LIFE HISTORY OF RANI BALA

INTRODUCTION

Rani Bala is 40 and is moderate poor in 2009 (i.e. above the extreme poverty line). She is the only one in our sample who was moderate poor just before the intervention. Qualitative interviewing can uncover actual material bases of households through successive interviews better than comparatively quicker targeting schemes. We decided to retain her in our sample as she reflects a very large population of the moderate poor who periodically dip into extreme poverty – for Rani it was a family separation and cyclone Aila.

This household has four members, Rani Bala (40), her husband (55), one son (12) and one daughter (14). Her eldest daughter was married off two years back. Both her...
children attend school. Living on government khasland, Rani Bala along with her husband has been involved in buying and selling shrimp and other fish for more than a decade. Though her husband used to earn before, presently his income has decreased due to ill health. He now helps his wife in the business. Rani Bala’s in-laws live in the hut next to theirs and occasionally eat with her family. Rani Bala has to contribute for medical expenses of her in-laws.

As Rani Bala lives near the embankment for the river Kholpatua, her homestead is in constant threat from cyclones and tidal surges. Her homestead was washed away during Aila. As her livelihood is dependent on fish business, her monthly income varies during the year. In the lean season of shrimp production, when she cannot buy or sell shrimp from the locality, both she and her husband try to supplement family income by working in rural road maintenance and embankment construction programmes. During this time they earn 150 taka per day for 15 to 20 days a month. The profit she makes from fish trading rises to more than 4000 (as estimated by Rani Bala) in the peak season of shrimp production.

Sources of Income for Rani Bala’s family throughout the year have been shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boishak</th>
<th>Jolitha</th>
<th>Ashar</th>
<th>Snibon</th>
<th>Bhadro</th>
<th>Ashwin</th>
<th>Kartik</th>
<th>Agrahayan</th>
<th>Poush</th>
<th>Magh</th>
<th>Falgun</th>
<th>Chaitra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ail 14</td>
<td>May 14</td>
<td>June 14</td>
<td>July 14</td>
<td>Aug 14</td>
<td>Sep 14</td>
<td>Oct 14</td>
<td>Nov 14</td>
<td>Dec 14</td>
<td>Jan 14</td>
<td>Feb 14</td>
<td>March 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working as day labourer in road maintenance and construction work</td>
<td>• Petty fish trading (working as farias or middlemen)</td>
<td>• Working as day labourer in road maintenance and construction work</td>
<td>• Working in other people’s shrimp ghers</td>
<td>Lean season</td>
<td>Pick season for shrimp/fish trading</td>
<td>lean season</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cyclones and tidal surges pose severe threats to her life and livelihood

Rani Bala thinks that natural disasters like cyclones and tidal surges pose severe threats to her life and livelihood. She had lost fish worth taka 10000 and several of her poultry birds during Aila. Her home was submerged in water during the recent tidal surges of October 8 and 9, 2010.

A recent incident that had posed threat to her livelihood is the government decision of not allowing flow of salt water to the shrimp ghers directly. The gher owners have to construct concrete canals to take water into their farms. This decision was taken to reduce salinity of the land but as this might be taking a long time, Rani Bala fears that her shrimp business might remain closed for a relatively longer period of time.

**WELL-BEING JUST BEFORE THE SHIREE INTERVENTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Just before the intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being category</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diets</td>
<td>Two meals a day with vegetable curvy. Fish once or twice a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livelihoods now) in terms of contribution to that years’</td>
<td>1. Petty fish trading 2. Day labourer at shrimp ghers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVE

#### CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Rani Bala and her eldest to two brothers and a sister were born in a poor household. Both her parents worked as agricultural labourers and used to earn 1000 taka per month. Both of them studied up to class two.

**Child labour to earn tuition**

Rani Bala also used to work with them earning around 7 to 8 taka per day. She remembers that she used to pay for her tuition with the money she earned from this work. That time, she paid 20 taka monthly for her tuition. She also helped her siblings study in the schools. One of her brother studied up to class 6 and her youngest sister studied up to class 5. Only her youngest brother was able to pass Higher Secondary School Examination. When asked how they paid for his education, she said that her younger brother worked in a brick kiln and with the money that he could save, he continued on with his education.

**Migrating regularly to Kolkata for work - she works as child housemaid**

During the liberation war of 1971, her mother’s family had shifted to Kolkata, India. Her maternal uncles all started living there. From 1981/82, her whole family started going to Kolkata to work as wage labourers. Her parents worked as construction labourers while she worked as housemaids in four houses. She remembers that she used to earn 150 rupees\(^1\) per month working as a housemaid.

Rani Bala’s family continue migrating to Kolkata for 5 years before she was married. Each year, the family stayed in Kolkata for 8 months and when it was time for paddy harvesting in Bangladesh, the family used to come back and work here.

Rani Bala remembers that her employers appreciated her as she used to work very hard. She said that her parents did not know that she was working as a housemaid.

