

CASE STUDY OF BALANMAYA IN EASTERN NEPAL

Balanmaya, aged 28, is the second wife of Ram. With a cultivated holding of less than a hectare of land, mostly unirrigated, the family of six (of whom three are young children) produces food that lasts for less than six months in a year. This family of six along with some chickens and goats shares a hut, which is not bigger than 4x7 meter in size.

Balanmaya has never moved from the village where she now lives. She has four brothers, of whom two have left the village. Her mother died some 10 years ago, and her father now has a second wife. Balanmaya recalls that there was plenty of food at her parents' place. But she had no opportunity to go to school, while all her brothers had.

Balanmaya had a 'love marriage' (rather than an arranged marriage) at the age of 18. She has given birth to two children, of whom one is surviving. When she came to live with Ram, his first wife had no children. Ram's father had died when he was 10 months old, and his mother remarried. His only brother was in Assam (India), and Ram cultivated all the parental land. Although Ram used to go to Assam during winter to earn some cash, he did not have to do portering for a living, but it is now his regular job. When Ram's brother returned from Assam and took his share of the parental land, the food produced from the farm was far less than the family's requirement. Then both of Ram's wives started having children. Ram went to Assam in November last year to find work and has not contacted them since then. Balanmaya, along with Ram's first wife and the three little children, is finding it hard to get enough to eat.

In a desperate move to meet the chronic food deficit in the house, Balanmaya started portering goods from the road-head to the nearby town, Ghoretar, which takes 4 to 5 days to complete a journey (depending on the amount of load carried). During her last journey, she carried 40 kg of consumer goods, which earned her Rs. 200 as wages. Though she had earned some cash to buy food, she ended up giving birth prematurely (two months early) due to the physical strain of the portering work. The baby died soon after the birth. Although there is a trained traditional birth attendant (TBA) in the village, supported by an INGO working in the area, Balanmaya does not know anything about the TBA, nor did she have any pre/post natal advice and assistance. As she is so weak and pale at the moment, she may have to wait several months before she is physically able to take up the portering job again. This incidence had happened just four days before I met her.

Balanmaya joined a literacy class earlier this year, but said she soon stopped attending the class, as she was too busy running the house. She is a member of the local saving group (initiated and supported by an INGO working in the area). She had taken a loan of Rs.300 from the saving group, which she has not yet paid back; she also has not paid her monthly saving contribution for the last two months.

Although the INGO working in this village has provided generous grants for house repairs and improvements, Balanmaya has so far failed to receive any such assistance. I noticed that the local influential families had managed to secure such free gifts in excess of Rs. 3000, even though they already had nice houses in good condition. Balanmaya's husband was refused a loan from the fund set up by the INGO on the grounds that he is away from home for most of the year. While I was still in the village, Balanmaya was asked to fill in a request form for a grant of Rs.1000 towards

the cost of a toilet, which she is supposed to make in order to become eligible for the house repair grant. The family has also not been able to obtain the subsidised rice from the nearby food depot: instead, they go to the road-head, Chatra, to buy rice.

Maiti, Ram's first wife, aged 31, was married (also a love marriage) at the age of 18. Her parents died when she was only four years old, and then her uncles looked after her. All her three sisters are now married, and the parental land has been taken over by her uncles. Maiti has so far had two births, both alive. She started taking the pill last year, but stopped when her husband went to Assam. She is also attending a literacy class in the village, but she is not in any of the local groups. Her first daughter aged 9 is in primary school.

Both Balan and Maiti work together to manage the house and farm. While Maiti does most of the housework (cooking, cleaning, childcare), Balan does the farm and casual labour.

(Source: Field Notes, Bhojpur, Nepal, 26-04-1998, Mahesh Pant).