

## Chapter 5

# Coping with Poverty

**T**his chapter identifies survival strategies of the poor that help them cope with poverty and periods of distress. The main coping strategies adopted by the poor include:

- Local strategies – strategies adopted while remaining in the villages or urban centers;
- Commuting to nearby villages and towns – looking for livelihood opportunities close by; and
- Temporary or seasonal migration to nearby or distant rural or urban areas.

The major local strategies adopted by the poor are: (i) incurring debts, usually with exploitative terms and conditions, (ii) mortgaging and selling land and other assets, and (iii) depending on common lands and common natural resources. Borrowing from relatives, employers, or from moneylenders is quite common among the poor. These debts are incurred for survival (for buying food in the summer or during drought years), for meeting health-related expenses on illness, injury, or childbirth, or for social expenditures on marriages, births, deaths, and other functions.

Poor communities mentioned several ways of coping with difficult periods. Some of the commonly recalled coping mechanisms included the following:

- Eating only one meal in a day or skipping meals;
- Selling firewood and timber;
- Migrating out of a village in search of livelihood;

- Working for low wages, engaging in hazardous and forced labor;
- Selling sex for livelihood;
- Begging;
- Seeking credit on exploitative terms;
- Mortgaging land;
- Accessing land through leasing and other arrangements;
- Brewing and selling alcohol;
- Working as child-laborers;
- Conversion to different religious and ethnic identities;
- Distress sales (Selling for less than cost of production);
- Sending children to big cities; and
- Encroaching upon common property resources.

### **Skiping Meals and Eating Only One Meal a Day**

In areas where no other options are available and family and community support systems have broken down, the poor have coped with hunger by eating gruel made of grass, wild boars, and wild potatoes.

### **Food Crisis and Responses**

In the event of food crisis, some communities especially tribes resort to eating wild potatoes. They bring these wild potatoes from the forests. An elaborate treatment follows, to remove the poisonous portions of the wild potato. The potatoes are cut into small pieces and are packed in a sack. The sack is then kept under flowing river water for around twelve hours. Thereafter, the sack of potatoes is brought home and boiled. The entire process is repeated and the potatoes are consumed after they are boiled for the second time. The community members contend that the potatoes are fit for consumption after this elaborate process, though eating it continuously for over a week causes health problems as the body becomes yellowish and puffy. It also leads to weakness and nausea.

Eating only one meal a day is a common coping mechanism observed across a large number of poor households. One of the reasons underlying high consumption of alcoholic drinks in many poor communities was stated to be the fact that it made one overcome hunger. Chewing of betel nut is another such practice.



Forests Supporting food and livelihoods (Source: PPA Field Study)

## Selling Minor Forest Produce

Selling minor forest produce (MFP) is an important source of income for a large number of poor households living in and around forest areas. Poor families near forest villages can engage in the collection and sale of mahua, *saal* seeds, *tora*, tamarind, *harra*, *baherra*, *char*, *safed musli*, and other MFP and earn an income. MFP also acts as an insurance against hunger for many poor households. Mahua flower and other MFP are sometimes stored and exchanged with essential commodities on a barter basis.

Other than sale of MFP, selling firewood and timber is another common survival strategy for a large number of poor households. This is particularly true of some primitive tribes who spend a good number of days in the pre-winter months gathering and storing stocks of firewood that can be sold in winter to make a living.

## Migration and Poverty

Migration is a major coping strategy of the poor. Tribals migrate to irrigated areas, to urban centers, and to construction work sites; the poor from dry regions migrate to urban areas and to irrigated areas in search of unskilled casual work; the poor from irrigated regions also migrate to distant urban centers in search of casual work; and the poor from small urban centers also migrate to larger centers looking for work. A lot of the work that migrant workers are engaged in is seasonal, temporary and low paid.

Migration across the border is a major cause for the less than rapid fall in poverty in the border and more prosperous states. The continuous influx of migrant population from neighboring states and adjacent countries has not only worsened the unemployment situation but also has changed the socio-cultural fabric of some states.

## People Subject to Distress Migration

A number of poor households migrate to towns and other states during the lean seasons to work in quarries, kilns, and other places where conditions of work are harsh and exploitative.

### The Story of Pandi – A Victim of Exploitation

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Pandi of Silli Village had gone to work in a construction site in a neighboring state for about 2 months, along with his family members. A few days before his scheduled return to his village, the contractor started demanding excessive work and began to harass him and his family. When Pandi asked for payment of the wages due to him and his family, the contractor promised to send the money to his village at a later date.

