AN ENQUIRY INTO THE LIVELIHOOD PATTERN OF THE RURAL POOR IN THE BIRBHUM DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

Synopsis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography of the University of Burdwan

Submitted by

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August-2014

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1. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

From 1970s and onwards poverty has been considered as one of the core issue of concern in rural development discourses. Since then analysis of poverty by pursuing rural livelihood approach has become a popular topic in development agenda. Because of its multi-dimensional nature, analysis of poverty through livelihood framework offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of survival among the low income groups (Ellis, 2001). Specifically, in a country like India where poverty is one of the contemporary social issues, the study of rural poverty and livelihood approach has a wider scope and connotation. This approach is not new, but livelihoods approach can lead to better formulation of rural poverty reduction policies than focusing on particular economic sector or sub sectors. In India near about 80 per cent of the poor live in rural areas. According to the World Bank report in millennium development goals, more than 600 million people will be trapped in poverty in 2015 (Chandy and Gertz, 2011). Although the planning commission have reported the fact that incidence of rural poverty is declining as it is evidenced by the decline in the head count ratio from 37.3 in 1993-94 to 28.3 per cent in 2004-05 (Planning Commission of India, 2006). The budgetary allotment for rural areas especially in the ministry of Panchayati Raj and Rural Development is still not more than 6 to 7 per cent of the total budgetary provision. However, focusing on poverty, the livelihood framework suggests that it is not only a product of material deprivation but of a set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, social isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness (Hossain, 2005).

Given this backdrop, the households’ livelihood strategy and generation of livelihood resources were not much emphasized in the poverty debate. In rural areas from the point of view of maintaining and improving the quality of life of a household, the livelihood strategy may be interpreted as the process of choosing activities and asset investment for maintaining and improving livelihoods (Ellis, 2004). However, rural economy because of its fragile nature and greater dependency on agriculture sometime produces a hand to mouth situation to the rural poor. Seasonality in agriculture and its allied activities only can sustain the rural poor.
during the agricultural peak season. However, poor often lack employment during lean season. In order to survive during lean season crisis the poor often diversify their income portfolio by increasing the options for substitution. Besides, the Central or the State sponsored poverty alleviation schemes are not much viable to take the poor out of poverty. In a country like India, where excessive dependency on agriculture resulting into the occurrence of deep poverty in country side, diversification through off-farm and non-farm activities in rural villages might be a good sources of employment during the lean season. However, earning from non-farm sector depends on how much the rural poor are efficient to do such activities out side their conventional occupation. It is often obstructed by their traditional family occupation. Besides, these newly emerging rural sectors are localized in nature. Some times people have to travel long distance to access those work or they have to learn some technical skills to have work in this field. Therefore, along with agriculture the ‘portfolios’ of the poor are determined by several factors to undergo several other livelihood practices. Under this wide range of circumstances, in a developing country like India the household poverty is thus related to its resource endowments, its organizational capacity to manage and to deploy its resources, its labour force position, the available coping mechanisms and external or family contingencies which affect it (Rakodi 1995).

The concept of ‘livelihood’ is widely used in contemporary literatures on poverty and rural development. A popular definition is provided by Chambers and Conway in 1992 wherein a livelihood ‘comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living’. The term ‘capability’ in the definition is derived from Sen (1993; 1997) and it refers to the ability of individuals to realize their potential as human beings. Therefore, capabilities refer to the set of alternative beings and doings that a person can achieve with his/her economic, social and personal characteristics (Dreze and Sen, 1989). The use of ‘capability’ components in the definition of livelihoods is confusing since its meaning overlaps ‘assets’ and ‘activities’. An important attribute of livelihood that is subsumed under ‘assets’ in the Chambers and Conway’s definition is the ‘access’ that individuals or households have to different types of capital, opportunities and services (Ellis, 2000). Access is defined by the rules and social norms that determined the differential ability of people in rural areas to own, control, otherwise claim or make use of resources such as land and common property (Scoones, 1998:8). Not going into
the definitional and conceptual difficulties for the present research, following Frank Ellis (2000) ‘livelihood’ may be defined as ‘a livelihood comprises the assets (natural, physical, human, social and financial capital), the activities and the access to those (mediated by institutions and social norms) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household’. According to Adugna Eneyew and Wagayehu Bekele (2001a), livelihood strategies are those activities undertaken by smallholder household to provide a means of living. The way a household copes with and withstands economic shocks depends on the options available in terms of capabilities, assets and activities, i.e., on the household livelihood strategy (Dercon and Krishnan, 1996; Ellis, 1998). Assets are the important constituents of livelihood definition. Different researchers have identified different categories of assets or capitals. Natural capital refers to the natural resource base (land, water, trees) that yields products utilized by human beings for their survival. Physical capital refers to assets brought into existence by economic production processes i.e. tools, machines, land improvements etc. Human capital refers to the education level and skills, knowledge etc. Financial capital refers to stocks of money to which the household has access. This is chiefly to be savings, access to credit or loans etc. Social capital attempts to capture community and wider social claims. However, Moser (1998) defined social capital as reciprocity within communities and between households based on trust deriving from social ties.

