LIFE HISTORY OF MINTU ALI

Shiree Q2 Research on Extreme Poverty in Bangladesh

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Owasim Akram</th>
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<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Helpage International</td>
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<td>Household ID</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee name</td>
<td>Mintu Ali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>Ethnic group and religion</td>
<td>Islam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Livelihood before the intervention</td>
<td>Day labourer</td>
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<td>Well-being Status before the intervention</td>
<td>Destitute (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status, children and other household members</td>
<td>Married, No Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union, upazilla and zilla</td>
<td>South Tapur Char, Roumari Upazila, Kurigram</td>
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<td>Dates of Interview</td>
<td>16th May 2012</td>
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<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Ageing, river erosion, flood, theft, eviction,</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Mintu Ali is a 75 year old working extreme poor man who lives in Roumary, Kurigram with his wife. Mintu was born into a moderately poor household during the British period and in his early childhood his father was able to provide enough to maintain them. Floods and river erosion however severely hindered this capacity in his later childhood.

Mintu’s elder brothers cheated the family by mortgaging many of their lands without informing them, and this combined with the death of his father left Mintu with the responsibility of bringing up his younger brothers in difficult circumstances. Mintu gradually
improved their situation by working as a porter to transfer goods to and from the Indian border. He managed to save some money to start a business of his own but unfortunately his house got burnt down and all his capital was destroyed.

Mintu and his wife currently live on their own land but his nephew is threatening to grab the land and trying to force Mintu to leave. Mintu has no children of his own and cites this as the cause of all his suffering. As he is now old he is not physically strong enough to work as a day labourer but he has to keep trying to do so. He has never allowed his wife to work outside and he can work only once or twice a week and thus cannot afford to buy enough food. Mintu lives in fear of being thrown out of his own house but he wants to die there. He is now just waiting to die which he sees as the only end point of his suffering.

### WELL-BEING JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION

Prior to involvement with the shiree programme in May 2012 the household’s wellbeing was as followed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Just before the intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being category</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diets</td>
<td>2 meals a day. 1 is panta and the other meal is rice with cheap vegetables but mostly potatoes. Sometimes both meals are panta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank Livelihoods now in terms of contribution to that years’ income</td>
<td>Mintu Day labourer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For other principal adult member</td>
<td>Wife Housewife, occasionally helps Mintu Mia in his work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive assets now rank them in terms of value (e.g. land, livestock, rickshaws),</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House and homestead: ownership, condition of tenure, condition of house.</td>
<td>Lives in a thatched house built on 4 decimals of his own homestead land</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mintu Ali was born in 1938 and can still remember the period of British colonialism. His father Tufan Seikh was a farmer and his mother a housewife. His father actually migrated from Tangail to Roumary in 1935 before he was born. At the time his father was struggling to survive in Tangail and Roumary was badly in need of people to cultivate land as very few crops were produced. Therefore Mintu’s father sold his lands in Tangail and moved to Roumary, where many other people from the same village had previously migrated to. In Roumary the price of land was very cheap and many crops could be produced. He bought 10 bighas\(^1\) of land in different areas of Roumary, mostly on the chars (river islands).

**Mintu’s unconventional upbringing**

When Mintu was born his family were quite well off. They had a good amount of livestock consisting of 8-10 cows, 10-12 goats, lambs and chickens. Mintu was the third child of six brothers. As Mintu had no sisters his mother treated him almost as a daughter in that he used to do all the household chores such as fetching water, chopping vegetables, cleaning, washing dishes, feeding the chicks with his mother and this would normally be a girl’s job i.e. etc. Since his early childhood his mother used to keep him closer than her other children.

Mintu remembers that the family were never left wanting for anything. His father was able to provide three meals for all his family members with a varied diet including meat, egg, milk, and different kind of vegetables almost every day. However neither Mintu nor his brothers went to school because at the time very few people were concerned about receiving a formal education.

**River Erosion**

Roumary is situated on the bank of Brahmaputra river and this had a profound influence on Mintu’s family throughout his life. In 1946 when Mintu was only 8 years old their house and some of their cultivable land was eroded by the river. Mintu’s family shifted from Tapur char to Kheruar char of Roumary. There Mintu’s father had already bought four bighas of land since he knew his other land could get eroded at any time. They stayed there for four years and did well during this time as crop productivity in the land was high. Later they moved again to Tapur char when their lands reappeared from the river after a few years. However within three years river erosion again destroyed their land, forcing them to move to Goddimari, another area of Kurigram district. His father also had land purchased in that area but Mintu could not remember the size of the land. However in this new location crop

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\(^1\) 1 bigha is equal to 33 decimals
productivity was not as high and they couldn’t eat as well or maintain the family with the same standard as they were used to.