When Pandi left to return to his village, agents of the contractor caught hold of Pandi in a moving train and threw him out of his compartment in the presence of other members of his family. His damaged body was recovered by the railway police posted at the next station and treated in a wayside hospital. It took Pandi almost a year to be cured of the injuries, but the economic health of his family was completely ruined in the process. They had to sell their cattle, ornaments, and a few acres of land to mobilize Rs35,000/- for his treatment. His family stopped migrating after the incident.

Distress migration intensifies during periods of droughts and famines. PPAs document extensive rural out migration in periods of drought.

## Patterns of Migration

About half of the villages covered under PPAs show distress migration of both short- and long-term nature to urban areas and prosperous locations in other states.

The most common livelihoods of migrants include rickshaw pulling; casual labor in factories; wage labor in construction sites, brick kilns, stone quarries, road works, and unskilled jobs of various forms.

While seasonal migrants mostly include men, a large number of women and children too migrate during lean seasons. Women support men in most collective activities of toilsome nature (e.g., harvesting, sowing, work in brick kilns, stone quarries, etc.) Children take up employment in *dhabas*, confectionery shops, vehicle-repair shops, small factories, recycling stores, etc.

Most migrant laborers take up accommodation in the workplace itself, in nearby slums, or makeshift settlements. The urge to save out of their meager income often makes many of them forego meals or consume cheap food. Some migrants have managed to clear their debts by stretching themselves.

Many poor migrants are not happy that they have to migrate. Their major complaint is that their lives have become totally unsettled and uncomfortable due to such migration. They leave their homes, their relatives, and sometimes their children when they go out, which is very painful. The facilities at the place of migration are invariably poor and the work is hard and long stretched. The poor cannot access education, health support, employment programs, or other welfare programs of the government. Since migration is mainly for survival, it does not help them in upward mobility either. Many suggested that work should be made available at home.

## Working for Lower wages, Forced Labor and in Hazardous Occupations

As detailed in chapter 2, the poor have to undertake work in hazardous and inhospitable terrain due to poverty, work at available wages due to low bargaining power and enter into forced labor arrangements.

### Forced Labor

Several kinds of exploitative systems and forced labor practices were also found during PPAs. For instance, under practices like *Harvahi*, *Dhangar* the poor people in need of money borrow from moneylenders and offer their daily labor free of cost (or for a token wage which is extremely low) for a mutually agreed period, normally ranging between 1 to 3 years for a loan amount in the range of Rs10,000/- to Rs25,000/-. Traditional systems of forced labor are prevalent in some villages where families are employed in the houses of rich farmers for several generations, and are allowed to neither seek alternative livelihoods, nor take leave.

### Maintaining a Diverse Portfolio of Livelihoods to Minimize Risks

For the poorest of the poor households concentrated in the urban slums, maintaining a diverse portfolio of livelihoods is a common strategy. In urban slums, working as domestic help was recounted by many women to be a compulsion, as they commonly lacked access to their husband's income and had the responsibility of managing their households almost single-handedly. Multiple working members and diverse portfolio of part time work helped cope with poverty.

### Selling Sex for Survival

One of the extreme forms of compromise made by poor single women in PPA sites is to engage in sex work during periods of crises. This has been elaborated in earlier chapters.

### Begging

Begging is a very common strategy employed by the poor to cope with nonavailability of livelihoods, particularly in urban areas. Most beggars in urban areas are migrants from villages, and are homeless. A large proportion of beggars comprise people with disability of different degrees, besides the elderly, women, and children. Many children who beg on the streets work for agencies and regularly deposit their collections to their masters in lieu of two meals and addictive substances.

Begging is also a common coping mechanism for people falling in the lowest well-being category. In some instances, begging was also found to be a traditionally perpetuated occupation.

## Seeking Credit on Exploitative Terms

Under desperate circumstances, many poor households take loans at highly exploitative terms. Several kinds of informal credit arrangements are prevalent. For instance, the practice called “*Bedhi*” requires the borrower to pay back double the amount of loan in four months time. Another prevalent system known as “*Dedha*” requires the borrower to pay an interest amount of 50% in 4 months. On failing to repay, the moneylender has the freedom to confiscate household goods like utensils, crops, or domestic animals.

## Mortgaging land

Mortgaging land and other productive assets in times of crises is a common coping mechanism of the poor. The poor recalled several kinds of mortgaging arrangements during the PPA exercise. In notified areas with a restriction on sale of tribal landholdings, establishing de facto control over land through mortgage arrangements is a common mode of land alienation of scheduled and primitive tribes.

## Some Systems for Mortgaging Land

In *toota bandhak*, a maximum duration of mortgage is agreed between the moneylender and the landowner, and irrespective of whether the loan is repaid or not, the land has to be returned to the owner after the mortgage lapses. Normally, the duration of a mortgage is between 5–10 years, by which time the loan is expected to be repaid.

Under the *Phirouti* system of mortgaging, the moneylender uses the mortgaged land as long as the borrower does not fully repay the loan amount.

