

My name is... Babita

POKHARA, Nepal

Babita Biswokarma, age 12, is the youngest in a family of six children. She lives with her mother, father, grandmother and four brothers and sisters—her eldest sister has married and moved away—in a small brick-and-concrete house just outside Pokhara, one of Nepal’s biggest cities.

On a clear day, Babita can stand outside her house and see the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas, the highest mountains in the world. Her father is a farmer. Like most people in Nepal, the family doesn’t have much money. Their house has no running water and

Babita doesn’t have any toys.

But they do have electricity and a small television, and outside there is a garden where Babita and her mother grow vegetables and flowers. Babita also takes care of the family’s chickens and ducks, chasing after them when they escape and scolding the ducks when they try to eat her lettuce plants.

She likes her neighborhood because she lives near lots of other kids, including Sapna, her best friend.

“She never quarrels with me,” said Babita, who wants to be nurse when she grows up. “If I don’t know something as far as schoolwork is concerned, she explains it to me, and I do the same for her.”

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Where She Lives

Babita lives just a few miles outside of Pokhara, which is next to a pretty lake. Pokhara is a popular destination for tourists, who come from all over the world to see the Himalayas. But Babita and her family don’t have much to do with tourists. Like most of Nepal’s 25 million people, they earn their living from the land. Babita’s father practices a type of farming known as sharecropping, which means that he grows crops on someone else’s property, keeping part of the harvest as payment.

In many parts of Nepal, farm fields climb up the sides of mountains like stair steps. But Pokhara is in a valley and the surrounding land is quite flat. The weather is mild, even in winter, which is Babita’s favorite season because it almost never rains. Every few months she and her mother take the bus into Pokhara to shop for clothes and other supplies.

How She Has Fun

Play games: Babita and her friends like hide-and-peek and “gati khelni,” which involves drawing squares in the dirt with a stick and hopping from one to the other on one leg while kicking a small stone. It’s similar to hopscotch and takes a lot of skill.

Have a party: This year Babita and her friends are going to use the money they got during Tihar, the festival of lights, to buy meat and other food for a picnic in the fields. “We’ll carry firewood from the house and then cook the food ourselves,” she said. “We’ll play games, sing songs and dance.”

Watch TV: Every Sunday night at 9, Babita watches a television drama called “Gahana,” which means “Jewelry.” It’s about a family and is “very sad,” Babita said. She also likes a comedy called “Bitter Truth.”

Babita’s mother wakes her every morning at 5. Babita has a glass of tea and a piece of bread,

fetches water from the tap that the family shares with its neighbors, then washes the dishes from the night before. She also sweeps the yard with a small broom. If she has enough time after finishing her chores, she does her homework before leaving for school at 9:30 a.m.

Babita likes school, where her favorite subjects are Nepali, her native language, and science. Once there was a Japanese man who came to teach at the school and showed Babita and the other students how to play baseball. Now Babita would like to visit Japan. “It’s a rich country and I would like to earn money to build a house,” she said.

During harvest season, Babita helps her parents in the fields. She has her own knife, with a short handle and a curved blade, which she uses for cut-

ting rice plants. It’s hard work but Babita likes the festive atmosphere. “There are a lot of people and while harvesting the crop they sing songs, so I enjoy that,” she said.

For dinner, Babita and her family usually eat rice, vegetables and lentil stew. They have chicken once a week as a treat. At 10 o’clock every night, Babita curls up in the big, comfy bed she shares with her grandmother and quickly falls asleep. Babita doesn’t mind the company. “It makes me feel secure,” she said.

—John Lancaster

Inside Nepal

How many people: About 25 million. About 40 percent are children ages 14 and younger. *How big is it:* About 54,000 square miles. That makes it just a bit bigger than Arkansas.

National symbols: They include a rhododendron, a white cow and a green pheasant.

Capital: Kathmandu.

Religion: Hinduism is the religion of more than 85 percent of the people, including Babita. Buddhism and Islam are also practiced.

Economy: Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries, with about 40 percent of its population living in poverty. Babita is very lucky to have a television (only 6 in 1,000 people do). Children ages 6-10 are required to go to school. Because the country is so poor, many children work very hard jobs at early ages.

Tall tale (actually not): Nepal is home to eight of the world's 10 tallest mountains, including Mount Everest, the world's tallest, which is on Nepal's border with Tibet.