Today, livelihoods approaches are most useful as an analytical heuristic tool (Clark and Carney, 2008). They provide a way to order information and understand not only the nature of poverty, but also the links between different aspects of people’s livelihoods. In this way, they help users to understand complex and changing situations (Alinovi L, et al, 2010). They also help to identify the relevance programmes as well as the key opportunities and constrains among the poor in formulating policies. Furthermore, livelihoods approaches still provide essential research tool within social and economic research on poverty, livelihood strategies, vulnerability and resilience mechanism of the poor (Carter and May, 1997; Orr and Mwale, 2001; Barrett et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2006; Devereux, 2006; Ellis and Freeman, 2007; Babulo et al., 2008). As articulated by Moser (1998), such approach seeks to identify what the poor have rather than what they do not have. It also strengthens the poor to think of own initiative solution rather than substitute for, block or undermine them. This framework is thought to be particularly useful as a guide to
micro policies concerned with poverty reduction in rural areas also. The framework of this kind not only provides the options for solving the problems of causes and effects in rural poverty reduction, it also suggests a way of organizing the policy analysis of livelihoods (Ellis, 1999). This research is entirely based on such framework of rural livelihoods approaches that identifies the main components of livelihoods of the poor in backward and resource poor region. The study also makes an attempt to encourage thinking on formulating policies which will help the poor to overcome constraints to manage better livelihoods.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The way an individual or household copes with and withstands economic shocks depends on the options available, in terms of capabilities, assets (including natural, physical, human, financial and social capital) and activities. A livelihood strategy is the way those options are arranged and selected therefore. The driving factors of each livelihood strategy are crucial to improve the response mechanisms related to poverty and backwardness in developing countries. Keeping this in mind the present research tries to address the question - how do poor people survive and manage their livelihoods with limited assets and access to resources? The present research also seeks to answer two research sub questions: first how do the poor frame their livelihoods strategies in different socio-economic condition to cope with poverty and vulnerability?; and second how far are the livelihood strategies of the poor will be economically viable and sustainable for surviving in an area affected by chronic poverty and limited resource availability.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the context of above discussion the main objectives of the research is to understand livelihood strategies of the poor in order to cope with poverty, vulnerability, risk and crisis. The different objectives devised to answer the central research question in the present research are as follows:

- To understand the nature of livelihood diversification among the poor households located in different regional settings;
➢ To find out livelihood management of the rural poor during the period of unemployment and livelihood crisis;

➢ To evaluate various causes and consequences of seasonal migration as livelihood strategy;

➢ To understand the question of sustainability in stone quarrying economy;

➢ To explore the impact of SHGs in household resource generation and poverty management in the backdrop of insecure vulnerable settings;

➢ To find out how SHGs intervention has changed the attitude and behaviour of the women towards savings, income earning capacity, mobility and expansion of assets and capacity building; and finally

➢ To find out the relation between indigenous livelihood strategies of the poor and the policies meant for poverty alleviation.

