INTRODUCTION

Dipali is 60 years old. She married at the age of 16, but her carpenter husband died of cancer in 2007. She has two brothers living close to her home on her father’s land. She has two sons and two daughters, all of whom have married. Her eldest son has moved far away from the family home, while her younger son lives in the same house as Dipali, though running his household separately. He is an agricultural labourer and swallow-engine trolley driver¹. Dipali’s eldest daughter also became a widow in 2007, while the younger daughter lives with her husband’s family.

¹ The engine of a power-tiller meant for ploughing paddy land used instead for transporting people.
WELL-BEING AT THE TIME JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

Dipali primarily supports herself through begging in surrounding villages visiting a different village every day, four days a week. Typically she receives rice, sometimes vegetables, and sometimes money (between 10-30 taka per day).

Occasionally (three or four days every month) she is paid in kind by producing puffed rice at others’ homes. For this she typically receives around 1.5kgs of rice for every 5kgs of puffed rice. To achieve this she needs to spend about half a day working.

Finally, for about 10 days at harvest time, she will earn rice by cleaning rice in the homes of wealthier farmers. Typically she receives 2kg rice in exchange for processing 4 sacks of paddy and rice. Again this will require half a day of labour.

**Diets**

Normally Dipali consumes a maximum of two meals per day which may include some vegetables like potato or arum leaves. She cannot normally afford fish, egg or meat. She states that she now eats fish about once a month but when her husband was alive; she managed to eat fish regularly.

Dipali’s region suffers from 2 lean seasons; October (referred to as monga) and March. During these times she receives much less begging because villagers are consuming their own reserves and are reluctant to give zakat. However some richer farmers still try to keep some money aside for zakat even in leaner periods. Her food intake goes down during these periods and occasionally she is forced to skip meals.

Dipali doesn’t like begging and prefers making puffed rice. However this is not a regular activity. While she usually is given rice and money for begging, she says that some beggars can make a good living. She knows one beggar who owns a two-roomed house and received a loan from an NGO which he now repays through begging. In fact, Dipali has cleaned rice in this beggar’s home, and was paid TK 50 and half a jackfruit.

**Assets**

Dipali’s most valuable asset is her own 5.5 decimal homestead land. On it, she has a house made from mud, bamboo and tin and a courtyard well-protected by a mud wall with a wooden door and a cowshed. She also owns some household utensils, sarees and petticoats for casual and occasional use, two cauldrons and one jug.

Her youngest son lives in the same house, but he cooks separately with his wife and they have also erected a hut where her widowed daughter lives with her adolescent son. Though her daughter and son live on the homestead, the property is in Dipali’s own name (see below).

The main challenge of Dipali’s life is to manage a regular income and food consumption, though this has been very difficult since the death of her husband.

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2 gathered vegetables
3 charity
LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH 1950-1970

Dipali was born in 1950 in a Hindu family. Her father was an agricultural labourer and sharecropper, though he rarely earned enough to support family, and Dipali remembers often starving and being half-fed many times. Her father had three brothers; one of whom was a wealthy farmer owning 8 bighas of land.

EARLY MARRIED YEARS

In 1966, when she was sixteen years old, Dipali’s parents arranged her marriage. Her father offered 300 taka as dowry. According to Dipali, her husband had purchased land jointly with his brother, who subsequently forged documents to deprive her husband of the land. After this dispute, Dipali’s future husband migrated to Patnitala from Faridpur district. After the marriage, he began to live on her father’s home as a Ghar Jamaī.

After the marriage, Dipali was responsible for maintaining all domestic jobs including cleaning and preparing food, washing clothes and fetching drinking water.

Her conjugal life was good and she lived a better life than when she was not married. Her husband would earn sufficient money to run the household because there was a high demand for carpenters in their locality to help build homes (doors, windows). Her husband earned around 50 taka and 1.50 kg of rice for making a window or door. This usually required two days.

EARLY ADULTHOOD: 1970-1990

However, things got worse for Dipali with the political turmoil that engulfed Bangladesh in the 1970s. During this time, her family also expanded. In 1970 and 1973 her first son and daughter were born. The increased burden on household expenditure was not matched by an increase in her husband’s earnings. Also, there was a strong fall in demand for carpenters during the liberation war of 1971 and the famine in 1974 as people did not have money to build homes. This meant her husband was forced to find other work.

This stress meant that during the famine, the family were close to destitution. When asked about relief during this time, Dipali remembers that she received government support amounting to 1 KG of rice, a 0.5 KG of lentil and a few pieces of bread. Apart from this, she did not receive any help from government.

With the increasing cost of the family, Dipali was forced to start working, occasionally visiting her uncle and other neighbours’ home to make puffed rice and receiving rice

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4One bigha land is equal to 33 decimals.
5Ghar Jamaī refers to situations where a married man lives with his bride’s family. Parents without a son and only one daughter often prefer Ghar Jamaī, especially if he is a skilled labourer who might be able support them in their old age.
in return. In 1980, money from their combined earnings, together with money from selling two cows enabled the couple to purchase 5 decimals of homestead land from her maternal uncle who had decided to migrate to India. At the time, they were living with their children in a room adjacent to her parents and Dipali wanted to buy the land in order to build a house and live there with her growing family. By 1980 she had given birth to another boy and another girl.

**MID-ADULTHOOD: 1990-2000**

As demand for his skills increased, Dipali’s husband returned to his carpentry work. He earned between 150 to 200 taka and 1.5 kg of rice daily. Meanwhile Dipali continued bringing in extra income for her family through a variety of jobs. In 1990, she took the initiative to purchase a cow with a loan of TK 2,000 from Grameen Bank, and the couple managed to repay the loan through their earnings. In the course of time her cows gave birth to a number of calves, with the family eventually owning nine cattle: two cows, two oxen and five calves. Her husband supported Dipali’s cow-raising business building a cowshed to shelter the livestock and helping to graze the cattle.

