COPING WITH POVERTY AND INSECURITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE KHERIA SABAR OF PURULIYA, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

Sixty-seven years after Independence, India is still struggling with poverty, especially rural poverty, which is most widespread among the socially disadvantaged groups like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This study looks at a marginalised community, the Kheria Sabar, inhabiting a particular unfavourable agro-ecological area in Puruliya, West Bengal (India). The poverty and marginalisation of the Sabars is perceived to be a structural problem caused by the interaction of interlinked systems – historical, socio-economic, political, environmental and spatial. Limited access to power and resources, and seasonality in employment opportunities and food security, are the principal sources of stress that the present-day Sabars are subject to in their daily lives. This article based on ethnographic research carried out in 2004 covering 270 households in Puruliya traces the lives of the Sabars and tries to analyse their response to stress in terms of the livelihood pathways adopted by them to cope with poverty and insecurity. Though not a very positive picture, it is hoped that measures will be adopted to provide the community with security and reduce its vulnerability and these should be complemented by long-term measures aimed at asset creation and livelihood security designed to bring about more lasting economic and social transformation.

Keywords: Coping**,** Kheria Sabar, Livelihood, Marginalisation, Poverty

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Introduction

Despite economic and social development since Independence, India is still struggling with the problem of poverty. Poverty in India has a distinctly rural bias and economic groups such as the landless agricultural labourers and the marginal farmers are the most vulnerable to poverty and insecurity. Probably the greatest structural vulnerability underlying the Indian economy is the stratification of Indian society on caste and class lines. This social dimension of poverty signifies that vast numbers of the Indian people belonging to tribal groups and Scheduled Castes have long been marginalised and deprived of the fruits of development. This study looks at a particular disadvantaged community the Kheria Sabar, and deals with the livelihood processes adopted by them in response to the twin stresses of poverty and marginalisation. The study is based on ethnographic research carried out in 2004 in eight Blocks (Puruliya I, Manbazar I, Manbazar II, Bandowan, Puncha, Balarampur, Hura and Barabazar) covering 270 households spread over 110 villages in Puruliya, West Bengal where the community largely resides.

The Community

The community under study, the Kheria Sabar, is most widely found in Puruliya, the westernmost district of West Bengal. In West Bengal, the Kheria Sabars are mainly found in the remote parts of south-eastern Puruliya where they inhabit 11 out of a total of 20 Community Development Blocks. The total Kheria Sabar population is enumerated at 10,854 spread over 2700 households in 161 villages as recorded by the *Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti* (PBKSKS), an NGO working in the area, in course of its village surveys in 2004. This number is endorsed by the Backward Classes Welfare Department of Puruliya.

With large-scale deforestation of forest lands after the coming of the British, and the subsequent nationalisation of the remaining forests after Independence, the Kheria Sabars, a traditionally forest-dwelling people, were gradually driven out of their habitat and forced to take to settled agriculture. However, scarcity of cultivable land, poor quality of existing land, erratic and scanty rainfall, lack of irrigation water and other inputs have been the main constraints in the lives of these people. Largely an illiterate community, they lead lives of extreme poverty and deprivation.

In addition to their poverty, The Kheria Sabars bear a stigma – the stigma of criminality. The Criminal Tribes Act passed by the British in 1871 was amended four times till 1924 (D'Souza, 2001). 158 communities were identified as 'crime-prone'. The Act was repealed in 1952 but the Sabars, till today, are persecuted as criminals and are the victims of police atrocities and mob frenzy (D'Souza, 2001). Because of this stigma, the Sabars prefer to live in isolation away from the main settlement areas; they typically make their homes in Sabar '*tolas'*, two to three kilometres away from the main villages, and shy away from any kind of interaction with the people of their neighbouring areas. Stigmatisation has, thus, helped to reinforce and perpetuate poverty and marginalisation.

The relative isolation of the community has meant that service delivery is poor, there is minimal social interaction with members of other castes and tribes, and the lands available to them for cultivation are poor and unproductive. Thus, the vulnerabilities faced by the Sabars in the historical context have contributed to the continued poverty and marginalisation of the community.

Livelihood Diversification

Recent studies have drawn attention to the enormous diversity of livelihood strategies at every level – within geographic regions, across sectors, within households and over time. In rural areas, for example, although farming continues to be an important activity, it is unable to provide households with a sufficient means of survival, and for this reason, rural households are found to depend on a diverse portfolio of activities and income sources that contribute to family well-being (Ellis, 2000). Occupational flexibility, spatial mobility and increasing dependence on non-agricultural income generating activities are seen as the hallmarks of rural livelihoods today, and this is borne out by the present study as well.