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\(^1\) Currency used in India.
and they also did not want her to work. She remembers that they could have three satisfying meals a day with vegetables and rice.

**Accidents and financial support**

While in Kolkata, both Rani Bala and her father had accidents. Her father fell from the building where he was working as a construction labourer and broke his leg. The company constructing the building paid for his medical expenses which was around 6500 rupees. Her father could not work for six months after that but the family could maintain themselves as the company paid compensation to her father. Rani Bala also had an accident while she was crossing the road and she was taken to the hospital by the owners of the car. They paid for her full medical treatment amounting to 3500 Rs. She recollects that if not for the generous support from all these quarters, it would have been very difficult for her family to continue working in Kolkata.

**Education in Kolkata up to grade 10**

Though all through her childhood, the family was moving in between Bangladesh and India, but she continued on with her studies as she stayed with her maternal uncles while her parents visited Bangladesh. She studied in Kolkata up to grade 10.

**Married at 14 and could not take exams**

Afterwards, when she was married, she had to leave school and was not able to appear for school ending examination. She was married when she was 14 years old. Her family came back to Bangladesh for the marriage. She never went to Kolkata after her marriage.

**EARLY MARRIED LIFE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD**

**Extreme poor marriage to a very poor man 5 years older than her**

In 1990, Rani Bala was married to a person 15 years older to her. Her husband had two brothers and one sister and he could only sign his name. Her husband worked as a petty fish trader. Her in laws did not have any land of their own and they lived in a 7 decimal² of government land.

For the marriage, her in laws asked for 3000 taka and a cow as dowry which her father provided for.

She comments that as her husband was much older to her and owned no land, her father could do away with small amount of dowry for her wedding. The others, who were much younger and more eligible, wanted more dowry which her father could not pay.

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² A measurement indicator for land. 100 decimals=1 acre.
Though she feels that she could have been married to a much better family but she also said that she never had to face any abuse in her in-laws place for dowry or any other purpose.

**Working as a day labourer after the marriage**

After the marriage, she started staying with her in-laws. During this time she worked as a day labourer working at peoples shrimp ghers and agricultural lands. She also used to catch fish fries from the river. She used to earn on average 60 taka per week. Her income was supplemented by the income her husband made as a petty fish trader. Her eldest daughter was born two years after her marriage.

**Cultural circumstance of women’s work: husband’s disapproval of her working as a high paid nurse in a local hospital**

Just after her daughter’s birth, she got a job to work as a nurse in a clinic located in the district head quarter. She was to be paid 700 taka per month if she had taken the job. This was a government job and she had an uncle who helped her get the job.

But her husband disapproved of it and so she was not able to take it up. She still blames her husband for this. When asked why he did not let her take up this job, Rani Bala’s husband said that

> He thought if Rani Bala had taken the job then she would not be able to look after her elderly in-laws and no one would be there to look after the household as she would have to stay in Shyamnagar (district head quarter and almost 15 kilometres away from the place where they were leaving) for the job.

Though Rani Bala could have earned lot more than what she was earning as a day labourer but it could be assumed that her husband had settled for “less income and wife living with him” rather than “more income with wife staying someplace else for work”.

It could also be assumed that Rani Bala was not able to practice the sense of independence that she had demonstrated over the years prior to marriage when she had stayed in Kolkata. She was married to a person much older to her.

**Support for children’s education**

Her three children were born during the nineties. Her eldest daughter was born in 1992, youngest daughter 1998 and the only son in 2001. Her eldest daughter studied up to class eight and she used to live with her uncles.

When asked how she was able to pay for her daughter’s education, Rani Bala said

1. That the shrimp gher owners with whom she does her business used to buy text books for her daughter.

2. Her brothers paid for her tuition fees.
3. As her other children received stipend from government and received free text
books.
So she did not have to spend anything for their education at that time.

But now as the children have gone into higher classes now, she now spends 250 taka
for their private tuition.

**MID-ADULTHOOD**

**Separation from In-laws**

After 2000, she and her husband got separated from her in-laws. She said that it was
her idea as she did not want to be a burden to her in-laws. But the family could feel
the financial pressure after the separation as she commented that,

“While we were with my in-laws, we did not have to worry too much about the
family expenses. But when we were separated, we started having financial
difficulties”

**Becoming a petty fish trader**

After her family was separated from her in-laws, she started working as a fish trader
along with her husband. This sort of petty fish trading involves buying white fish\(^3\) and
shrimp, fish and shrimp fries from the local shrimp gherns (in cash or on credit) and
selling them to the whole sellers.

She and her husband worked jointly in the business. She said that as her husband had
not been good with calculations so she had to be aware of all the business deals that
they were making with the shrimp gher owners and other traders. But she added that
both she and her husband always took the important decisions jointly and her
husband respected her opinion.

She also used to keep the capital for the business to herself.

