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AN ANALYSIS OF THE RURAL POVERTY FROM PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES : A Case Study From Amarpur VDC of Panchthar District

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This article focuses on the rural poverty from the people's perspectives. It emphasises on understanding poverty in the context which usually implies trying to discover how people view their own situations and how they solve their problems. This research article incorporates the views, expressions and analyses of rural poor on poverty in terms of their economic and socio-cultural context. As the research is about the analysis of micro-level situation, methods used in this research are the combination of both participatory and anthropological tools. Participatory tools were used to reflect the situations of the poor people from their own analyses as these tools provide a basis to elicit their situations. Similarly, anthropological tools give better insight into the situation of the people (Bernerd, 1991). This paper is based on the Chambers' (1983) deprivation theory. He defines the causes of rural inequity inter-linking five clusters, i.e. powerlessness, poverty, physical weakness, isolation and vulnerability. Together, they form the deprivation trap. The deprivation trap is valid at household level.

Poverty is a major problem in Nepal. Of the total population, about 49 percent are below poverty line (NPC, 1992). Poverty has affected the large number of people in general and rural people in particular. Number of poor people are increasing due to stagnant growth in the economy, increased population pressure and increased unemployment (Blaikie et.al. 1982).

There is a plenty of literature on poverty and poverty alleviation. Past literatures focused on different aspects of poverty.

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ICIMOD (1993) stated that the close inter-linkages between limited resource base, rapid population growth, environmental degradation, low level of social development and wide spread poverty pre-present a complex development challenge which shows that poor people are bad for the environment and more poor people are worse. Family size and dependency ratio are higher in the Hills than in the Terai. This means that the size of poor Nepalese family is bigger than that of non-poor families (Bhandari et.al, 1986).

The relative concentration of children in poor families means that the children of Nepal are proportionately more exposed than adults to the disadvantages of poverty including limited access to food, education, health services and sanitation. At the same time, they are more vulnerable than adults to the consequences of poverty (World Bank, 1991). The ratio of total household members to earning households members shows some unusual pattern. Usually, a higher dependency ratio characterizes the poor families (Karki, 1996).

Land has been considered as one of the sources of wealth, status and power. Generation of social inequality in the rural areas is due to unequal distribution of land (Bhandari, et.al., 1986). The national living standard survey (NLSS) (1996) reported that there are 40.13 percent small farmers operating less than 0.5 ha. of land and distribution of small farmers are more in the Hills (0.89) with national average of 1.09 ha.

Different cultural factors are responsible for influencing socio-economic life of the people. Foote et.al (1996) reported that a funeral can debilitate the economy of a family for years. The vicious debt cycle has created an increasing trend of debt which often leads to land loss, and inevitably to food deficiency. The other severe hardship they experience in the celebration of festivals such as Dasain. The other dimensions of persisting poverty are due to existing socio-cultural values. Present socio-economic structure is built on oppression and exploitation of people they want to preserve the present structure because it gives them prestige and wealth (Dahal, 1987).

Levels of education is one of the major determinants of the socio-economic condition of the people. NLSS, (1996) reported that only 38 percent of the population consisting of 52.15 % for males and 24.35 %

for females, are literate. Literacy rates are higher in urban areas (64 %) than in rural areas (36 %).

Past literatures on poverty which are based upon secondary data with extensive coverage and limiting the concept of poverty into economic and physical indicators interpreted the concept of poverty with their own indicators. In such studies, poor people responded what was asked to them with prefixed indicators of poverty. In the economic analysis of poverty, it is very difficult to measure poverty because basic needs of people vary from society to society and culture to culture (Heralambus, 1997).

The Study Area

Amarpur is one of the VDCs of the Panchthar district. The study area is bordered by Tharpu VDC in the east, Tamor river in the west north, Kabeli river in the north and Subhang VDC in the south. The study area is fifty kilometers far from the district headquarters of Panchthar district. Meechi highway passes through the study area. Kabeli and Tamor are two perennial rivers which flow along low elevation. The major local markets are Amarpur, Bhalu Chok, Singapur and Kabeli.