4. METHODOLOGY

A variety of field methods are available for the investigation of rural livelihoods of the poor. In analyzing rural livelihoods, the approaches and methods are not seen here as being mutually exclusive, rather they can be seen as a portfolios from which a hybrid approach can be developed which utilizes the strengths of particular methods that are appropriate for particular investigation (Scoones, 1998; Norton et al, 2001). The methodology (Table 1.1) of the present research includes both quantitative as well as qualitative approaches. Quantitative methods are semi-structured questionnaire survey, and the analysis of both primary and secondary data collected from various sources. As the proposed research will follow-up only a block level investigation as a case study covering only twelve gram panchayats of the of Birbhum district, therefore, purposive sampling techniques of the target groups have been followed to recognize the dimensions of livelihood framework. First the selection of villages has been made on the basis of judgment sampling considering their various physical, socio-cultural and agro-ecological conditions. Poverty is a multi dimensional phenomenon. There are many indicators of selecting the poor. However,
for the present research only the land less people or people with less than 0.2 acres of land or marginal share croppers have been taken into account for the selection of research participants. Measuring livelihood diversification, one of the central issues of the research problem, diversification indices namely Inverse Herfindahl-Hirschman (IHHD) has been used for investigation. As poverty is the result of multiplicity of factors, various multivariate analysis e.g. Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Multiple Correlation, UNDP measures of Human Development Index (HDI), Standard scores and other statistical tools generally employed by the economist to measure income inequality has been applied where necessary. However, livelihood analysis of the rural poor is a topic experienced by much inter-personal and inter-regional subjectivity and that is why in some cases observation by considering the qualitative attributes has been used supplementary to reach the goal. Qualitative methods, for instances, informal conversation with individuals, formal in-depth interview, focused group discussions, life history, social mapping etc. have been followed to gather information from the research participants. Questionnaire survey have been followed to collect information on various socio-economic variables of the respondents related to their money management, risk strategies, coping, vulnerability and adaptation, asset strategies, circulation and migration behaviour etc.

5. SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Principal sources of information are as follows:
(i) Topographical Maps (metric scale) published by Survey of India, Dehradun
(ii) District Resource Map published by Geological Survey of India
(iii) National Bureau of Soil Sample Survey (N.B.S.S. Maps), Kolkata
(iv) District Statistical Handbooks, Birbhum District
(v) Bengal District Gazetteer, Birbhum
(vii) Human Development Report of West Bengal
(viii) Human Development Report of Birbhum
(ix) Model Questions for Questionnaire Survey
(x) Cadastral Maps
(xi) Satellite image (IRS-LISS-3) , SRTM and ASTER data
(xii) Zilla Parishad, Birbhum District
(xiii) District Magistrate Office, Birbhum District
6. WHY THIS REGION?
Enquiring into the livelihood strategies of the rural poor, the district of Birbhum has been taken into the account for the present study. Located in the western plateau fringe in the state of West Bengal, regional imbalances in socio-economic development exist in Birbhum and it is caused due to differences in livelihood assets, level of development intervention taken by the government and variation in physical or natural capital. Further, as discussed in chapter two, there are several constrains for the occurrence of poverty and backwardness mainly in the western parts of the district. In order to look at the livelihoods of the rural poor more intrinsically, the present study focuses on the Birbhum district in general and Mohammad Bazar block in particular. Mohammad Bazar block (Figure 1.2), located in the western plateau region, is one of the poverty stricken blocks of the district in Birbhum. Out of 19 blocks of Birbhum district, Mohammad Bazar block is selected for micro level understanding on the basis of following considerations:

Firstly, applying the method of composite scores by taking the indicators of poverty and backwardness such as percentage of illiterate population, percentage of agricultural labourer, percentage of backward population (S.C. & S.T. population), percentage of marginal workers, percentage of non-workers, percentage of unirrigated land, percentage of per capita cultivated land holdings in hectare from the Census of Birbhum (1961-2011) and percentage of Below poverty level population from office of the West Bengal Panchayats and Rural Development, it has been found that Mohammad Bazar block has always shown positive score values of backwardness and poverty. In none of the decadal years, it crossed the 0 value and experienced negative score values. Therefore, Mohammad Bazar can be defined as most backward and chronically poor block of Birbhum District.

Secondly, Location Quotient abbreviated as LQ is a method to judge the nature of disparity related to a particular geographical space. For understanding the spatial nature of poverty and backwardness in Birbhum district by using the aforementioned parameters, it has been observed that the blocks located in the
western part of the district are more prone to poverty and backwardness. Higher LQ values indicate higher levels of poverty and backwardness. In respect of Mohammad Bazar block, for LQ of BPL household (2006-07) it ranks 5th, for LQ of ST population it ranks 1st, for LQ of illiterate population it ranks 3rd, for LQ of agricultural labourer it ranks 5th. By examining all these facts and figures, Mohammad Bazar block has been taken as a representative block among the 19 blocks of the district struck by poverty and backwardness.