Diversification has been adopted as a key survival strategy as a response to climatic seasonality and limited access to resources by all Sabar households. Despite the existence of inter-Block and inter-household differences, engaging in a multiplicity of activities is necessary for the survival of the people right across the study area. Thus, households in all the Blocks practise at least two occupations in the quest for survival while the people of Manbazar II, Puncha, Bandowan and Barabazar have as many as ten choices to exercise in terms of livelihood activities. Thus,

handicraft making, cultivation, forestry, migratory agricultural labour and hunting emerge as the primary economic activities of the surveyed population.

The crafting of a variety of articles from products collected from the forests seems to be the most popular form of activity among the Sabar households. As wage opportunities in agriculture are limited to particular times of the year, the making of handicrafts has been taken up as a major household activity for earning much needed cash. Often referred to as the only artisan tribe of West Bengal, the Sabars have traditional knowledge of weaving baskets, mats, date palm and bamboo brooms, *babui* grass ropes, *sal* plates etc. This skill has been utilised by them to build up a source of income that is used to meet their consumption needs of clothes, books and stationery, and to repay loans or pay for social needs. While the majority of the households sell brooms made by the women from bamboo and date palms in the local markets, a number of Sabar men and women have received special training from the PBKSKS, in the crafting of a range of sophisticated handmade items that are sold in the markets of Kolkata, Ranchi and Mumbai, and displayed at exhibitions all over the country.

However, for the households that make only brooms from bamboo and date palms, i.e., the majority of the Sabar households, this activity, although an important source of supplementary income, is hardly a high return or sustainable one especially in the light of the rapid exploitation of green resources. Almost all the households have to take loans to buy the bamboo poles they work with, and the finished products are either supplied to the moneylenders or sold to repay the loans. Any meagre profit earned is not saved but spent to fulfil basic needs especially during the lean seasons. Capital investment is, therefore, urgently needed if this activity is to be made a viable and profitable one, and financial support should not only be on a long term basis but well coordinated with afforestation programmes of the Forest Department.

About 72% of the households are engaged in cultivation. The livelihood category of 'cultivation' includes both those who farm their own lands, and also those who work as agricultural labourers. Ownership of land does not necessarily mean that the people are cultivators as many have not been able to acquire their lands whereas others have been forced to keep their 'uncultivable' lands barren. The percentage of cultivators is low for Hura probably

because only 33% of the households have been able to occupy and farm their *patta* (occupancy rights given by the government) lands, while the poor quality *baid* and *tanr* land (dry, relatively infertile high land) in many parts of Barabazar and Manbazar I have forced the people to leave their plots fallow. In contrast, land ownership is high in Puncha and Bandowan though most of it is occupied land while in Balarampur, the land owners are all legal occupants of their lands.

Forestry, a livelihood choice exercised by about 64% of all the households surveyed, involves the collection and often sale of minor forest products like firewood, leaves, fruits, bamboo, *babui* grass, medicinal herbs etc., and has been considered separately from the collection of predominantly bamboo and date palm for making handicrafts. Forestry is an important livelihood activity for the sampled households in all the Blocks especially Hura, Puncha and Bandowan as these areas still retain much of their green cover.

Besides working as agricultural labourers in the local area, many Sabars seasonally travel outside for work, with the neighbouring district of Barddhaman being the most popular destination. Thus, migratory agriculture emerges as an important livelihood choice of about 60% of the surveyed households, and percentages are particularly high for Manbazar II and Manbazar I. It was however not an option for any of the surveyed households of Balarampur and Hura.

