LIFE HISTORY MALATI HEMBROM

INTRODUCTION

Malati Hembrom is 44 years old. She lives with her husband. Both Malati and her husband are in their second marriage. They have been married for 15 years. Malati Hembrom is blessed with two daughters – one from her first marriage and another from the second one. Her second daughter is 14 years old and stopped attending school after studying up to class three in primary school. At present her husband does not work regularly so her second child works as a day labourer. Malati occasionally makes Chuani, home-made liquor.

The main challenge in her life was to earn a living. She endured many shocks during her first marriage which was abusive and was eventually dissolved. Now her present husband drinks too much. When he indulges in drinking, he cannot manage work. Another key and deteriorating problem which she faces is her inability to work regularly due to her poor eye-sight. Also her abandoned daughter has three sons between the ages of 2 and 6 who live with her grandmother but during daytime.
they eat with Malati and Malati looks after the children whilst her daughter goes agricultural labouring.

At the time of interview it was found that her well-being status was decaying due to lean season. There are three main reasons behind this decline:

Means of earning livings

Unemployment. Malati does not earn any cash money from labouring at present since she has not been able to work for the last 4 years due to her eye problem. So, she looks after her daughter’s young children (2-6) while her daughter works in the fields and her husband works (when he is not drinking).

Chuani (country liquor). She reported that she makes liquor and sells it to neighbours as a way of earning a living. There is some stigma attached to this so she states that she brews liquor for family consumption during festivals. However she earns extra money by making and selling Chuani and as she gets older and finds it hard to labour, she may rely on this more and more.

Before she tried a legitimate business – rearing cows on lease from a school master - but because the school master (also the wealthiest person in the village) knew of her husband’s drinking he refused to give her his cows on lease. .

Agricultural labour for kind payments. During the major harvest period her husband and daughter work and get gin (in kind payment by paddy) which is based on a calculation that 3 scuttle/baskets of paddy are paid for 20 scuttle/baskets of paddy harvested.

Her husband obtained 12 mounds Gin (rice paid as returns) in the last Augrayan and Poush during the harvest of Aman. Out of 12 mounds he took 5 mounds advance gin during threshing and winnowing.

Gleaning She did not earn any cash this season but managed to do some rice gleaning and obtained 2/3 kg rice each day for her work. She did rice gleaning for around 8/9 days.

The prime income earning activities of the household are as follows:

Gathering grain scattered during harvesting and threshing

1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>MAN’S WORK Type</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Male, female or joint</th>
<th>Payment Mode 6am to 2pm (Upkharaki or cash, no kind payment for last 5 years)*</th>
<th>Adolescents or unskilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aman paddy Transplantation</td>
<td>15-20 days</td>
<td>joint</td>
<td>TK.100 a day (equivalent to 21/2 to 3 kg rice)</td>
<td>TK.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aman paddy Weeding</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>joint</td>
<td>TK. 60 a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Aman paddy Harvest</td>
<td>10-15 days</td>
<td>Joint – dominated by men</td>
<td>Zn(Paddy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Aus (rainfed) Paddy Transplantation</td>
<td>5 days</td>
<td>joint</td>
<td>TK.100 a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aus (rainfed) paddy Harvest</td>
<td>5 days</td>
<td>dominated by men</td>
<td>Zn(Paddy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>IRRI Transplantation</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>joint</td>
<td>TK.100 a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>IRRI Harvest</td>
<td>20 days</td>
<td>Joint but dominated by men</td>
<td>Zn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hay Stack</td>
<td>4-5 days</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>TK.150 a day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Earth Digging</td>
<td>8 days</td>
<td>joint</td>
<td>TK. 700 contractual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total days Approx. 113 days per year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TK. 113,000 per year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*payment amount is THE SAME for men and women here, except for unskilled labour, such as Malati’s younger (14 year old daughter), she gets less about ½.
No income was obtained from wheat production because farmers prefer IRRI rice to wheat owing to its higher per acre production than the latter.

She has no savings with any NGOs or association

**Assets**

The family live in two small room hut made from mud, bamboo and corrugated steel sheet. Her home is built on 3 decimal khash land. She had 10 hens, but at present only 3 hens are alive. The others died after being attacked by mongooses. Her family does not have any productive assets. She has:

- Two sarees, two petticoats and two blouses for casual use and one saree for occasional use and chador (shawl), sweater;
- 1 big and 4 small aluminium cauldron, one pitcher, Bati (Big knife)
- 1 spade, 2 sickles, 1 chopper with shaft.

A bigger cauldron is being used to produce liquor locally called Chuani. It is produced for family consumption as well as for sale.