Methodology of the Study

Ward number 1, 3, 5, 8 and 9 of Amarpur VDC were selected on the basis of criteria such as remoteness from the roadhead, insufficiency of food yields, lack of school and water supply facilities, lack of implementation of development activities in the past and ecosystemic fragility and vulnerability (such as frequent occurrence of landslide). In these five wards, there are 522 households of different ethnic and caste groups. All households were selected for the general study. After well-being ranking, only the households of the poor were selected for indepth study. Well-being ranking, focus group discussion, key informant interview and observation were the major tools for data collection.

Population Distribution of the Sample Wards

There were 522 households with 3361 population. According to the study, 1685 male and 1676 female population is distributed in the sample wards. Ward no. five had the minimum number of households and ward no. nine was biggest both in the number of households and population. Average family size and sex ratio of male and female population was found to be 6.43 and 100.53, respectively. Distribution of

households by ethnicity indicated that Bahun and Chhetry are the dominant caste groups in the study area (42.14 %). The second largest group is Tamang (19.81 %) followed by Limbu (13.83 %), Rai (7.65 %), Newar (5.35 %), Majhi (4.94 %), Kami (2.91 %), Damai (1.67 %), Magar (1.01 %) and Jogi (0.78 %), respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1 : Population Distribution of the Study Area on the Basis of Caste and Ethnicity

Caste/ethnicity	Total HHs	Male	Female	Total Population	%	Family size
Bahun/Chhetry	221	708	708	1416	42.13	6.40
Tamang	109	327	339	666	19.81	6.11
Limbu	70	228	237	465	13.83	6.6
Rai	41	128	129	257	7.65	6.28
Newar	27	93	87	180	5.35	6.66
Majhi	21	93	73	166	4.94	7.90
Kami	15	49	49	98	2.91	6.53
Damai	8	28	28	56	1.67	7.00
Magar	5	19	15	34	1.01	6.8
Jogi	5	12	11	23	0.78	4.6
Total	522	1685	1676	3361	100	6.43

Source : PRA, 1997.

Classification of the Households by Poor Rank

In order to identify the rural poor in the present study, the households of different wards were categorized into different socio-economic strata. Well-being ranking was done in group meetings with the participation of males and females. The number of categories varied from one ward to another. In some cases, the village people made up to ten categories while defining the well-being at the household level. After categorizing the households, the participants provided the characteristics of the households in each category. Common indicators used by the community for well-being ranking are food availability from their own production, job at foreign army, number of cattle, type of house, pension, social prestige, family security and the presence and absence of male in the home. On the basis of indicators of well-being ranking and other supplementing information found during the study, all households of the clusters are classified into four major ranks. Rank A, B, C and D are termed as very rich, rich, poor and very poor, respectively. There are not very

rich households (Rank 'A') in Majhi, Kami, Damai, Magar and Jogi community (see Table 2).

Table 2 : Population Distribution of the Rural Poor Households on the Basis of Caste/Ethnicity

S. N.	Caste/ethnicity group	Rank 'A' very Rich	Rank 'B' Rich	A+B	Rank 'C' Poor	Rank 'D' very poor	C+D	Total HHs
1	Bahun/Chhetry	50	62	112	72	37	109	221
2	Tamang	13	35	48	33	28	61	109
3	Limbu	17	31	48	8	14	22	70
4	Rai	6	19	25	8	8	16	41
5	Newar	6	10	16	6	5	11	27
6	Majhi	-	3	3	6	12	18	21
7	Kami	-	3	3	2	10	12	15
8	Damai	-	1	1	2	5	7	8
9	Magar	-	-	-	-	5	5	5
D	Jogi	-	-	-	-	5	5	5
Total		92	164	256	137	129	266	522
Percentage		17.62	31.42	49.04	26.24	24.72	50.95	100

Source : PRA, 1997.

(1) Very Rich Households

These are very influential personalities of the society with good social respect. Many of very rich households are active in politics. Many of them have either job in the foreign army or have retired from the army. They have enough land in the village and also grow cash crops like cardamom. Most of them have land in Terai. They sell food-grains in the village. Many rural poor have to depend on them for food and work. Size of livestock is bigger than other groups. They have either improved cow or buffaloes. They have bigger and better houses than others. Some of them have domestic servants also. They have access to higher education. Such households constitute 17.62 percent to the total number of the households in the study area.

(2) Rich Households

This group is relatively well off and has fixed sources of income from either cash or kind. It has larger land size (From 16 to 40 ropani). Quality of the land is good and fertile which contributed to food availability for more than one year. Normally, they do not borrow loan for daily necessary activities. These households constitute 31.42 % of the total households. In this, study very rich and rich households are categorized as well off households.