Hunting, the age-old occupation of the Sabars, continues to be a primary source of sustenance. Rats, snakes and small game are all caught and often form the only source of animal protein for many of the households especially during the months of August, September and October, that is, the lean months. About 53% of the households surveyed keep poultry, and this is mostly a security measure as poultry can be sold at any time for earning quick cash or repaying loans. The ownership of poultry is common among the better-off households, and the comparatively more prosperous villages. Besides, draught animals like cows, oxen and goats are also kept as buffer stocks to be used in times of need and scarcity by a small percentage of households. While chicken are often slaughtered for their meat, cows and goats are not; the Sabars prefer to eat the meat of rats, snails and snakes, the latter being a delicacy. About 18% of the surveyed households carry out fishing, another popular activity of the past. Fishing is restricted to the *bandhs*, *jhores* and rivers, and fish are usually caught by the Sabars for their own consumption. Fishing, animal grazing and poultry farming are all unorganised means of livelihood to be

carried out casually during lean months particularly; animal grazing is often the responsibility of children while poultry are cared for by the women. Households in Bandowan and Barabazar have received Government help for keeping poultry and rearing goats, while assistance from the PBKSKS has helped poor households in Puruliya I and Puncha to buy chickens and goats. Besides, veterinary training has also been provided to a number of Sabars by the PBKSKS with UNDP funds. For households in Bandowan, Puruliya I and Manbazar I, working as labourers in brick kilns and construction work (like roads through Food for Work programmes) is an important livelihood option. Work in brick kilns is often available outside the district, and this is therefore a kind of seasonal migratory work; in other cases, brick kilns situated in the neighbourhood often employ the Sabars as daily wage labourers while some are also called for laying roads and building schools though the latter is usually for a maximum period of fifteen days a year. Some Sabar households are engaged part of the year in miscellaneous activities like stone and sand work or even as carpenters. The percentage is highest in Barabazar where the people said they had traditional skills in stone and woodwork, and also considerable in Bandowan. Some households of villages on the banks of the R. Totko in Bandowan and Manabazar II (e.g., Dharmapur) are engaged in the collection of gold from the river bank (*shona dhowa*); an age-old activity, this gold gathered in the rainy season is sold in the village markets or sent to Barabazar and Manbazar.

The major livelihoods of the Sabars, namely, handicraft making, cultivation and forestry are all natural resource based; the low returns of all these activities means that it is difficult to get out of the poverty trap. The low productivity of agriculture, its seasonal nature, and uncertainty of obtaining work regularly as agricultural labourers push people to seek other livelihood options, and thus people are forced to migrate seasonally or take up other non-farm activities like forest product collection or the making of brooms and ropes to supplement their incomes. The latter, usually carried out by the women, are year round activities that yield money while animal and poultry are kept as buffers. Hunting and fishing are not strictly occupations but activities designed to promote food security. The weaving of bamboo and date palm brooms that utilises the traditional skills of the community is a livelihood activity that provides the Sabars with income security, and much needed support to cope with the insecurity of agriculture. Thus, diversification may be seen as a short-term seasonal risk management strategy adopted by the

Sabars to tide over employment, income and food insecurity; the low returns and unproductive nature of these activities, however, raises questions about their long-term sustainability, and ability to better the lives of these people economically in the absence of massive capital investment designed to enhance the productivity and viability of the activities.

Certain divisions of labour based on gender became evident during the course of the survey and in informal chats with the Sabar women. It is the men who now usually carry out fishing and hunting, though according to the villagers, women are equally adept at hunting. The women look after the poultry, and all across the study area, they contribute significantly to the family income by making brooms and ropes. The children are usually engaged in grazing animals. However, as reiterated by the people themselves, for the most part, men and women work together as wage labourers and cultivators; both are engaged in the collection of forest products and families generally migrate together seasonally. In many Sabar households, men were found to be engaged in traditional activities like the making of handicraft items like baskets, rat traps, ropes and others. Therefore, the active participation of both men and women is key to livelihood survival as it boosts the ability of individual households to access multiple sources of income through livelihood diversification.

Besides diversification, agricultural intensification and extension with better utilisation of water resources and availability of inputs may help to reduce the vulnerability of the people to the problems of seasonality and unsustainability of agriculture. Only 14% of landowning Sabar households have access to irrigation that allows them the option of producing a winter crop, while only 12% of their cultivated land receives the benefits of irrigation. The results of the benefits of irrigation are clearly seen in villages like Kuda (Manbazar I) and Boro (Manbazar II) where many households are now able to produce winter crops of vegetables and mustard that are marketed for profit. All the produce is used for consumption purposes and there is no marketable surplus. The poor quality of lands, and the small size of holdings, thus, makes agriculture a non-viable and unsustainable enterprise for many Sabar households. The supply of agricultural inputs to the poor Sabar farmers to assist them in crop production has also been far below requirement; only 20% of households have received help from Government programmes while 18% of households have received assistance from the PBKSKS; there are spatial variations

here too. The lack of capital, inputs and water for irrigation are thus perceived to be the greatest constraints enhancing the vulnerability of the people to unsustainable agriculture, one of the primary livelihood activities of the community. Though the production of paddy is important as it provides food security to the people, diversification into other crop varieties especially those that yield better cash returns may be a possibility worth considering. Unfortunately, their position in the lowest rung of the agricultural hierarchy means that it will be a while before the Sabars benefit from any future agricultural development in the district. For the immediate future, the best option is possibly the provision of irrigation water through the development of small irrigation projects constructed with Sabar labour and with the financial support of the Government or other aid agencies.

