

# Bedey Community of Bangladesh: A Socio-Legal Study

Supravat Halder\*

## Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the present sociological situation and legal status of the people of Bedey community of Bangladesh, their sociological status, family and social structure, status of their livelihood, income, housing, health, nutrition, education, etc. It also contains rights based analysis of vulnerability of people of Bedey community. Furthermore, the paper presents, in short, the analysis and assessment of legal and governmental actions to ensure the rights of Bedey people in Bangladesh.*

## 1. Introduction:

The Bedes are a nomadic people who live in boats and travel throughout Bangladesh by rivers. Their major occupation is selling various items like cooking utensils, jewelry, spices and performing various acts of entertainment like snake dancing, magical tricks or palmistry. Another occupation of this community is catching snakes, treating snake-bitten patients and advising on preventive measures to adopt to keep snakes away from entering homesteads. For their nomadic life on river boats, they are also known as the river gypsies of Bangladesh. They were self reliant economically and in rural Bangladesh they were highly regarded in society for their activities like treatment of snake bite, spiritual healing. But in recent years they have become critically vulnerable for so many reasons that are analyzed in this article. This article is mainly descriptive in nature with analysis on specific issues on the basis of literature study.

## 2. Bedey Community: An Acquaintance

Bedes in Bangladesh are familiar for their nomadic<sup>1</sup> lifestyle. They appear to be river gypsies. Bedey a community belonging mainly to the ethnic Mong-tong

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\* Senior Lecturer and Coordinator, LL.B. (Honors) Program, Department of Law, Northern University Bangladesh.

<sup>1</sup> The term "nomad" is derived from Greek nomas, roaming, particularly in search of pasture, from nemein, to pasture. Dictionary of Encarta characterizes nomads as ?1. member of itinerant people: a member of a people who move seasonally from place to place to search for food and water or pasture for their livestock; 2. wanderer:

(Mangta) of Arakan, who in 1638, accompanied the fugitive king of Arakan, Ballal Raja, and later settled in Bikrampur area near Dhaka. Many of them were converted to Islam over time. Later, the Bedeys spread out to remote areas of Bengal and Assam.<sup>2</sup> The Mangta people were popularly called Bedey after the Bangla word Baidda meaning village doctor. In physical appearance they are quite close to Bangalis.

## 2.1 Social Practices:

Bedeys follow the customs and practices of the Kowma society of Arakan. Apparently the community is patriarchal, but the women tend to play crucial roles in day to day affairs. They do all types of hard work. The community generally lives in clusters on machans (platforms) constructed by the side of rivers or on boats. Throughout the year, and especially during harvesting, they move out in groups from village to village and conduct their trade. Bedeys call this travel gawal. They carry with them wicker-baskets of snakes or bags of herbal medicines. Usually, it is the women who go in gawal. Snake catching and snake-charming make a major source of income for them. Towards the end of the month of December at the beginning of winter and in the last half of July, at the end of the dry season, they go in gawal with their families. While in gawal, they live with their families mostly in boats, tents or in the verandas of local schools.

## 2.2 Family:

After the gawal they return to their permanent place of residence and indulge in various festivities, in which young males and females are allowed to choose their partners and marry them with due consent of their guardians. After marriage, the husband goes to the wife's house to live permanently. The wife takes a vow that she will take care of her husband and the children. In case a young man from outside the community marries a Bedey girl by enticement, he has to pay a fine for obtaining consent of the community. Polygamy, child marriage and living in a joint family are not in vogue. Widows are not prohibited from remarriage. If

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*somebody who wanders from place to place*" The World Book Encyclopedia defined nomad as "a person who moves from one place to another as a way of making a living. The word nomad comes from a Greek word that means one who wanders for pasture." The Macmillan Family Encyclopedia defined nomad as "people without permanent dwellings who migrate regularly according to their own detailed knowledge of exploitable resources."

<sup>2</sup> Bede, viewed on 18th October, 2012 from <http://www.munshigonj.com/-MgonjSection/bede.htm>

divorced, husband and wife divide their properties including children among themselves. The larger share goes to the wife.