(3) Poor Households

These households have better position than the very poor households and are deprived than the well off households. They have own land with small size ranging from 5 to 15 ropanis. The quality of land is not that good. Food sufficiency is for five to eight months. Some of them are in service in low position. Sometimes they also get involved in wage labor within the village. Some of them have access to local high school. These households constitute 26.24 % of the total households.

(4) Very Poor Households

Very poor households are characterized by miserable socio-economic condition (Pokharel, 1999). Food sufficiency is for less than four months from their own production. They have either small land size of less than 4 ropanis or have no land. These households are keeping young animals or other's animals on shared basis. Their source of income is in farm or off farm farming. Few of them cultivate others' land on the basis of share-cropping. These households comprise 24.72 percent of the total households. In this study, both poor and very poor households are categorized under rural poor households.

Basic Features of the Rural Poor**(a) Poverty**

Focus group discussion, key informant interview, case study and observation were basic techniques to understand the extent of the people's poverty. In this study, poverty is defined in terms of food sufficiency. Chambers (1983) states that poverty contributes to physical weakness through the lack of food, small bodies, malnutrition leading to low immune response to infection and inability to reach or pay for health services, to isolation due to inability to pay for schooling cost, to look for work, to vulnerability through lack of assets to pay large expenses or to meet contingencies, and to powerlessness because lack of wealth goes with low status, the poor have no voice. The field evidences supported that the rural poor spent their substantial amount of time in search of food. To cope with the problem they adopted different strategies as sale of assets, pulling children out of school, wage labour activities, etc.

(b) Physical Weakness

Chambers (1983) noted that the physical weakness of a household contributes to poverty in several ways : through the low productivity of weak labor, through an inability to cultivate larger areas or to work longer hours, through the cultivation of larger areas or working longer hours, through the lower wages paid, through withdrawal or weakening of labor through sickness. In the study area, some of the ethnic/caste groups had large family size in comparison to the district and national level average family size. But the average family size of the rural poor was not as high as well off of the study areas. However, existing production from land could not fulfill the food demand of the rural poor households throughout the year. All family members depended on wage labour of the household head. Hence, the average family size could be considered a high one in terms of production.

(c) Powerlessness

Many rural poor households were dependent economically upon the local well off households. Such kind of dependency gave the rural poor households a subordinate position in society. They could not express independent opinion against the money lender. They have to spend a substantial amount of time to seek loan. Chambers (1983) views that it reinforces physical weakness, because time and energy have to be devoted to acquiring for access, because labor obligations to patrons reduce labor availability for household production or other earnings.

(d) Isolation

The poor households of the study area live in different socio-cultural and geographical situations. Not all the rural poor are remote from communication, services and market centres. Some of them concentrate on the roadhead of Mechi highway. However, they occupy marginal land. Some of them live in vulnerable places such as Apegounda, Phedappa and Jorpani of the study area. These settlements are either along steep slopes or the landslide prone areas. Comparatively, wards 8 and 9 of the study area are less accessible from the roadhead.

(e) Vulnerability

The rural poor have not enough land, no sufficient production and no employment opportunities. As a coping strategy they sell

assets or live without meals or have half one meal for a few days. In this regards, Chambers (1983) mentioned that vulnerability relates to poverty through the sale of mortgage of productive assets, to physical because to handle contingencies, time and energy have to be substituted for many, to isolation through withdrawal whether spatial or social following shocks and contingencies and to powerlessness through the dependence on patrons to which it gives rise.

Survival Strategies of the Rural Poor Households

The food sufficiency of the rural poor comprises the agricultural and livestock production for their own consumption and partial source of income is sale of lentils, citrus fruits, etc. All of the rural poor do not produce enough food from own land as well as others' land to meet household demand see (Table : 3). It reveals that 51.50 percent households have sufficient food for only 6-8 months. Another 23.31 % households have food for 1-4 months only. A slightly more than 15 percent households have food scarcity throughout the year and the remaining 10.15 percent have food sufficiency for four to six months. It was reported that food deficit households derive the supplementary income from wage labor, portering, loan from local money lenders, seasonal migration, etc.