Seasonal Migration

A direct fallout of seasonality in the agricultural calendar of Puruliya is a kind of 'seasonal labour circulation' evident among many Sabar households. Goddard (1974) describes this as a movement of labour that is 'characteristically short term, repetitive or cyclical in nature, and adjusted to the annual agricultural cycle'; in some studies, such movement is known as 'seasonal migration' (e.g., Todaro, 1976). Seasonal out-migration is most popular in regions which fall into a 'one rainy season' category, and among people whose exploitation of their land is held down by a seasonal rainfall regime and a lack of irrigation which makes year-round farming impossible.

On an average, about 64% of the households surveyed said that they travel out of their villages for work on an annual basis, and of this, 93% is agricultural labour that travels to the greener pastures of neighbouring Barddhaman (*pub khata* meaning 'going east') and about 7% comprises households that go to work as daily wage labourers in brick kilns in Bardhhaman and Ranchi. The period of stay differs for different households; most households participate in two movements for agricultural work, one in summer and another in winter, spending about 20 to 25 days in each round. The brick kilns of Barddhaman and Ranchi are the preferred destinations of households particularly in Balarampur and Puruliya I, and they typically spend more time there, about five to six months. Earnings vary between households according to the number of family members taking part in the movement, and according to the time spent in the place of work. In

general, the Sabars prefer to migrate as families, that is, parents and children move out together; thus, those households with small children (below five) or those with old and infirm members do not usually take part in this annual routine. Thus, these seasonal movements of labour vary spatially between Blocks, villages and households in terms of the work done, the time of travel, the period of stay and also the income earned depending on work opportunities, successful negotiations, the ability to take part in such activities, and of course, personal initiative and preference.

Lack of employment opportunities in the local area seems to be the overwhelming push factor affecting out migration during the lean seasons; pull factors of more attractive wage structures and the opportunity of accumulating food stocks are the other important reasons influencing the decision to migrate. The attraction afforded by better-organised and higher pay structure in Barddhaman is not inconsiderable; the daily wage rate for agricultural work in Barddhaman is about Rs.35 to 40 plus two kg of rice while that in Puruliya is Rs.20 to 25. For the security of higher wages, migrant labourers are willing to put up with longer hours of work and often, poor living conditions; the added attraction is the rice they receive which is accumulated for providing crucial food security during the 'hungry' months. Wage rates are the same for males and females; there is, however, a preference for female workers during the sowing season, and for males during harvesting.

Much research has been carried out on the reasons behind individuals and households to adopt diversification as a livelihood strategy, and the two most significant considerations seem to be necessity or choice (Ellis, 2000). Necessity refers to involuntary, and distress reasons for diversifying while choice refers to voluntary and proactive reasons for diversifying, for example, seeking out seasonal wage earning opportunities, or travelling to find work in remote locations. In the case of the Sabars, it may be appropriate to say that both diversification and seasonal labour movements began, during the late 1970s, as a matter of survival to cope with unfavourable natural and physical conditions like the loss of their forest habitat, the lack of cultivable land and income earning opportunities, the problem of seasonality in agricultural work etc. (and is still so for the poorer households), but with time both have evolved as effective *ex ante* risk management strategies (Webb *et al*, 1992) designed to improve livelihood security and

reduce vulnerability. For many landless households, and for marginal land owners for whom rainfed agriculture is highly susceptible to crop failure, migration is considered a crucial safety net; for households with comparatively more secure livelihoods, participation in seasonal migration is seen as an opportunity to make extra cash and stock paddy, which would come in useful during the 'hungry' season. Though migration is increasingly seen as a legitimate poverty alleviation strategy (De Haan and Rogaly, 2002), it may be argued that it leads to household instability, and therefore, cannot be a long-term development strategy. However, the fact that at least some have the choice as to whether to migrate or not in conjunction with other activities suggests a greater ability to manage risk and reduce vulnerability, and marks an important break from previous patterns of migration (Coppard, 2005). Thus, for the Sabars, limited access to productive resources, and few avenues of assistance have meant that diversification and seasonal migration have become enduring features of rural survival.