### **2.3 Social Structure:**

The *Mong-tongs* of Bangladesh are divided into nine sects. They are *Lauyo*, *Chapailya*, *Bajikar*, *Bej*, *Gayin*, *Mellach*, *Bandaira*, *Mal* and *Shapurja* (snake charmer). All these groups consider that doing physical work in the field is undignified. Their universal profession is to practice folk medicines and to sell indigenous drugs including different kinds of wild creepers, leaves and roots. Every Bedey family, if not entirely destitute, has its own boat. A few families with their boats form a group and the boats of the group form a fleet. Each fleet takes an identity of a sub-tribe headed by a Sardar or the leader of that particular group of families. The Sardar divides his fleet into a number of small groups and appoints a guide for each of the groups through whom he coordinates the community affairs. The Sardar determines the trade routes and area of operation for every group. He imposes penalty for violation of norms and pronounces decree to that effect after examining witnesses and evidences. If any group fails to return from gawal in time without showing good reason, the Sardar can punish them. Maintenance and subsistence of the Sardar are the responsibilities of the fleet. Special fees are paid to the Sardar at the time of marriage. The Sardar receives gifts on the occasion of different festivals.

As they claim to be Muslims, they tend to maintain a minimal relationship with the local Muslims. They also practice many rites and rituals of Hindu religion. They worship the Manasa (the goddess of snakes). The Bedeys have their own language called Thet or Ther. They use it within their own community. The language has much similarity with the language of the Arakanese.

### **2.4 Geographic Location:**

Bedeys are scattered more or less in different regions of Bangladesh. They are found in Rajshahi division at Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rajshahi and Pabna, in Khulna division at Jessore, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Narail, Khulna, Bagerhat, in Barisal division at Patuakhali and Barisal, in Chittagong division at Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Chandpur, Noakhali and Chittagong, in Sylhet division at Sunamganj, Moulavibazar and Habiganj, and in Dhaka division they are found more or less in all districts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Indigenous People of Bangladesh: Bedey, Banglapedia.

### **3. Socio-economic Status:**

#### ***3.1 Income:***

Bedeys in Bangladesh are poverty stricken. Their incomes vary from place to place and time to time. They have no access to meet their basic needs and even are vulnerable, destitute or in Marxian term proletariat. They belong to one of the professional minority income groups of Bangladesh having a very low range of average income. Almost 98% of the Bede people live below extreme poverty line. They are not in the mainstream of the income sources of the economy and involved in some informal, traditional and hereditary ways if income. They have no orientation of any other income sources. So that, they are bound to live in chronic poverty situation finding no other means.

#### ***3.2 Housing:***

Bedeys lives are significantly related to river. Communities of the small groups of nomadic bedey people do not live at a particular place and move from place to place, rather than settling down in one location. They change their living places so many times a year for earning their livelihood. While in gawal they live in small boats. Normally one Bedey family comprising of 5-8 members, irrespective of children or adult, male or female, live in one boat. They generally live in and on boat. Since time immemorial, they were available in different regions not only in Bangladesh but also in many other countries all over the world. They like to live riverside or in boat clustered way. Their fleets are usually not stable more than two or three days in a certain place. Each year, Bedeys start their journey by fleets after the completion of the festival of 10th Choitra (the last month of Bangla calendar) and 10th Kartik (seventh month of Bangla calendar). For two months of the year, they anchor in any place and during this period are engaged in cooperation with family members, in marriage ceremony and in the meeting of Shalish (arbitration). Returning from gawal they build plastic sheet huts by the riverside and live in those for few months on land.