**Diets**

At present, her household encounters food insecurity. They eat twice a day (morning and night). On the day of interview she ate scum of rice with salt (account of last Kartik/lean season). This is the common food consumption pattern of their household during lean seasons. Often, she collects roots and leafy vegetables to cook. They need 2 kilograms of rice each day – one and half kgs for morning and noon and half for night.

**LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE**

**CHILDHOOD AND EARLY MARRIAGE (E.G. 0-20) 1967-1987 LEVEL 2**

Malati Hembrom was born in 1967.

**Abandoned by her father (gender discrimination) then her mother (sheer poverty)**

Malati’s father was a day labourer who migrated from Bharat due to economic scarcity. When her mother had given birth to two daughters consecutively, her father responded by moving to India and remarrying there. He effectively abandoned his wife and daughters.
Being abandoned, her mother returned to her parents’ home with her baby sister (who later died of dysentery as an infant). Because of her mother’s sheer poverty, she decided to abandon Malati when she was 5 or 6. Malati was adopted by her uncle (father’s brother) who had no daughter. Her adopted father was an agricultural labourer too and grew affectionate of Malati. But Malati never forgave her mother for abandoning her and never saw her again.

**FIRST MARRIAGE AT 14/15**

Malati was married off to someone living in Godagari, a nearby Upazila\(^2\), in 1982. She was only 14/15 years old.

**Box 1: Marriage and sustained domestic abuse**

Four years after her marriage she gave birth to baby girl. The marriage was not a happy one since her husband used to torture her physically after going on a drinking binge. He would drink liquor and then come home, get angry, and beat her. Malati said that at that time she wasn’t earning from doing paddy work regularly - only occasionally. It seems that one of his justifications for meting out beatings was that she did not work regularly and did not supply food for dinner. The husband meanwhile it seems was indolent and did not work. Any money he had was spent on liquor.

The beatings became more and more frequent. She found no one near her who would stand up to her husband and tell him to stop because people felt that it was ok for a man to beat his wife.

She managed to send a message to her father by asking some migrant workers from her own village to inform him that she was seriously ill. On hearing this information her father rushed to her side and then she told him of the domestic abuse.

Her father knew something wasn’t right because when her husband visited his own home and her father couldn’t supply him with liquor (as is the Adivasi custom) he misbehaved by shouting and scolding her father for not being a proper host. Her father couldn’t supply the liquor because he was a poor man and had no regular income.

\(^2\) Upazila is one of the geographically demarcated areas with some administrative and service sectors under a district. It exists immediate later of Union Parishad, the first tier of local government in Bangladesh
Her father saw her distress, believed her, and decided to negotiate to dissolve her marriage. This was not a formal process but a settlement negotiated Malati through the community leaders. In 1987 her marriage was over.

Malati was luckier than most women – her adopted father was willing to help her out and believed her. He was also affectionate towards her. Nevertheless, according to Malati this period was one of intense suffering, from both severe emotional distress resulting from the shocks of her sustained domestic abuse from her husband, and her inability to find work. The lack of work made her worry about her family and how to maintain it.

In the first few years of her recovery she lived with her father and gave him any earnings she could muster. As she recovered she began working regularly and began to look after herself and her daughter.

Both in childhood and until her marriage was dissolved, she had suffered food insecurity with two meals per day throughout the year, and only one during lean periods.

**EARLY ADULTHOOD: 1988-2008**

After her marriage was dissolved she came back to her father’s home along with her first child and started to work as agricultural labourer. According to cultural norms she used to offer her earned income to her adopted father. She lived in her father’s home for five years. In her view, she had to struggle hard to live from hand to mouth. During her stay with her father she took on various jobs: paddy transplanting, harvesting, threshing and winnowing and earned about Tk100 a day.

She often faced difficulties getting work during Ashwin and Kartik months. In her view, this was a really hard time in her life. Her eldest daughter lived with her and continued living with her parents even after her second marriage. Her parents arranged her eldest daughter’s marriage at the age of 13 to 14 years.

Her situation improved her second marriage in 1992. Both she and her husband worked to maintain the family. In her view, her husband was very active and could manage work easily due to his skill in agricultural work and good health.

**Migration to India and return**

She gave birth to her second girl in 1994. To secure better work opportunities they migrated to India in 1995. They paid Tk 150 each to make the border crossing. But their condition deteriorated due to her husband’s illness. Finding the overall situation hard particularly because of her husband’s illness, they returned to Bangladesh just one year later. This time they did not pay any money.
Illness

Reaching Bangladesh her husband visited a kabiraj (traditional healer) to get treatment for his ailment and he recovered soon. But Malati was struggling to recover from eye diseases. She along with her husband went to Rajshahi Mission Hospital and got admitted there. It took almost two days to arrive at Rajshahi since they could not afford the transportation costs. However, Malati got admitted and had to stay at the hospital for around 2 months. When she was released, the hospital authority gave her TK.100 as transportation cost to enable her get back at home easily.