Poverty Status

Estimates of income and inequality among the households of the eight Blocks under study have been considered to analyse the poverty status of the community. Income data has been proxied by expenditure data; besides, the latter is a means of analysing the pattern of spending of households. However, it is stressed here that these values should merely be regarded as indicative and relative as the households surveyed were often not sure of the exact monetary value of transactions, and thus responses may not be accurate. Besides, the income earned by the Sabars from different activities is not regularly available on a fixed basis; for example, that earned from migratory labour may be earned twice a year (this has been converted here to a monthly value) while often wages are received not on a daily or monthly basis but as a lump sum at irregular intervals.

The average monthly income of a Sabar household in Puruliya is about Rs.1280.5 varying marginally across the Blocks. The high income earning Blocks (Balarampur, Puruliya I) also record the highest SDs indicating inequalities in the level of incomes earned; the number of members in a household has a bearing on the total income earned as even minors work as wage labour. Incomes from seasonal migration are high in Balarampur and Puruliya I whereas none of the surveyed households of Hura migrate for employment. Though Puncha and Bandowan

display highly diversified livelihoods, both record relatively low incomes signifying that the returns to livelihood activities are comparatively lower here. In terms of incomes earned Bandowan and Hura, thus, emerge as the two most deprived Blocks, and this is corroborated by the low standard of living of the people here as witnessed during the field survey. The contribution of agriculture to income is the greatest, almost half; the sale of handicrafts and forest products are important income-generating activities as is daily wage labour (excluding agriculture), which has a share of 14% in incomes earned .

The average monthly expenditure of a Sabar household is about Rs.1194, marginally less than its average income. Monthly expenditures are highest for the households of Balarampur, Barabazar and Manbazar II, and lowest for Hura and Bandowan. SD values are comparatively much less for average expenditures except in Balarampur indicating that the households have similar consumption structures; Hura and Bandowan again emerge as the Blocks most deprived, and so expenditure data corroborates income values in both these Blocks. The bulk of a household's monthly expenditure is on food; clothes and healthcare are other items of importance while a good proportion of spending is on alcohol. Therefore, expenditure is almost exclusively for consumption purposes.

The income and expenditure patterns reveal that a Sabar household survives on a meagre amount of money per month; irregularity in receiving incomes makes their lives doubly difficult, and money earned during productive months (e.g., after harvests) has to be meticulously saved for use during the lean months. On an average, a household survives on approximately £16 or $30 a month, and therefore exhibits 'a dollar a day' poverty. Average annual incomes would probably be a better measure, as the activities of Sabar households are seasonal rather than monthly. Expenditure patterns indicate that the bulk of the earned income is spent on consumption and social needs. With better provision of healthcare, housing and education by the State, money could be saved or used for productive purposes. As monthly expenditure falls marginally below income, it is assumed that chronic indebtedness is comparatively low; however, loans are taken during the lean months and these have to be repaid by labour so employers can exploit the Sabars by paying wages lower than the legitimate rates. The cycle of poverty and therefore of insecurity, is again seasonal, and there is little way out of the cumulative poverty trap. The lack of

disposable income, and consequently of savings and investment has become a major hindrance to the sustainability of livelihoods of these people.

Household Assets

The security of livelihoods is related to the assets that a household or community commands, as those with more assets have a greater range of options, and an ability to switch between multiple strategies. Vulnerability, therefore, is closely linked to asset ownership; the more assets that people have, the less vulnerable they are and vice versa.

The house often comprises the poor's main physical asset by value. House ownership is by far the most important productive asset of the community with the majority (71%) owning at least one house; ownership of more than one house could be a pointer to the prosperity of individual households with one being built with one's own resources, and the other being provided by the Government. On this count, Puncha appears to be the most prosperous Block, and Balarampur, the most deprived. Housing is commonly identified as a basic need or item of household consumption; it is also an important productive asset, however, that cushions households against severe poverty. The importance of housing has also been recognised by the Government, and the IAY programme is one of the few Government schemes that have been widely implemented at the grassroots level. Despite the shortcomings of the IAY houses, they have provided many Sabar households buffers against the vagaries of the weather (a source of seasonal stress in rural India), and reduced their vulnerability to recurring expenditure. Ownership of an IAY house is, therefore, a symbol of security among the community members. Home ownership has also provided the households with opportunities for home-based enterprises (for example, handicraft making) that utilise the skills of women, and allow them to contribute to household income. The provision of power and sanitation would further enhance the productivity of this important resource. The ownership of housing has served another purpose; it has effectively reduced nomadism, and helped in the settlement of a once transient population.