#### ***3.3 Education:***

Although poverty plays a vital role for deprivation of the Bedey children from education, their nomadic lifestyle is the main cause for not getting enrolment in schools and if enrolled they dropped out from the process because the children leave the place, where the school is situated, with their families. Schools do not accept them at all. And because they are so poor, adults want their children to

work as snake charmers, snake catchers and traditional healers to generate extra income.<sup>4</sup>

### **3.4 Healthcare:**

The Bedeys usually practice ethno-medicine as one of their professions for the treatment of various complex and simple diseases. They are the traditional ethno-medical practitioners recognized by the community in which they live as a group of people who provide health care by using herbs, vegetables, animals and mineral substances and certain other methods. These methods are based on social, cultural and religious background as well as on the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that are prevalent in the community regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causes of disease and disability. The male Malboidhyas conduct the medical practice with various plant and animal parts and sell medicines, and the females are involved in the removal of worms from teeth and eyes (according to their beliefs), suck out 'bad blood' with animal horns, and treat the analgesia of hips, etc. The significant factor is their income which is so low and for that they cannot afford modern medicine and medical care.

### **3.5 Nutrition:**

An empirical study shows that 47.5 % of the people of Kanchonpur, a village where a Bedey group lives, drink water of the nearest pond or river that is so injurious to their health.<sup>5</sup> However, it is also showed that 42.3 % of the people (who are educated or health conscious) drink water of tube-well.<sup>6</sup> It is also mentionable that Bedeys of Kanchonpur were traditionally boat dwellers and drink only water of river. Nutrition is the vital part of a standard livelihood. But, most of the Bedey children are the victims of malnutrition. They have no ways to overcome such malnutrition. Though there are available steps taken by NGOs to remove malnutrition (e. g., IPRSP, MDG), they are not getting the resources to eradicate malnutrition or not being benefited.

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<sup>4</sup> A.K.M. Masud, Bangladesh River Gypsies Moving to Mainstream, viewed on 18.10.2012 from <http://www.sfgate.com/world/article/Bangladesh-river-gypsies-moving-to-mainstream-3243360.php>

<sup>5</sup> Abul Kalam Azad, 2012, *Bedey Community of Kanchanpur: A Sociological Study*, Lamdert Academic Publishing, Germany, p. 82

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

### **3.6 Participation and Voice:**

Bedey people of Bangladesh now are cherishing to be assimilated with the non-Bedey people; they are now cherishing the prosperous life and leaving their traditional occupations as it is obvious from their rules and regulations and organizational objectives and their constitution. Bangladesh Jajabor Samaj Kallayan Samity (Bangladesh Society for Nomad's Welfare) stands for sedentarization or settlement. It also demands for employment of their people.

### **4. Special Feature of Vulnerability: Evil Cycle of Poverty**

As the Bedey people have no permanent place of living they do not have any permanent address also. So, they cannot claim to be belonged to any particular place that results no local government body recognizes them as the inhabitants of that particular area. So, those authorities or bodies do not consider as the eligible target group for various social safety programs like VGD, VGF, TR etc. Furthermore, for not having a permanent address banks, NGOs or any other money lending institution cannot lend them money that they can use in income generating activities. As stated earlier Bedeys are losing their traditional profession that result in income loss which further results in more poverty. For less income they cannot save money rather they have to borrow from others in case of sudden need for uneven expenses such as for repairing old boat or buy a new boat. Since they cannot borrow from the banks and no having microcredit access very often they borrow money from the local people on a high interest rate. To repay that loan they may take another loan if they do not earn sufficient to repay the first loan. Thus this cycle makes them more vulnerable causing "evil cycle of poverty".

### **5. Present Status: A Society on Change**

The traditional lifestyle is undergoing drastic change in some localities where the live permanently leaving their gypsy lifestyle. History says that Bedeys are nomadic in nature. But, this idea is being changed because of their settling down. These changes are evident in the Bedeys of Kanchonpur, a locality in Dhaka district. With the changes in the way of life their functions have been radically changing, no doubt. Before 200 years they had no piece of land, no house without boat, no certain place, in a word, no certain social structure; they were scattered in different regions of Bangladesh; they were illiterate; they did not participate in national politics; they had no so scope of recreation. If we explain this traditional structure of the Bedeys of Kanchonpur, we may say that they were in primitive stage. Therefore, there was a great cohesion among them. But, with their settling down, they create a new shape of their social structure and

their functions began to be changed. They have now certain places, some amount of lands and the instruments of farming and cultivation; they have private property; they have the accessibility and reach of recreational instruments such as T.V., Radio, mobile phones, and also the instruments of playing football, cricket, carom, cards, kori etc.; there is the existence of income and inequality in the present structure of the Bedey people of Kanchonpur.<sup>7</sup>