When asked how she could make any profit from the business, she explained that it
was not possible to profit every day from this business as the market price of the
shrimp/fish varied each day. She usually bought fish/shrimp from the gher owners on
credit and due to this she had to make the deals to pay 20 taka more per kg of
fish/shrimp to the gher owners. She was only able to get a profit if that day’s selling
price in the whole seller markets was more than what she had to pay to gher owners.
If the difference was greater, her profit margin was greater. She also explained that if
she could buy the produce in cash than the profit margin also increased. In a good
day, she would make profit of taka 400, on some other days, there would be nothing.

But she says that she had been gradually improving her situation till Aila
happened.

\(^3\) Curp fishes cultivated with shrimps.
Rani Bala also added that though most of the people with whom she used to do business were Muslims but she never faced any threat from them or they never tried to cheat her. There are very few women in the area who are involved in fish business like her. She claimed that she is respected by the traders and other shrimp gher owners and they have always been part of a very strong support system for her. She has been financially assisted several times (her daughter’s wedding, medical treatment of her husband, funeral of her mother, daughter’s education) by the fish traders and gher owners. This good rapport helped her strengthen her business.

But she wanted her husband to take a more active part. Her husband’s income had decreased over the years and she had to play the main role in maintaining the family. She wanted her husband to assist her more in her business as she thought that the support she was presently getting was inadequate.

Decline in fish trading due to Aila

As the embankments protecting the union where Rani Bala lives were broken during Aila, shrimp farming was suspended after Aila. She also could not continue her business. She started catching shrimp fries from the river and selling it to the whole sellers.

Paying dowry for daughter’s marriage

Her eldest daughter was married off in 2009. She had to give 15000 taka cash to the groom’s family which her brothers gave her. The groom’s family also wanted a gold ring which she was not able to give. Rani Bala’s brothers gave gold earrings to her daughter for the marriage.

The local shrimp farm owners with whom she does her business collectively helped her in arranging the wedding. They paid for the food for the wedding which she calculated to be around 40000 taka.

But her daughter’s in laws kept on asking for dowry and they do not allow her daughter to visit Rani Bala and her husband. Rani Bala still needs to repay a portion of the money that her brothers gave her for the dowry without any interest.

Devastation due to Aila

Rani Bala thought that the devastation due to Aila had severe negative impact that hindered progress of her life.

- She lost fish amounting to taka 10000 and several of her poultry birds (8 ducks and 5 chickens) and livestock (6 sheep) due to Aila. Her house was also washed away by the tidal waves.

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4 Super cyclone Aila hit the south western coastal areas of Bangladesh in May 2009 killing almost 15000 people. The losses to property, livestock and agricultural production had been substantial.
She with her family had lived on the embankment where her family had constructed a small thatched hut for six months.

**Post Aila Assistance**

She received relief from government and different NGOs (20 kg rice and 6 kg pulses from government and 30 kg from ‘Shushilan’ per month). That time government and other organisation started different ‘Food for work’ scheme in the area to create income sources for the Aila affected people. She received 3000 taka from government to construct her house. She also received latrines from a local NGO after Aila. After she was able to return to her house, she started working in the food/cash for work programmes.

For each day’s work, she was paid 150 taka. But this work was not regular as in some months she had work only for 22 days and for some months, there was none.

**Liabilities**

She still needs to repay 15000 taka to the shrimp gher owners. This is the unpaid amount of the fish that she had lost during Aila.

**Fish business closed down**

Her fish business was shut down after Aila. She could only resume her business after she received Shiree intervention in August 2010.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Rani Bala’s life history tells us about a household who moved from moderate poor to extreme working poor situation only twice, when they were separated from their in laws and when they suffered severe asset loss due to Aila. But interestingly enough, this family had been able to cope well with difficult times because they had strong social support structure which provided financial assistance for them along with business opportunities. Moreover, she had a good education up to standard 10 which it is assumed helped her with strategizing and calculations she needed to make for her fish business.

Her good rapport and social networks had also abled her to get the road construction and maintenance work during the lean seasons of fish trading. The support she is getting from her husband to run the business is also giving her a sense of security to make deals with shrimp gher owners and agents. It is my understanding that this family’s ability to successfully negotiate and build favourable relationships with the wider social agents have helped then to quickly recover from all the temporary setbacks that they had to face. Though Rani Bala still needs to repay her 15000 taka loan to shrimp gher owners along with a portion of the money her brother had lent her for her daughter’s marriage, but her access to different business parties
and her getting involved in Food/cash for work programme will make it relatively easier for the household to repay the loans.
Rani Bala’s marriage to an asset less, illiterate person has made her lose higher income earning opportunities and confined her to low paying works as a day labourer.

Fish trading along with her husband had given her the opportunity to raise the family well being and build strong support system.

Separation from in laws made her lose the family support system that supplemented Rani Bala and her husband’s income.

Super cyclone Aila caused significant asset loss along with loss of business for Rani Bala. She still needs to repay 15000 taka to shrimp gher owners.