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Nomadic Bedes are Experiencing Identity Crisis and Shifting of Their Traditional Habitats in Bangladesh

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors RARS finalized the study conception, data collection, curate the data, writing original draft and reviewing the manuscript. Author IJS was collected literature, performed data analysis, editing, and checking plagiarism. Authors MJH, MSAM, MER and MMR were checking the English grammar, revising, reviewing, writing response to the reviewers and editing the manuscript.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.#

RARS and IJS are equally contributed first author to this study.

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries, with various ethnic communities scattered throughout the nation. The nomadic Bede are an ancient ethnic group that has traditionally lived, traveled, and earned their livelihood in Bengal's riverine systems. Snake charming is one of the main ways they make money. However, most of the Bedes are changing their inheriting characteristics of riverine system to a new habitat. The purpose of the study is to identify the actual scenario of the Bede community in selected areas of Bangladesh. The study revealed that Bedes are changing their traditional way of life by moving from boats to temporary land, where they live in a small collection of huts and makeshift homes for a long time. Few of them were still engaged in their traditional occupations, such as snake charming and selling ethno-medicines; however, the majority relied on the begging in the street by bluffing the street people or make the people fool or engage with other jobs to make ends meet. Although contemporary technology has brought new sorts of entertainment, decreasing the incentive for Bede's to work, less Bedes may have been active in snake charming as a means of continuing their parental profession. Importantly, the young generations are not interested in their nomadic Bede life and few of them are doing snake-charming and other forms of traditional entertainment for a living. The mainstream of society does not accept them cordially due to their cultural, ritual, and occupational differences. As a whole, the Bede people lived below the poverty line, making them very vulnerable in the society and experiencing an identity crisis. The Bede community requires the government and human rights organizations' help to secure their house, make it easier for them to get work, and ensure their health and education so th5at they may survive as a people in the society's mainstream. This is a preliminary study that attempted to identify the reality of the Bede community in a small representative part of Bangladesh. Future study is needed to discover more information about the Bede community that lives around the country.

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Keywords: *Bagging, ethno-medicines, identity crisis, Nomadic Bede, survive, snake charming.*

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31 1. INTRODUCTION

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33 Bangladesh is known as the "Land of Rivers" because it has over 700 rivers and tributaries.
34 The country's rivers are extensive, defining both the country's geography and the people's
35 daily lives. Throughout history, rivers have been a focal point of human activity. Rivers have
36 played an important role in the history of civilization in many countries around the world,
37 including Bangladesh [1]. Numerous diverse communities in Bangladesh have developed as
38 a result of cultural and ethnic diversity. The Nomadic Bede people, also known as the snake
39 charmer, sapuria, river gypsy, or water gypsy, are spread across the country. Bede is a
40 "Nomadic Indo-Aryan" ethnic group that is also referred to as "Manta" [2, 3]. They travel in
41 groups and never stay in one place for more than a few months at a time. In Bangladesh, the
42 Bedes are a racial minority group. Although the exact number of Bede people in Bangladesh
43 is unknown, a study found that approximately 17 lakh Bede people live scattered in 53
44 districts of Bangladesh [4].

45 The Bede people are renowned for living a nomadic lifestyle, living in open fields, moving by
46 boat and local transportation as well as via waterways, and having a distinct sociocultural
47 tradition. In Bengali, the term "Bede" refers to a caste or group of people that live off of
48 catching snakes and entertaining people by having the snakes dance to the sound of their
49 flutes, as is depicted in the movie itself. A small distinction exists between Bede, or snake
50 charmers, and snake catchers, or rescuers. Snake catchers or rescuers only do so as a
51 hobby or duty; however, Bede or snake charmers practice the occupation of snake
52 charming. The snake is usually slow and reluctant to bite the Bede or snake charmer, even
53 when he or she sits out of its reach. Fang or venom gland removal, or even sewing the
54 snake's mouth shut, are more extreme forms of defense. A variety of literary works and films
55 have also clearly portrayed the lives and characters of the Bede community previously, such
56 as "Bilashi" and "Beder Meye Josna." Although the Bede community does not belong to **our**
57 mainstream society, their way of life and line of work have long been deeply ingrained in
58 Bengali culture, which is reflected in **our** literature.