## **6. Vulnerability of Bedey Community:**

**Marginalization:** Since many of Bedeys carried their profession as traditional doctors of snake bites and spiritual healers were once highly regarded in rural Bangladeshi culture because there was no modern treatment of snake bite in rural Bangladesh even 20 years ago. But their gradual decline began some 60 years ago and now they are seen as outcasts, partly because of their dietary habits and because their women do not wear the purdah (veil) and often touch the bodies of male patients.<sup>8</sup>

### **6.1 Loss of Profession:**

With the advancement of science and technology modern medicines are available now. So, people do not move to Bedeys for traditional treatment for snake bite or other diseases that people used to get solved by the Bedeys previously. So, Bedeys have lost their income and profession. Again, snake-charming is no more charming to the people as they have now more charming ways of recreation. So, snake-charmers have lost their profession. As the result, now a day so many Bedey people are seen begging in the bus stands and busy streets of different district towns including Dhaka city. But, Bedeys consider begging as a sin and undignified job. Unfortunately they have been forced by the situation to involve in begging. Moreover, they are forced by the socioeconomic situation to change their profession and traditional lifestyle from nomadic community to permanent settlers.

### **6.2 Loss of Shelter:**

Due to loss of earning means most of the household of the Bedey community lost their capabilities to afford repair their old broken boats or buy or build a new boat. Thus they loss their necessary shelter.

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<sup>7</sup> See note 13, pp. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Bijoyeta Das, Bangladesh's River Gypsies Lose Traditional Lifestyle, viewed on 7 October 2012 from <http://thinkbrigade.com/asia/bangladesh-river-gypsies>.

### ***6.3 Inability of Adaptation and Absence of Rehabilitation:***

Since the livelihood of bedey community is based on moving from one place to another through rivers, they neither have agricultural land nor they are familiar with the process and knowledge of agriculture. Although they have lost their profession, there is no mechanism and program for their rehabilitation and adaptation.

### ***6.4 Breakdown of Confidence:***

In a country of capitalism where every goods and services are produced only for the people who can afford those and since Bangladesh is facing decline of social capital and kinship, in addition to these governmental safeguards and rehabilitation program are poor in degree and performance, every vulnerable group of people losses confidence of becoming self reliant. So, they become reluctant to change their fate rather they believe only their fate because they believe that neither people nor the state will help them to change their life.

### ***6.5 Social Stigma or Exclusion:***

Bedeys are de facto one of the lowest classes of people in Bangladesh. They are treated as untouchables to the village people. That is why they do not get any opportunity to be appointed as household workers in any solvent family and thus they are out of the informal sector of the economy.

### ***6.6 Special Vulnerability during Natural Disaster:***

During natural disasters and calamities the Bedey people becomes more vulnerable because they have no permanent shelter and the people who have shelter becomes vulnerable and they deny to provide shelter to Bedey people.

## **7. Causes of Vulnerability:**

### ***7.1 Loss of Social Capital:***

Bangladesh has a great standing of social capital historically. But recently there are so many instances show that it is facing decline of social capital as "citizen inalienation" is evident. As an inevitable result, Bedey people do not get much attention like the past ages when they got social protection by the common and ordinary people.

### ***7.2 Fear of Unfamiliarity:***

Since the Bedey are socially excluded and are regarded as untouchable, people have fear from Bedey people for their unusual lifestyle, food habit, customs and traditions. So, the Bengali people do not want to integrate Bedeys with the mainstream of the society.

### ***7.3 Out of Governance Process:***

Bangladesh is one of the countries of poor governance performance where stakeholders of any development program are seldom consulted and their opinion is rarely taken into account while planning and implementing the program. The issues regarding Bedey are never taken into consideration because they have no access to the process of governance of development programs. These people are not the subject of "structural adjustment process" carried by the governments every year investing huge amount of public money.