**Raising livestock enhanced family's well-being**

Dipali’s economic condition improved considerably while she raised livestock and the household would get 4-5 litres of milk each day from the cows. Her financial condition was so good that they arranged the marriages of their eldest son and daughter on the same night, entertaining invited guests of Hindus and Muslims with meat from two slaughtered goats. They even managed to get a set of gold ornaments (necklace, earring, nose ring and bangle) for the younger daughter to present as gifts during marriage.

Because the demand for her husbands’ carpentry skills often declined during lean seasons - i.e. when farmers had little income to spare - the couple decided to start making rolling pins used to make roti and sell them in villages. Being entrepreneurial and Hindu, Dipali was confident about moving from home to home selling the rolling pins, especially within her own village. Indeed this activity made her well known, and this made it easier later to earn money making puffing rice as well as begging. In addition Dipali would also produce puffed rice for sale. This steady stream of income from different sources moved the family out of poverty.

**ROBBERY AND ASSET STRIPPING: 2000-2005**

However, their good fortune did not last. In 2000, robbers assaulted her husband and her younger son and stole valuable assets, including five productive cows. However, the robbers did not find the gold ornaments of her daughter, as these were safely hidden. Narinda believes that jealous neighbours were involved in the theft, having seen the gold ornaments displayed at the children’s weddings.

As a result of injuries sustained by her husband in the attack, he was forced to abstain from work for three months. Some neighbours, both Muslims and Hindus, came forward to help the family with gifts of food and clothes. The family had maintained

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6 flatbread
good social relations with their community and her husband’s work was popular, even in other districts. After 3 months her husband’s health returned and he returned to work.

**Widowhood of elder daughter and her return home**

In 2005, the husband of Dipali’s elder daughter died of cancer. After struggling financially with a young son, she eventually returned to her parents’ house, sharing meals with them. The daughter managed to find work milking other people’s cows for 10-15 min every morning, earning 30-35 taka a month; cleaning and winnowing rice for which she received 1.5kg rice per 4 sacks of rice cleaned; and also rearing goats on share. At first she reared one goat but this increased to four goats after 2 years. Meanwhile her young son learned carpentry skills from his father.

**Illness and death of husband**

Dipali’s livelihood condition got worse when her husband became sick in 2007. Often he would feel unwell and suffered a lot of pain in the stomach. He went to a nearby Mission Hospital for treatment but did not recover fully. She then paid for her husband to see a doctor in the market, who turned out to be unqualified. Her husband’s condition did not improve. With financial help from her younger son she travelled 12 km to a nearby government hospital but according to Dipali, her husband was not admitted as the doctors claimed he was not ill. As a result he was brought back home, and after a year of being bed-ridden he finally succumbed to his illness in 2008.

**AFTER HER HUSBAND’S DEATH 2008-2010**

After the robbery and her husband’s protracted illness, Dipali was left with no savings and no productive assets. Her only asset was her homestead and her own labour capacity.

**Lack of support from children**

One year after her husband’s death, Dipali’s widowed daughter and her son chose to be separated from Dipali. This exacerbated Dipali’s vulnerability since the grandson had been earning around 100 taka per day through carpentry. This income helped provide food for Dipali, her daughter and grandson. She was also not able to count on the support of her two sons since they had their own problems. Her eldest son had been married 3 times: his first wife had been unfaithful and the marriage was dissolved; the second wife suffered from mental illness and eventually committed suicide. He is still married to his third wife and has one son. Dipali’s other son is a trolley driver.

**Failed attempt to get support though Union Parishad**

After her husband death Dipali contracted the local government Union Parishad Chairman to receive a widow’s allowance. The chairman advised her to see the Ward Commissioner who asked for a 500 taka bribe. She somehow managed the money with the help of her younger daughter whose husband was working as a migrant mason in the Middle East. Despite paying the bribe, she is yet to receive the
allowance. When she took this matter back to the UP chairman he gave her 10 taka as charity but took no measures to follow up her complaint.

**Begging as primary income**

Finally, Dipali was forced to start begging for a living. Since she enjoys relatively good health, she does not think she has experienced extreme poverty in her life.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The story of Dipali is one of changing fortunes. To date, the only period her family was close to destitution was during the early 1970's. During this time a combination of factors pushed her family into extreme poverty including a fall in demand for her husband’s work, political turmoil and uncertainty, and inadequate state responses to the famine.

However, with some struggle, the household enjoyed a period of relative prosperity between 1990 and 2000 when they owned 9 cows and received regular income from milk sales and the husband’s work.

This period of relative comfort however did not last. The assault on her husband and her son, the robbery of assets and her husband’s deteriorating physical condition and eventual death pushed Dipali’s household back into destitution.

She tried to find help through government safety nets and through her children. But these either failed or were not reliable. She has also worked hard to secure a livelihood but seasonal changes in demand for her work meant that she could not support herself. As a result she has turned to begging.
Life history map of Nandita Baroi (60)

- Marriage with skilled labour in 1976
- Started to make puffed rice and to sell rolling pins
- Bought cow with a loan of Grameen Bank in 1990, earned regularly from milk sale of two cows
- Condition worsened with 1971 war & 1974 famine
- Robbery in 2000: lost cows and husband injured
- Son in law died and 1st daughter with son returns to her family
- Husband got sick in 2007 and died. Nandita starts to beg

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