Thirdly, according to 11th five year plan and annual plan for Birbhum (2007) 301 revenue villages of the district have been identified as backward (Figure 1.3) under Backward Region Grant Fund (BRGF). By considering the criteria such as less than 30 per cent female literacy rate, incidence of non workers and marginal workers more than 65 per cent etc, it has been found that most of villages are concentrating in the western part of the district especially in the Mohammad Bazar.

Fourthly, villages in the Mohammad Bazar block are mostly far away from the large urban-industrial centres and are therefore characterized by lack of non-farm jobs for which poor people depends more on farm sector for their livelihoods. In addition, there is no urban centre in this block also.

Fifthly, the Human Development Report of Birbhum (2007) reveals that among the nineteen blocks, Mohammad Bazar ranks 18th i.e just before the Murarai block. Considering the index of health, education and standard of living the HDI value of Mohammad Bazar (Table 1.2) block is only 0.38 which is far below the district average.

Finally, comparatively greater value of vulnerability index (0.42) of Mohammad Bazar block in the Human Development Report (Table 1.3) than the other western blocks of the district, greater amount of cultivable waste land (3240 hectare) and permanently unsuitable land for cultivation of irrigated and rain fed rice, frequent flood and drought, diversified nature of spatial economy are some of the issues which have been critically considered for the selection of the study area.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION
Livelihoods and diversity have become popular topics in development discourse. The livelihoods framework does not constitute an entirely new approach to the problem of addressing rural poverty in the realm of rural development. Rather, this approach mainly focuses on people, their assets, activities and access, instead of insisting on
several economic sectors and sub sectors which are conventional for policy implication for rural development programmes. So far, a very few attempts have been made to link the livelihood framework in a systematic way to get an insight of indigenous poverty management policies at micro level. The present study has been done based on empirical research on livelihood patterns of the rural poor in selected parts of Birbhum district of West Bengal in order to explore the nature of diversity as well as the indigenous livelihoods strategies to cope with crisis. The research argues that without understanding the indigenous strategy of the poor, mere formulation and implementation of poverty alleviation programme is not going to be viable. This section presents the summary of the main findings given in foregoing chapters and identifies the overall trend captured by the research.

Vast literature exists on poverty, vulnerability and livelihoods but these are not always linked to each other dealing those aspects as disparate in development dialogue. The existing literature, besides helping to formulate the research questions and objectives of this research, informs us that rural livelihoods approach has wider connotation and greater relevancy for framing rural development policies and practice significant for the third world countries even in contemporary period. For this an in-depth micro-level research is a necessary precondition before formulating new programmes for the livelihood provision of the poor especially in places with limited resource endowment.

The research examines the possible factors responsible for the incidence of poverty and backwardness and the low status of development in the Birbhum district especially in the Mohammad Bazar block which found to be one of the most poverty stricken blocks of Birbhum. Moreover, understanding poverty from different perspectives also tells the fact that the blocks located in the western part of Birbhum are more prone to poverty and backwardness due to certain environmental constrains and related resource crisis. Analysis from composite scores and human development measures reveals that blocks namely Mohammad Bazar, Khoyrasol, Murarai-I, Rajnagar, Dubrajpur requires special attention for enhancing health status, educational attainment, better standard of living and improved irrigational facilities. In Mohammad Bazar, the western, northern and some southwestern parts are much affected by poverty situation. Viewing this wide range of spatial disparities and regional imbalance, the planners and the policy makers should make comprehensive
attempt to reduce the inequality and at the same time to make development fruitful in real sense.