### ***7.4 Advancement of Technology and Medical Science:***

It has been found that bedeys have become professionally, thus economically, vulnerable for modern medical technology. Advanced medical science and technology has made them further professionally marginalized because people do not proceed to them for traditional treatments of snake bite and spiritual healing rather they go to the doctors and hospitals for modern and secured treatments.

### ***7.5 Lack of Political Will for Inclusion:***

In a country like Bangladesh where the political process does not function properly and politics has become a way of making profit investing huge amount of money for manipulation of election result, most of the politicians are engaged in grabbing more and more money, land, public offices, nepotism and corruption. They have no time and effort at all to invest in thinking affairs like social development and rehabilitation of the critically vulnerable people like bedeys.

### ***7.6 Legal Provision:***

Sometimes law of the state itself may make the people vulnerable. For example, the newly passed the Vagrant and Shelter-less People (Rehabilitation) Act 2011 may cause severe vulnerability to the Bedey community because of its several provisions. The said Act in effect,

has criminalized the vagrants in the name of rehabilitation by making arbitrary arrest and detention of beggars legal, without addressing the need for special provisions for specialized group of people like Bedey because Bedeys are not vagrant.<sup>9</sup> They are recently engaged in begging finding no other means. They are ethnically nomadic and mobile in nature. But the said law empowers the police to arrest them since they are shelterless. Again the Act empowers the Magistrate to detain them for two years that violates the constitutional guarantee of free movement.

## **8. State Undertakings regarding the River Gypsies**

The government of Bangladesh undertakes every year so many development programs, social safety net programs and welfare programs for the vulnerable groups of people of which the bedey people are subjects. Beside these, in recent years, the Government is trying to settle the community, which is spread in small pockets throughout the country by allotting them places to live by the rivers where they can erect their own homesteads and lead a more settled life. One such community of about 7,500 people is settled by the Bangshi river in Savar municipality, which is on the outskirts of Dhaka, the capital and biggest city of Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup> However, two of the governmental programs can be assessed in the following way:

**Social Safety Net:** Government of Bangladesh allocates significant amount of money in national budgets every year in which Bedeys are subjects directly or indirectly. But since Bedeys have no permanent home and address they cannot avail the benefits of those safety net programs.

**Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper:** Poverty reduction Strategy paper is the only document of the government where name of Bedey community is mentioned for the first time in the history and so far. But the implementation and result of PRSP is not satisfactory. So, it has not left any impact on the Bedey population at all.

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<sup>9</sup> Taslima Yasmin, Punishing Victims in the Name of Rehabilitation, viewed on 8 November, 2012 from <http://www.thedailystar.net/forum/2011/November/victim.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Taleb Hossain, Z.U.M. Emdad Ullah Miajee, Mst. Afsana Khatun and Mohammed Rahmatullah., A Preliminary Study of the Health Management Practices of the Bede Community of Savar, Bangladesh and some of their Ethnomedicinal Formulations, *American-Eurasian Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*, pp. 136.

## **9. Moving Forward:**

It is a matter of good sign that the Government of Bangladesh has at last identified and realized the problem, though not properly, and the people of Bedey community are, in very limited number are going to be rehabilitated. But, in a country like Bangladesh where resources are employed and reached to the targeted people in "tickle down" process, the political and administrative will of the Government plays a vital role to ensure the rights of the people who are vulnerable like Bedeys. Investing sufficient resources on objective satisfaction with meaningful stakeholder consultation is necessary.

## **10. Conclusion**

To end the discussion, a logical conclusion can easily be drawn that the Bedey community have become critically vulnerable since they either are deprived of or unable to avail almost all the basic economic rights and as the consequence of this deprivation they are reluctant and further deprived of other civil and political rights. So, it is the high time for the state to ensure proper right based rehabilitation of the Bedey community to establish an inclusive and balanced society where all people enjoy basic human rights and live with dignity.