The importance of land as a productive asset has long been recognised. In rural India, especially, where asset ownership is poor, the legal right to land assumes great importance despite the small size of plots, and the non-viability of the agricultural enterprise. Among the Sabars, too, land is

the most desired commodity especially for those who don't own it (27% of the surveyed households), and who therefore, are solely dependent on external work opportunities for survival. About 73% of the surveyed households own land, and a majority of this percentage has some semblance of livelihood security; insecurity of ownership, for example, that arising out of not receiving *pattas* or legal rights, as well as inability to occupy rightfully owned lands have created an extreme sense of vulnerability among many Sabar households. Land entitlements are however, no guarantee of livelihood security; the small sizes of plots, unproductive nature of the land, limited access to irrigation facilities, and scarcity of capital and inputs to invest, make agriculture a marginal and non-viable enterprise for many Sabar households. Thus, ownership of productive land seems to have overwhelming significance in the asset structure of Sabar households.

The keeping of livestock often plays a critical role as a store of wealth, and as a buffer against bad times; among the Sabars, too, livestock is merely a security to be utilised during times of stress and shock. Fieldwork showed that it is the relatively better off households who own cows used for ploughing and goats or poultry; therefore, those households that do not own animals are more vulnerable to poverty as they do not have access to the food items (like eggs) that are available from the animals or the monetary security that they provide. The number of animals kept varies widely between households; a drawback of owning goats and cows is however, that it encourages absenteeism among children who are generally responsible for their grazing. The extent to which livestock is the focus for livelihoods among the rural poor varies greatly; for the Sabars, animals are merely a fund resource, and greatly under-utilised. The livestock sector holds potential for development, and with proper planning and investment, could be used to provide an important livelihood alternative for the community.

The community has poor access to financial capital (stocks of money like savings and loans); indeed, fungibility (ease of switching between uses) is a fundamental characteristic of capital in the form of cash (Ellis, 2000) that insures households against unexpected and unforeseen shocks thereby reducing their vulnerability. In the context of ownership of stocks of anything other than animals as a measure of security, a very small percentage (3% of households) has access to stocks of gold and jewellery, which seem to be the alternative means of holding surpluses

between current production and consumption (Swift, 1989). None of the households of Manbazar II, Manbazar I, Balarampur, Hura and Barabazar, however, qualify on this count and surprisingly, it is the households of Bandowan (9%), often referred to as the most deprived Block of the district, that have the greatest ownership of gold and jewellery. These items are of particular significance for household security as they are usually the first to be sacrificed in times of need; their absence in the asset portfolios of most households is another indication of the community's poverty and vulnerability. Other productive assets like bicycles, radios and watches were also identified. Ownership of cycles is often a necessity for households in remote villages, and a luxury for those with good access to facilities; they are also frequently used as collaterals for securing informal loans. The ownership of consumption assets like watches and radios is truly a luxury for the community. The ownership of furniture is low; except for a few cots, most households do not own any. Most Sabar households are owners of hunting tools like bows and arrows, traps, spears etc. A legacy of their past, these still come in useful especially in the search for food though they probably have little resale value. In contrast, the ownership of agricultural implements like ploughs and threshers that would have been a significant advantage in agriculture is relatively poor with only 25% of households owning these.

The Kheria Sabar community as a whole is an asset poor community; the only assets that the households own and that can be converted into cash in times of crises are houses, land, animals, some jewellery and single items like cycles and radios. Moreover, households vary in their asset portfolios, and the most vulnerable and insecure are those that do not own any of these. However, in recent times, diversification, assisted by human and social capital, has been used as an instrument for increasing the range of opportunities that are open to the people, and for reducing dependence on a single asset (land) and a single activity (agriculture). Cash (in the form of savings or available credit), the most substitutable of all assets, is perhaps the resource that the community is most deficient in.