**Illness of father**

Life continued in this fashion until his father became sick with Tuberculosis (TB). It was a tough time for them. His father was so sick that he couldn’t go out of the house and was unable to work. Very few of their neighbours supported them since there were lot of myths related with TB and they almost became completely isolated from the rest of the community.

**Brothers cheat family out of land**

Mintu’s two elder brothers took advantage of their father when he was sick. Without his knowledge Mintu’s elder brothers mortgaged his lands to a man in exchange for a huge amount of money and left the house, taking the money with them. His elder brothers cheated the family of their assets and they were unable to recover the land as Mintu’s father was not able to repay the amount taken for mortgage. Without the land to generate an income and with the father too sick to work, the family were forced to sell almost all their livestock to maintain the household.

**Death of father**

Mintu’s father couldn’t recover from TB and died in 1957 when Mintu was 18 years old. Mintu’s neighbours and relatives encouraged him not to leave his family like his elder brothers and Mintu therefore inherited the huge responsibility of managing the household along with his mother and to bring up his three younger brothers. Mintu decided to move to their original house at Tapur Char since they had no land left in Goddimari. They had only a small amount of land in Tapur Char but Mintu started to cultivate it anyway. The family started to eat two meals on average instead of three. His younger brothers started working in others’ houses maintaining livestock but that didn’t add anything to their family income.

**EARLY MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD (1959-1980)**

The land they had there was not enough to sustain a family of five. Mintu therefore decided to do some additional work on the side in order to earn more, save money and support the household. As Tapur Char is near the Indian border, many people in the village were working for some businessmen who smuggled jute and other products across the Indian border illegally. In 1962 Mintu got involved with this and started working as a porter, carrying jute from Bangladesh to India. Mintu believed his role was not illegal but rather the business of the man who was doing the smuggling was illegal. As far as Mintu was concerned, all he had done was helped them to carry the load in return for money. Mintu used to work for 4-5 hours from the evening until night. He earned five taka a day for this work. This money made life
easier, and his younger brothers also joined him in the business when they discovered it was profitable.

**Village politics prevent accessing land**

In the meantime some of their land that had previously been eroded emerged from the river. However another powerful man (usually termed johtdar) of the village grabbed their land and denied their right over it. All the documents related to their ownership over the land got destroyed during the previous flood therefore Mintu had no documents left to legally claim his lands. Mintu was neither financially strong nor socially powerful enough to fight with that johtdar.

**Mintu got married**

Mintu fell in love with Sona Khatun, a young divorcee woman who was his immediate neighbour. In 1965, at the age of 27, he got married to her. Immediately after his marriage, his three younger brothers also got married one by one. By 1970 all his brothers were married and had separated from him. Mintu’s mother remained with Mintu and Sona. Mintu got only the homestead land as his share after the separation, on which he built a thatched house for them to live in.

**Assets for new business destroyed**

Mintu had always wanted a business of his own and was saving money for that purpose. By 1970 he had saved 700 taka with the intention of starting a rice selling business. He planned to produce rice from paddy which he would sell in the market. Therefore he invested his savings in buying paddy, a big pot to boil paddy, a scale with weight bars, bosta (sacks), dali (a big basket made of bamboo) and also installed a dheki (husking pedal machine machine) and a golaghar (granary) in his house to husk the paddy.

Mintu was excited to be starting his business but it was not to be, and Mintu’s house burned down in the night. One of his cousins was a thief and used to steal crops and other things from households of the neighbouring villages and store it in a room near Mintu’s house. He got caught the day before Mintu was planning to start his business and the village committee decided to hold a trial the next day. To destroy the clues and all the evidence (stolen crops and other things) his cousin’s brother burnt his house so that no one could prove his guilt. Unfortunately Mintu’s house also got burnt since it was next door. All of his investments were stored in the house and they all turned to ashes. That was a turning point in his life; from that day onwards life has not been good.
Wishing for a child

Mintu and his wife had no child. He invested a lot of his income in treating him and his wife for a child but nothing worked. He took treatment from kabiraj and took enchanted water/oil from religious leaders but failed to have any children. Mintu realized that was how his life was designed by the Almighty and stopped spending money to treat her for infertility.

Mintu’s mother died in 1980. Now Mintu’s family comprised of only two members, his wife and himself. Although Mintu was still involved in smuggling, he was growing older and the border security was so high that working for such a business had become very risky. Still Mintu continued to do the same thing and thought he would save some more money and then would start a new business with the saving.