Livelihood diversification is an important aspect of the livelihoods of the poor. In that context the research tries to understand how households pursue diversification to cope with poverty, vulnerability and crisis. Case studies from a variety of different locations suggest that the poor households are often engaged in multiple activities and rely on diversified income portfolio to address the lean season crisis. Focusing on diversification as a key component of livelihood, our study argues that more the value of diversification more is the magnitude of vulnerability. The findings related to crisis management policy show that poor always give emphasis on two main financial strategies to cope with crisis i.e. either borrowing or using savings done their day-to-day earning. In dealing with the debate on the ability of the poor to save, this research demonstrates the fact that the poor can save even while living in poverty and vulnerability condition. One interesting illustration finds the fact that during lean season crisis, the role of centrally or state sponsored poverty alleviation scheme or other social safety net approach are found to be less effective to provide the means of subsistence. The present research also demonstrates that instead of supporting particular economic activities it would be more effective to facilitate the poor to gain better access to opportunities they already developed or to create new opportunities of their choice for enhancing quality of life.

In exploring the livelihood strategies to cope with lean season crisis, the research focuses on seasonal/circulatory migration as a dominant livelihood strategy of the rural poor in the study region. The research indicates that although there is a positive relationship between migration and livelihood management, the practice of mobile livelihoods seems to be a less efficient option to secure the livelihoods of the poor. This research makes an argument on the issue that mobile livelihoods and remittances can never be a sustainable option for livelihood security in areas which are relatively lacking in resources despite the overall development activities going on to strengthen the rural economy. Rather, mobile livelihoods make the rural livelihoods fragile under seasonal vulnerability and situations of chronic poverty; it also hinders the power of social resilience of the poor. Therefore, the present research argues that along with the capability enhancing and freedom, the agency and structure of seasonal migration is also required to be analysed intrinsically to understand the poverty and deprivation trap which exists in rural settings.
In understanding the impact of state’s intervention in the poverty alleviation of the region, the study investigates the impact of Self- Help microcredit programme for the generation of livelihoods and in household’s poverty management. In spite of its several limitations, the research explores that self-help micro credit programme have induced improvement in certain circumstances. Women’s participation in SHGs enabled them to discover inner strength, gain decision making ability, self-confidence, social and psychological empowerment and capacity building. Moreover, Self-Help credit based economic activity has facilitated the women to think about their households’ financial management policy in a better way. However, the role of SHGs in household resource generation, financial well-being and income earning capacity and crisis management, the microfinance were found to not sufficient enough to facilitate people to cope with poverty situation and lean season crisis. The present research finds that there are several factors acting against the proper functioning of SHG programme in our research area. The fear of falling in certain economic uncertainty in near future and lack of unity among the group members in availing project loan are making the microfinance strategy a less viable sustainable livelihood option for the poor. Moreover, lack of efficiency and effectiveness of the group leader is also found to be a significant negative factor in the success of microfinance in the region. The study shows that lack of effective participation and irregularities in monthly deposit are also affecting the overall performance status of the SHGs especially in availing loan and enhancing group saving etc.

The research explores several livelihood issues of the rural poor in stone quarry areas of Birbhum district. The present study demonstrates the fact that because of lack of government control, the stone quarries of Mohammad Bazar area of Birbhum have a devastating impact on its overall regional environment. The physical environmental quality is rapidly deteriorating day by day for this illegal operation of *pathar khadan* and stone crushers. The empirical research explores that the less visible impacts are social in character, having a great bearing especially on the survival of poor indigenous tribes living in this region. Costs of several occupational diseases, accidental costs put great hardships on the livelihoods of the poor. In all spheres quarrying activity has annihilated the social fabrics of tribal life. If this continues, the tribal community will be at the verge of extinction in near future. The research suggests some environment friendly sustainable livelihood measures such as fishing in abandoned quarries, food possessing from available palm trees, intervention
of tribal women in SHG related activities both for the environmental sustenance as well for the sustainable livelihoods of the tribal community.

From the above discussions it is evident that all the research questions and the some specific objectives which have been taken into account at the time of commencement of research are found to be well established.

The present research concludes that the poor households have their own financial instrument and livelihood strategies to cope with crisis and vulnerability condition in order to survive in backward rural settings. Rather than self employment initiatives, poor people prefer wage employment programme where there is no risk of investment. Before formulating any programme, it is necessary to understand the indigenous strategies of the poor on how to deal with extreme poverty and vulnerable situation. Participatory approach of development can work well rather than top down approach of government sponsored development. Besides taking advantage of government sponsored schemes, the poor also have to rely more on some in-situ resources so that their substitution capabilities can enhance their power of resilience even if their occurs smaller disturbances in their livelihood systems. In this context the NGOs can also play a greater role for enhancing the capabilities of the poor.

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