Food Consumption

The question of food security is quite an important one in connection with the lives of the Sabars, especially as the people interviewed often mentioned the scarcity of food in relation to their poverty. The availability of food seems to be again a seasonal phenomenon with food reserves at

the disposal of households being lowest during the pre-monsoon 'hungry' months. Regularity of supply and adequacy of quality and quantity seem to be important indicators of food security. The availability of food seems to be adequate during a 'normal' period; thus, 55% of the households said they have two meals a day while 41.5% said they have more than two meals a day. About 3% of the households have only one meal a day, and it is obviously this percentage that is prone to food insecurity. However, all the households said that the number of meals has to be reduced seasonally, especially during the months of *Baishakh, Jaistha, Bhadra* and *Ashwin*, when paddy loans are also common. Viewed in this way, there definitely seems to be a degree of food insecurity in the community; in fact, for some, one of the incentives for sending children to school is the mid-day meal that they are provided there.

Another indicator of food security is the number of different food items consumed by a household; this reflects the level of dietary diversity, and therefore, the quality of people's diets (Devereaux, 2006). From the consumption pattern of the Sabar households recorded in the survey, it would seem that their diets are rather inadequate in terms of diversity. Households vary in their consumption of lentils, fish, meat and eggs. These items are usually not purchased; fish are caught in the nearby streams and *jhores*, meat from small game is consumed when hunted, and eggs are eaten by those who own poultry. Mutton and chicken are special treats, and often shared by villagers during festive occasions and fairs (*melas*). Thus, food items other than rice and vegetables are consumed 'whenever available'. Compared with the past, the diet of the Sabars has undergone quite a lot of change; there is need, however, to enhance its quality.

Besides food, other items consumed by households regularly include tea, tobacco, betel leaves and *bidis* (local cigarettes). About 70% of the households consume country liquor on a daily or weekly basis; over the years the Sabars have been notorious for their 'drinking' habit, and often employers and Government officials accuse them of turning up for work in an inebriated state. The people themselves acknowledge that the habit of drinking, though now a lot less than in the past, still exists among a number of people, and is quite high in many villages.

Coping Strategies

Some of the surveyed households were asked what they would do (or what they had done in the past) in the case of an extreme event like crop failure due to drought or flood during a particular year. This was done to gauge their response to crisis. The disposal of assets is usually the preferred tactic but for many of the asset-poor Sabars, this too becomes difficult; responses of course, vary across households according to their asset status and generalisations are therefore impossible.

It seems that the most common coping strategies adopted by the Sabars include the taking of consumption loans (which unfortunately increases the dependence of the Sabars on their employers and moneylenders), distress sale of meagre assets like animals, poultry or a cycle perhaps, saving on the education costs of children, and enhancing labour input into alternative activities like handicraft making and seasonal migration. For many Sabars, therefore, diversification and migration, which may well have originated as *ex post* coping behaviour, have now become effective *ex ante* adaptive behaviour (Webb *et al*, 1992) designed to maintain a spread of activities and income.

What will be important for policy makers and implementing agencies in the future is, to find ways of making activities more sustainable by enhancing returns from existing income sources, and making them more viable, as well as finding new channels of asset creation. All these will help to reduce vulnerabilities to future shocks (for example, those arising from possible climate change), improve resilience, and provide for more successful adaptive strategies (Davies, 1993; 1996).

Conclusion

The Sabars have managed to survive in the face of adverse circumstances both in terms of a hostile socio-economic and physical environment. They have responded to stresses in the form of inadequate access to productive resources and seasonality in employment and food availability by diversifying their livelihood portfolios and undertaking seasonal migration to greener pastures during the 'hungry' months. Over time, for some, the pattern of activities selected have been transformed from a set of 'coping strategies' adopted in the face of crises to well-planned adaptive behaviour thereby leading to a marginal reduction in vulnerability. However, the

livelihood activities of these people yield low returns, and because the quality of resources is poor (primarily land, availability of water, credit etc.), it is difficult for them to get out of the poverty trap. Chronic poverty is widespread as is exhibited by the low average income and expenditure levels, and seasonal food insecurity compounds the problem. A poor asset base and lack of savings and investment mean that the people have little to fall back on during times of crises; thus, despite engaging in a range of activities, the community remains, on the whole, chronically vulnerable to poverty. The quest for daily survival has left the people with little scope or opportunities to plan for the future. Therefore, while short-term measures seem to be necessary to pull them out of the poverty trap, provide security and reduce vulnerability, these should be complemented by long-term measures aimed at asset creation and livelihood security designed to bring about more lasting economic and social transformation.

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