The *Katouti* system is similar to the *toota bandhak* system, whereby the loan amount is divided into several equal installments, and for each installment, an equivalent duration of control over land is given to the moneylender.

*Sikmi* is another prevalent system of land mortgage, whereby the land is valued by the moneylender, and the amount of loan is accordingly determined.

## Accessing Land through Joint Arrangements

Local systems of mutual help are prevalent whereby farmers divide themselves into groups and work in each other’s farms in turns to finish off labor-intensive activities on time. Systems like *Pancha* or *Sangat* are good examples of such arrangements.

Lease arrangements such as sharecropping practices which allow the poor landless to access and cultivate land on rent are common in some areas and are known by a number of local names such as *Sajha*, *adhia*, or *batai*. In some parts, fixed rent systems are prevalent.

### **Brewing and Selling Alcohol**

In many villages studied, brewing and selling alcohol was found to be a common strategy employed by many poor households. The impact of this on nutrition levels and cropping patterns has been discussed earlier.

### **Children at Work**

The engagement of children in labor, often voluntary, is one of the ways in which poor people cope with poverty. There are some exploitative systems which entail leasing of children in lieu of a predetermined consideration.

### **Conversion of Religion**

Religious institutions offer gruel and food to the poor who under certain circumstances of deprivation either convert their religion or transfer their traditional feudal loyalties to the hands that feed them.

### **Distress Sale (selling for less than the cost of production)**

For many artisan households living through the lean periods of their business (e.g., the food-scarce rainy season when businesses go through a low and artisans are busy in agricultural operations), distress-sale of their unsold craft-products for a very low price (often amounting to less than the cost of production) is a common survival strategy.

### **Encroaching upon Common Property Resources**

Occupying common property resources, mainly forestland, riverbanks, various kinds of non private fallow land and local water bodies is a common strategy employed by the poor for survival purposes. This phenomenon has become extremely common in the last 10 years and transcends a large number of communities in a number of districts.



## The Debt of Childhood

In some villages, the poor have mortgaged their children to moneylenders in lieu of bullocks and seeds. For instance, K mortgaged his daughter in July 2004 to a household located in the neighboring village in lieu of a pair of bullocks. The girl is primarily responsible for grazing the animals of the household and taking care of children.

S of the same village mortgaged his 10-year old son last year in lieu of about 40 kg of rice. The boy has not come back since going away.

J mortgaged his son to a moneylender. The boy died while extracting juice from a *Sulphi* tree. After the death of the child, the moneylender forcibly took back his bullock, and J could not claim any compensation in the absence of any documented evidence of the transaction.

In the extreme form of mortgage, children are kept in the houses of prosperous farmers in lieu of yearly supply of rice (paid to the parents of children). The children only get two meals a day, occasional clothes, and a place to sleep. This practice is believed to be a key reason behind the high rate of school dropouts and preference for male children in some villages.

In some of the sites of PPAs, sending children to big cities to work as domestic servants was found to be common. Households were found to have sent their children, including adolescent girls, to big cities. In some cases, the children are no longer traceable as their addresses and contact numbers known to their families have ceased to be valid.

In some of the urban slums studied, a number of children in the age range of 6–18 years are engaged in child labor and in various forms of petty crime. Most of the younger children (aged up to 10 years) work as rag pickers. They leave their homes early in the morning and walk 6–8 km in search of scrap. The elder children also sell their labor and work as assistants in roadside garages and mechanic shops. Engagement of children in child labor and various criminal activities stem from limited earnings of large-sized families, the need to earn enough to buy addictive substances, and to meet other personal needs, peer pressure, and nonavailability of parental guidance to children of poor, working parents.

## Private Coping Initiatives at the Household and Community Levels

When there is shortage of food, people sell household items like cycles and go for daily wage employment.

The poor use dried up river beds for cultivation during winters.

Some communities like the Mishing community in Jorhat, have evolved their coping mechanisms against flood and starvation by building *Chang Ghars* to store food for the rainy season and keeping boats ready for mobility.

In some instances, communities have come together to build common infrastructure including canals to channelize water to agricultural fields.

Similarly, a common fund has been formed in some villages called “*Kalyan nidhi*,” where many households contribute Rs10/- per month during work seasons, to be used during difficult phases.

## Social Security

Both the rural and urban poor perceive social security benefits as critical to meeting their needs with dignity. This is particularly true of female-headed households including widows who have to fend for themselves and the aged. Despite the recognition of the benefits accruing in well-being of the poor as a result of a well functioning social security system, the outreach has not been to the extent required. While a small percentage of the poor are availing these benefits, a large percentage of the aged and infirm still fall back on the informal systems of support that exist in rural areas but are drying out in urban areas.