SUPPORT FROM RELATIVES

When she got trouble in her left eye one of her patemal brother-in-laws, a converted Christian helped communicate with representatives of the mission. She manages to meet with a missionary who took her to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital and Sadar Hospital. She was in the hospital for six months. It did not involve either expenses or surgical operations to recover from her troubles.

The situation of the family began to improve further as soon as she recovered after eye treatment from Rajshahi in 1998.

During her sickness her present husband, who never tortured her, helped with domestic works, including cooking and cleaning.

SECOND MARRIAGE AND IMPROVED ECONOMIC CONDITION: 1992-95

Box 1: Permanent Farm Servitude - Discussion on changes on husband’s employment condition with tightening of labour market

During the 1990s her husband was working on a yearly basis contract which required carrying out all sorts of production related tasks in the courtyard and paddy field of the employer-farmer. The paddy growing task included tilling, preparing seed bed and seedling, transplantation of rice shoot, weeding, harvesting, and threshing.

In addition he was responsible for doing other domestic works like taking care of the cattle even extending labour for a close relative of the employer when asked. Labourers find this part of the contract particular demeaning.
Under such contracts, farmers would work until the first harvest and then get paid in kind (rice) – but any loans taken during the previous monga would be deducted.

Usually the contract begins with an agreed amount of cash payment together with a component of rice payment. At the end of the year, they then receive kind payments and a cash payment. However what happens in practice is that during the 2 lean seasons of March and October/November – when labourers are short of rice – they ask the employer for an advance of rice. So if a labourer asks for a loan in October/November (usually only rice) then the value of that advance is deducted from his payment during the harvest/season when he is paid in rice and cash.

Labourers are very vulnerable as they are bound or ‘tied’ to the one farmer. Sometimes a full payment is never made when a bad harvest occurs.

These types of contracts don’t provide enough latitude for wage bargaining because they families rely on farmers throughout the year for consumption and there are few alternative employment opportunities. Moreover, they need cash throughout the year to buy small essential items - cooking oil, kerosene, medicines, and clothing.

Since the early 1990s, slowly the growth of deep tube well installations has increased the area under paddy cultivation and with that employment opportunities have expanded. As a result, labourers gradually are in a better position to bargain for better wages and a new employment system has been introduced known locally as Upkharaki - or daily cash payment with no in-kind element.

This new system was in place when Malati married in 1992. It enabled her family to reject, to some extent, the offered wage rate if it was too low to meet the essential needs of the family.

But, Malati’s physical condition continued to deteriorate since 2005 as she could not work on account of poor eyesight. In addition, the death of her father who used to provide support for her well-being meant that she was becoming far more vulnerable.

**Daughter abandoned by husband**

Her son in law deserted her elder daughter in November 2009 leaving three minor children to be cared for but no obvious resources to do this with.

Originally her abandoned daughter lived with Malati full time, which increased Malati’s family burden as the number of non-earning members increase. But it turned out to be good for Malati because her daughter is a hard worker and earns by herself working as an agricultural labourer.
But now her daughter sleeps at Malati’s adopted mother’s home and eats lunch with Malati (who also looks after her children whilst she is out labouring). The reason she sleeps at her grandmother’s house is the fear that she was getting too familiar with her workmates and may risk having a liaison. Malati’s husband was concerned she would get a bad reputation. Her elder daughter is providing food to her grandmother with whom she stays.

**FATHER’S DEATH**

**Box 2: Family death and increased insecurity**

She hardly gets any support of her neighbours because of the family’s poor economic condition. She reports that only her father provided them with financial help to buy corrugated iron for their home six years back. In order to purchase tin, her husband received TK 1500 which was a debt owed to him by a farmer for whom he had worked. Her father gave TK 10,000.

However, after five years (1997) of her second marriage, her father passed away. This meant she lost an important source of support. The situation was so bad that she had to beg to organize Bushishim of her father’s departed soul. Bushishim is observed in order to make sure that the soul of the deceased person is taken to join the ancestors’. All neighbours and relations attend this event where men sing and dance. All the guests are served with food and drinks. Men will take food first and eat the head of chicken, pigs etc. The grandeur/volume of celebration depends on the worth of belongings left by the departed person. The more the value of the belongings left behind the bigger is the celebration. For Malati’s father’s Bushishim, she required Pachani 4 hondi; 12 kilograms of rice; 3 chickens- one from maternal uncle, one from mother and one her own.