Table 3 Food Sufficiency of the Rural Poor HHs

Food Sufficiency	Total HHs	Percentage
Zero month	40	15.04
1-4 months	62	23.31
4-6 months	27	10.15
6-8 months	137	51.50
Total	266	100

Source : PRA, 1997.

During the field visit, discussions were made on coping strategies adopted by the rural poor households during the time of hardship or food deficit period. It was noticed that the rural poor households adopted different occupations to meet their food requirement which are described below.

(1) Wage Labour

Table 3 reveals that none of the rural poor households have sufficient food through agricultural production in the study areas. They earn their living through agricultural wage labor or other wage labor. Masonry, carpentry, ploughing, digging, and sawing are the major types of wage labor opportunities in the study area. It was

reported that a large number of wage labourers are employed within or outside of the study area during monsoon season. Similarly, the households of the rural poor get labour opportunity during the cardamom harvesting time. Occasionally, the poor households get labour opportunities along the Mechi highway to clear the landslide debris. It was reported that both males and females are involved in agricultural wage labour. In addition, the male members are involved in outside the village wage labour also. The wage rates of the study area varied for males and females. Males receive Rs. 25 per day whereas females receive only Rs. 12 to 15 a day. If a male gets ploughing job, he earns Rs. 30/- with one time meal a day.

(2) Seasonal Migration

Another coping strategy of the rural poor is seasonal migration. Insufficient land, poor crop yields, and rural indebtedness are the notable reasons for the seasonal migration of the study area. Economic hardship is the main reason for periodic migration. There are also several evidences of drought and flood causing for seasonal migration. In the beginning, such migration is temporary and after some times either the migrants came back or settle down at the new place permanently. A few people from the rural poor households are going to Sikkim as well as Nagaland also. In the months of July/August, the rural poor migrate to Sikkim. After earning some cash income, they return to their villages and repay loans or take back their land given to use for others on mortgage basis. One can earn Rs. 4000 to 5000 during the migration period. Some of the members of the rural poor households migrate to Arabian countries also. It was reported that those who went to Arab had mortgaged their own land and ornament for travelling. In this case, the debtors paid Rs. 100 percent interest to local money lenders when they come back from Arab. A key informant in the study area reported that one family could not pay on his return. This completely ruined his family.

(3) Loan Borrowing

Almost all of the households of the rural poor fall in debt. Borrowing loan is the common way to solve economic crisis in their daily life. The majority of the households have the thinking that when some unforeseen events happen, they have to further contact local money lenders to get money just like they buy in food deficit period. If crops failed due to natural calamities and unfavourable weather, the poorer households borrow grains or money from richer people in the

community. In such cases, the interest rate depended on the money lender's convenience. Thirty six to fifty percent interest rate was found during the field visit.

(4) Livestock Raising

To solve the crisis of small magnitude, poor rural households have the opinion that loan can be repaid by keeping animals on shared basis which gives some return after a few years. When people fall in debt either from crop damages due to hailstones, drought or others or if active members get sick who were supposed to earn money in such situations, the first remedy for them is to sell existing animals they have. To meet the financial requirements for the construction of houses and to observe social rites and rituals, the first option they have is to sell animals and chickens.

(5) Strategies in the Period of Stress

The common strategies for the period of stress are sale of assets, begging and relying on relatives, pulling children out of school, obtaining loan from the rich people, pursuing more wage labor activities. It was noticed that the target groups used yams, sweet potatoes, and pumpkins as night meal in the winter season to save food-grains for food stress months. During the period of stress, some of the rural poor live without meals or half meals for a few days.

Conclusions

More than fifty percent households of the study area are poor households. Rural people have own definition, indicators and analysis of the issue of poverty. Rural people categorized the households in terms of food availability. All of the rural poor do not produce enough food from their own land because of their possession of small land size and marginal land. The rural poor spent their substantial amount of time in search of food. Food deficit households derive the supplementary income from wage labour and seasonal migration, and take loans from local money lenders. Most of the households of the rural area fall in debt. Many of the rural poor economically depend upon the local well off households. Such kind of dependency gives the rural poor households a subordinate position in society. Because of high level of dependency on well off households the rural poor cannot articulate independent voice in the presence of the well off. The average family size of the rural poor is high in terms of production. All of them are not living in remote area. However, most of them occupy marginal land and some of them live in vulnerable places.

Notes

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