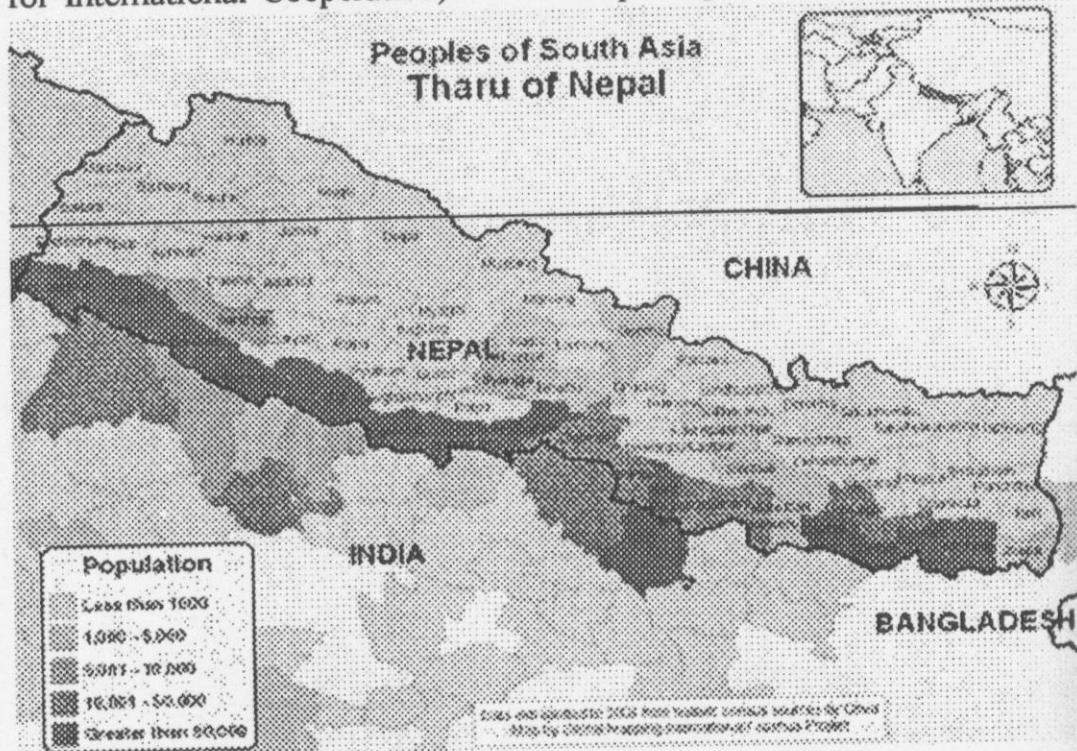
Percentage Distribution of Kamaiya in Selected Districts of Nepal 1997



Source: Sharma and Thakurathi, 1998.

| Districts | Ethnic Group | | Sample Kamaiya |
|-------------|--------------|-----------|-------------------|
| | Tharu | Non Tharu | |
| Kanchanpur | 95.9 | 4.1 | 362 |
| Kailali | 98.7 | 1.3 | 602 |
| Bardiya | 84.8 | 15.2 | 604 |
| Banke | 77.9 | 22.1 | 353 |
| Dang | 93.8 | 6.2 | 482 |
| Kapilbastu | 94.2 | 5.8 | 308 |
| Rupendehi | 50.9 | 49.1 | 169 |
| Nawalparasi | 67.3 | 32.7 | 156 |

Source: MS Nepal (Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke (MS) Danish Association for International Cooperation) www.msnepal.org.



Source: Global Mapping International /Joshua Project
www.joshuaproject.net