She has cast her vote three times so far at elections. Her husband advises on candidate selection, and most of the villagers consult among themselves at election time.

**MID-ADULTHOOD:**

Since 2007 Malati eye problems returned. Consequently, she has stopped moving out for work.
In 2009, she stopped begging as her second daughter (14) has joined the workforce. She works with her father and usually earns half her father. Out of 3 family members two are working at present. This helps keep the family in a decent situation.

**Chuani earnings**

To cope with financial crisis she occasionally produces Chuani – something she Malati learnt from her parents. She said that Chuani earns her family TK 20 to 50 each day. They prepare it for special occasions like the Puja (worship). Adivasis customers are allowed to drink sitting at her home while the non Adivasis take the sold liquor away in pots or bottles. She intends to make Chuani every eight days or so.

**Anxieties concerning the future**

She communicated with one of the well-off neighbours known as schoolmaster to rear cattle on share. But she was refused because of her husband’s addiction to liquor.

She also decided not to rear pigs for fear they may be stolen. Also this might offend the schoolmaster who is the only rich man in her locality and also a Muslim.

She expressed that it would have been convenient for her to run a small shop sitting at home. But she wonders that this business might not run well as the Muslim and Hindu communities will not buy from her shop as they regard them as Chhoto Lak (People of lower caste).

Also, it is quite evident in Tanore areas that tea shops use separate cups to serve tea to Adivasis. The bottom of cups is marked to avoid mixing it with others used for non Adivasis. Fearing a restricted access to market she prefers ox to cow since the milk sale would not be possible to all community people irrespective of religion and ethnicity.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Several reasons lie behind Malati’s downward mobility.

There is a misconception that Adivasi women enjoy more freedom than Muslim Bangladeshi women and gender is less relevant. Yet this life history finds the opposite. Gender discrimination was a running intergenerational theme in Malati’s life: her own mother was abandoned because of the boy child preference of her father who was upset at her mother having borne two girls. The second was Malati’s own experience in the hands of an abusive and idle first husband. While her second husband was cooperative, he too developed a drinking
problem in later life which affected his ability to regularly bring income home. Her own daughter was then abandoned by her husband, who despite having 3 boys to care for, developed relations with a fairer skinned woman. Strangely he used the excuse –’’you produced 3 boys but no girl, so I am leaving you.’’ Her daughter was doing all the right things by adivasi standards: earning money and bearing sons nevertheless she was abandoned. This is common in extreme poor families among the adivasis – if the wife’s family is extreme poor – the husband feels he can abuse her, and can leave her more easily because the wife’s family is relatively powerless.

She could not seek state support to help her or her daughter in the time of their sufferings: she did not complain to any authority about the physical torture suffered at the hands of her first husband. When her son in law left her daughter she could not do anything to negotiate with him to prevent him from doing so because of her extreme poverty. He should have got formal consent from his first wife to marry a second, but he did not get this permission and he felt he could get away with this because the in-laws were so poor.

In fact she was never in a position to seek the services of government as well as NGOs. The only support she got from the UP (Union Parishad) includes 3 rings of latrine. She lent her rings to one of her neighbour whose status is a little bit better than hers. Her neighbour will return those during harvest period. During the harvest time it will be easier for them to install the rings and slab. Right now she has access to her neighbour’s latrine during day time. She also goes to the surrounding bushes and fields for bathroom.

Child labour is an issue. Malati is living essentially now on her abandoned daughters’ income and her younger 14 year old daughter’s labour. She was pulled out of school because her mother could not work due to her eye problems. She earns only half her sister’s income because she is considered unskilled.

Another theme running through Malati’s life is that alcohol was both a cause and a solution to poverty for her. On the one hand it fuelled her first husband’s anger and beatings and it also made her cooperative second husband increasingly less work focused. On the other hand it saved her as it brought income when she could no longer do agricultural labouring.

Growing ill health and looming marriage to arrange: Malati cannot work properly because of the eye problem. On the other hand her husband is growing older. Besides, her younger daughter will have to be married off within 2 to 3 years. As a result the number of income earners will decrease hampering their well-being as a whole.

The potential threat is the aggravation of her husband’s health condition. He is about 50 years of age and his drinking habits are harming his health. Furthermore the prognosis for Malati’s health is not good. The risk of losing her sight is real and this would catapult her into a much weaker position.

Finally, she suffers the same social exclusions that all Adivasis have in accessing loans from Muslims and in selling produce to them. This is a critical problem for an increasingly disabled couple who resort to alcohol production to make ends meet.