



Going cheap: the slave market in Nepalganj. Bonded labourers in Nepal can spend their whole lives paying off a 'debt' that might have been incurred generations earlier

Today's offer in Nepal's slave market: buy one, get one free

by CAROLINE LEES

IT IS market day in Nepalganj, Nepal, and the goods for sale are lined up in rows. Their hair neatly brushed and wearing clean clothes, the small, wiry men and women on show are slaves, on offer to the highest bidder.

They are being inspected by prospective owners. Plump, wealthy-looking landlords seeking new workers for their private estates, walk up and down, occasionally stopping to ask one's age, another his price. Most cost between £200 and £300.

Once a year during *Maghi*, Nepal's annual slave market, landlords sell their slaves, or bonded labourers as they are officially described, or buy new ones. Landlords haggle over the price while the labourers themselves squat in the sunshine and gossip.

In Nepal, bonded labourers are considered to "belong" to their employers because they owe them money. Yet the debts which they spend their lives working to repay may first have been incurred generations before.

The sales, which take place

For as little as £160, a labourer and his family can be bought for life – and beyond

once a year on a date determined by the moon, operate on a buy-one-get-one-free basis. The slaves, known locally as *kamaiyas*, are rarely purchased unless they are married or have a female relative or children who come as part of the package.

Women and children, who work as household servants or in the fields, are paid nothing. One 17-year-old daughter of a *kamaiya* at the market had worked every day of the previous year: her only payment was 12 red glass bangles.

Some landlords make a profit from the human trade. One at the *Maghi* was proud of his day's trading: "I bought this man for 10,000 rupees and sold another for 14,000 – 4,000 rupees in my pocket," he boasted.

The *kamaiyas* get nothing from the deals. Their price is set by the amount of money their landlord claims he has loaned them and their family. Most of the

kamaiyas and their families are illiterate and have no idea how much they owe, but most trustingly accept their landlords' rough estimate.

Debts can accumulate quickly. *Kamaiyas* are never paid in cash, but in sacks of unhusked rice, flour or mustard. They are forced to borrow cash from the landlord for everything else they need. A debt can also be increased at the discretion of the landlord. If he so chooses, he can charge his *kamaiya* for a broken plough or damaged tools. Most landlords also set their own rate of interest, usually just enough to ensure that the debt can never be paid off.

Gobardhan is one of those for sale. The 31-year old, who has worked as a *kamaiya* since he was 12, is priced at 8,404 rupees (about £160) the amount his landlord claims he still owes.

A landlord is negotiating

Gobardhan's purchase with his current owner. A deposit of 50 rupees (£1) is paid, the debt is worked out and scribbled on a dirty chit of paper, along with instructions: "Please send the *kamaiya* to my home in a few days. I will come and collect his furniture with my cart and give you the rest of the money. From now on, your *kamaiya* becomes mine."

Gobardhan's only role in the sale was to sign a "legal document", drawn up by his new owner, agreeing to the amount that he owes. The *kamaiya*, who cannot read or write, added his thumbprint, before his signature was "witnessed" by another illiterate *kamaiya*. With his thumbprint, Gorbadhan, his wife and children become the official property of the new owner for the rest of their lives, or until sold again.

The landlord's transaction is entirely legal. There is no law

against the system, and according to a recent report by Anti-Slavery International, the country has more than 200,000 bonded labourers.

One of the authors of the report, Adam Robertson, has visited the *Maghi*. "It is like livestock trading," he said.

Although bonded labourers in southern Nepal may live and work in medieval conditions, the landowners enjoy every Western luxury. They have electricity, telephones and satellite television dishes sit on top of their large brick houses. Many inspect their estates on powerful motorbikes.

The life of a *kamaiya* is less enviable. Buddhi Ram Chaudhar, 60, lost his right hand in a threshing machine 18 years ago. Under pressure from his villagers his landlord agreed to give Buddhi Ram some land as compensation, but he never did. Now his future is bleak: "Either the government should provide us some land and help with some means of livelihood or give us poison to eat or else shoot us dead," he said.

□ Additional reporting by Sushil Pyakurel, Nepalganj