Mintu worked very hard and saved up enough money to invest in two goats. Within the following two years his goats gave birth to six baby goats. He thought he would get a handsome amount after selling them and would invest it to start a small new business. However Mintu was cursed with bad luck as all his goats died after a morok (a local term used to refer to a pestilence causing great mortality of livestock, poultry, beasts, birds etc). He had lost his possibility for a better future.

MID-ADULTHOOD (1981-2000)

In 1985 Mintu stopped working on the Indian border and instead got a job as a day labourer. Mintu had never imagined that one day he would have to be a day labourer. Since there were only two members in his family he could at least afford two meals with his daily income but with reduced frequency of fish, meat, egg or milk. The rest of his mid-adulthood continued without any major events, but Mintu grew upset about not having a child and felt insecure about his old age.

LATE ADULTHOOD (2001-2012)

Dream of Dhaka

In 2001, two of his nephews took Mintu to Dhaka where his nephew was working in a garments factory. His nephews were thinking of starting a grocery shop there and needed a trusted person to run the shop since they had to do their jobs and would not get enough time to oversee it. Mintu thought he would get a handsome payment from his nephews and he would get relief from the physical labour that he was doing in the village as his age meant it was getting too tough for him. Mintu left his wife in the village and planned to send money for her so that she could survive well. However his dream of having a monthly salary got shattered as his nephews didn’t pay him a regular salary. Instead he was given three meals a day and got to stay in their house for free. When his nephews used to come to the village
they would give Mintu’s wife a lump sum amount but it was meagre. Mintu’s wife insisted that he returned to the village. In 2004, after three years and at the age of 66, Mintu returned to village.

By this time Mintu’s physical strength had greatly reduced and people didn’t want to take him on as a day labourer because his productivity would be less than a young adult man. Fortunately some people showed him mercy and would hire him but Mintu could not work every day. Mintu never allowed his wife to work outside even though he was facing hardship in maintaining his family.

**Illness and disability**

In 2008 Mintu got a mild paralysis in the left side of his body which he believed was caused by being possessed by an evil spirit (batash laga) while working in the field. He was not able to take treatment of a medical doctor but instead took enchanted water from a local kabiraj. However this did not work and his partial paralysis remained, further reducing his capacity to work. Whereas previously he could go to work every alternative day, after the paralysis he was only able to work two days a week. Moreover the nature of food consumption added to the burden. Panta is their breakfast/lunch now and for dinner they have rice with some vegetables. The only time Mintu has meat is during the eid ul azha when most of the capable Muslim family sacrifice animals. Fish and meat are hardly in the menu, not more than once in a month and sometimes only bimonthly.

**Box 1: Aging in Bangladesh**

Aging has emerged as a new demographic issue in Bangladesh as life expectancies improve and the absolute number of older people increases. A social issue related to this is widowed hood, which will increase, following this demographic trend.

Traditionally elderly people often live with and rely on close immediate family, particularly married sons with grandchildren. The older generation often support their younger generation both financially and voluntarily, through child care and household work. Arguably however these traditional support systems are decreasing as Bangladesh experiences broad socio-economic change. The forms of poverty that these changes entail can be seen as one cause behind this reduction, and many people are forced to continue.

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doing physically demanding labour well beyond the age of 60. Elderly people can easily be vulnerable and those in poverty are even further excluded and insecure.

Given these changes it is important for the government to ensure there are appropriate systems in place to support and protect the elderly and particularly those most vulnerable. Direct financial support as well as support related to health care may be important starting points. Of the 12,000 plus NGOs working in Bangladesh few are specifically targeting the elderly and more therefore also needs to be done by civil society organisations.

**Insecurity of being uprooted**

In the past few years another of Mintu’s nephews has been threatening to force him to leave his house and grab his only homestead land which is eight decimals. Mintu has no papers or documents that prove his ownership over his homestead land but he had been living there since his birth, albeit with regular intervals due to river erosion and flooding. Mintu believes that since he is old and has no children, his nephew is trying to grab the land by power. When he went to Dhaka to work in the grocery shop of another nephew, this neighbouring nephew thought that they were giving Mintu work so that they would inherit the land after Mintu’s death. This is why he began threatening him to leave the house. Till now it has remained a verbal threat but Mintu is worried that anytime he could be thrown out of the house. Mintu said, “amar jodi ekta pola thakto taile he sahos paitona amar sathe erokom korar, ami bura manush ami kichu koite pari na, kichu korteo pari na.” (If I had a son, he would not dare to do this, we are old, we can’t say anything and can’t do anything about it).

**Village politics**

The more interesting thing is that his other nephews (who took him to Dhaka) suggested that Mintu filed a case against the nephew who was threatening him. However Mintu could not afford the cost of making a case against him, so the cousins did it on his behalf and bore all the costs. Mintu can understand why they will invest in filing the case but he has no option left since he needs to keep his home till both he and his wife die. Although Mintu had no money to pay his nephews back, he worked as a day laborer in one of their houses for free. Mintu couldn’t demand payment because he is old and they are bearing the cost of the case they have filed for him.

**Being deprived of property**

Mintu’s in laws’ house is near to his village. Mintu’s wife, Sona Khatun, is the only daughter of his parents in laws and so she should have inherited a few decimals of land from her father’s
property. However her parents are not alive and his only brother in law refused to hand over the property to Mintu, even though Sona claimed it from her brother. Mintu’s brother in law’s concern is that ultimately he will have to take the responsibility of his sister once Mintu dies. If he hands over the land to them now and Mintu sells it, he will not be able to meet the cost of maintaining his sister.

**Spirituality and healing**

In 2011 Mintu got an anal infection which he suffered a lot with. However he had no money to see a pas kora daktar (medical doctor). When one of his brothers saw his suffering, he gave Mintu 30 taka to buy medicine from a local pharmacy. Mintu promised to offer five taka to the local shrine if he got cured. He bought medicine from the local medical store and got cured but has still not been able to afford to pay the five taka to the shrine. He is determined to pay this money before he dies.

**Threats of eviction from homestead**

Mintu wishes to have some valo mondo khabar (usually refers to good, rich and nutritious food like meat, fish, milk, fruits etc.) at this age but he can’t afford it. He is unable to sleep as he feels too much tension over his house, not knowing if he will be able to die in his own home or on the street. Mintu also fears what will happen to his wife after he dies. He does not think his family will allow his wife to stay for a single day in the house, even though she is so old.

Now Mintu is living on the mercy of his nephews, brothers and in laws. When he feels good he goes for work. If he works for the whole day now he gets 150 taka where a physically fit person gets 200 taka though the level of work is same. Even that 150 taka is hard to get and requires bargaining power which Mintu does not have. However he thinks that whatever he gets he will have to use to survive.

**CONCLUSION**

Mintu’s life shows many important interacting and overlapping dynamics to extreme poverty which together bring Mintu and his wife to their current situation.

During Mintu’s early life his household’s situation deteriorated due to three clear factors. Losing land to river erosion forced his household to work on comparatively unproductive land and their nutrition decreased. His father’s illness and subsequent death not only left the household without their main income earner but also allowed Mintu’s elder brothers to take advantage of the family, cheat them of assets and abandon Mintu to support his mother and younger siblings.
Now supporting his household, Mintu’s situation improved when he found work helping smuggle goods across the Indian border. At the same time their previous land which had disappeared under the river re-emerged but was denied to them by a local elite, this highlights their powerlessness and the importance of the local political-economy. Losing business assets in a fire deteriorated his household’s capacity to significantly improve their situation. During this period Mintu got married, though a characteristic of this marriage – their lack of children – was itself a cause of their future poverty in later life.

Factors related to his household and wider family again play an important role in Mintu and his wife’s poverty in later life. Having been forced to work as a day labourer Mintu migrates to Dhaka though this ends badly when his nephews’ don’t pay him a regular salary for running their small business. His nephews’ and wider family again detriment his condition when they threaten to force him off his land, leaving him psychologically distressed, and when his wife’s family refuse them their rightful inheritance. Mintu sees his lack of a son as significant cause of their vulnerability, in not being able to support the household or protect them from family and wider society.
# Life History Map

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Well-being movement</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938-1945</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Born into a moderate poor household with livestock and land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-1957</td>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>Falls to working extreme poor due to river erosion, brothers cheating parents and death of father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-80</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Works smuggling goods over Indian border, though is prevented by local elites from taking old land and assets destroyed in fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-2007</td>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>Forced to work as a day labourer, unsuccessful migration to Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2012</td>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>Now very elderly, suffers partial paralysis, unable to work often, threatened to be thrown off land</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mintu grew older and started working as a day labourer. Two meals a day became hard to manage. Mintu got married, followed by his younger brothers who all separated from family. Mintu's father got TB and his elder brothers cheated family by selling their land in secret. Elite person appropriated some of Mintu's father’s re-emerged land. Mintu saved money to start business of rice husking but all his capital and savings got destroyed in a fire.

Mintu went to Dhaka to work in his nephews shop for a couple of years. Mintu grows older, became partially paralysed, and was unable to work frequently. One of his relatives threatened to throw him off his land. Mintu becomes increasingly old and weak and no one wants to hire him for work.