59 Bede people have the capability of training snakes to play an instrument called a pungli while
60 being trained to appear mesmerized. These kinds of shows involve handling numerous
61 venomous and hazardous snakes while doing other risky activities such as staples, juggling,
62 and sleight of hand. This form of activity is prevalent in several Asian countries such as
63 India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, as well as some regions of
64 the North African nations of Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco [5]. Snake bite is the single most
65 important cause of envenoming worldwide and results in substantial mortality throughout the
66 world, particularly in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas [6, 7]. A previous study reported
67 that approximately 421,000 envenomings occur annually worldwide, with the highest
68 numbers estimated in South Asia (121,000), followed by South East Asia (111,000), and
69 East Sub-Saharan Africa (43,000) [8]. As a result, the villagers believe that Bedes have the
70 ability to heal people who have been bitten by snakes.

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72 Bedes have been experienced as the best entertainers for the village people in Bangladesh
73 regarding the performances and acts of snake-charming that are considered to be their
74 major source of income [1, 2, 9]. They have good knowledge **about** the local flora and fauna
75 and prepare herbal medicines for various diseases as an additional source of income. Two
76 decades ago, the Bede people performed snake-charming and related activities on a regular
77 basis, as they were accustomed **to that for a long time**. However, **our** previous study
78 identified that Bede people faced a number of obstacles in their day-to-day activities due to
79 their occupation **in concern with** socio-economic status [9]. **The present** study aims to
80 identify the actual scenario of the Bede community in the selected area of Bangladesh.

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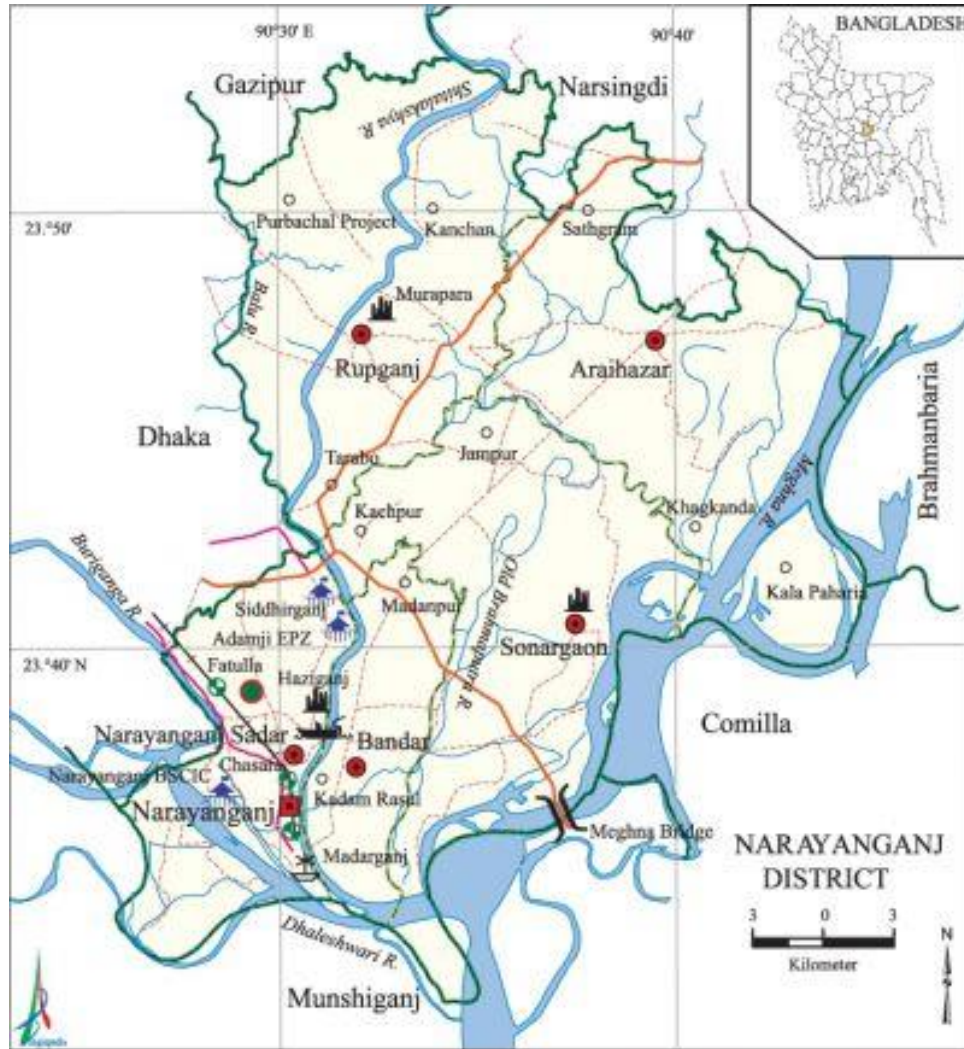
2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in three upazilas of Narayanganj district, such as Sonargaon upazila, Bandar upazila, and Rugganj upazila. Narayanganj District is located in central Bangladesh and is home to the ancient city of Sonargaon. It has an area of 687.76 square kilometers and is located between 23°33' and 23°57' north latitudes and 90°26' and 90°45' east longitudes. It is bounded to the north by Narsingdi and Gazipur districts, to the south by Munshiganj district, to the east by Brahmanbaria and Comilla districts, and to the west by Dhaka district. It is also one of the country's oldest industrial districts. The district is located on the banks of the Shitalakshya and Meghna rivers. It serves as an industrial centre for the country's jute trade, plant processing, textiles, garment, shipyard, brickfield, international trading, import and export industries create job opportunities for the people, allowing them to supplement their home income. As a result, many Bede peoples and other homeless peoples prefer to live in this region to build a hub for easy accessing to the surrounding cities and making more money easily than others.

DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected from these sampling areas using both primary and secondary techniques. The primary techniques used for gathering data are close observation, interviewing of Bede people, census surveys, preformed questionnaires, photography, and group discussions. The secondary techniques included the searching of articles, reviews, government reports, local volunteer participation, and so on. The face-to-face interviews using pre-formed questionnaires with the Bede peoples from various parts of these areas were very helpful in determining their actual situation. Following the collection of the data, the data must be processed and analyzed in accordance with the study's objectives. All data were loaded into excel file and analyzed pertinent information, offering hypotheses, and assisting in decision-making. To achieve the research goal, we used the most important basic information for data analysis and then observed various aspects of their daily lives. During our earlier investigation, we thoroughly investigated the lifestyle of Bede peoples and collected a lot of research parameters [9]. However, few of the important parameters were attracted our interest and we started to work with these parameters. We visited the Bede people's areas again, discussed with them, and finalized the research objective and output. Due to the Bede people's request and the agreement of our guide message, all questions and other material were not published here. Despite the fact that most Bede peoples were hiding part of the questionnaires owing to societal fear and Bede community restrictions. We compared previous data with current study data and opted to use only data that was newly collected and had not previously been published. We removed unnecessary and unworthy data from the final analysis.



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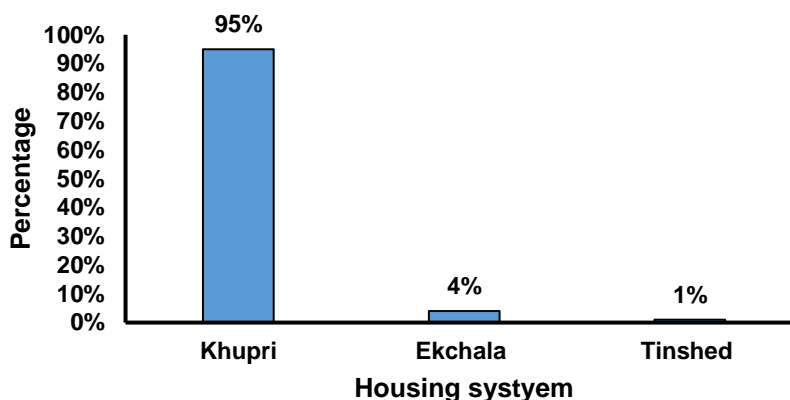
Fig. 1. Map of the study area (Figure obtained from: https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/narayanganj_district).

3. RESULTS

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Data analysis is a crucial strategy to use in any research project if you want to come to conclusions about an issue or subject. In our present study, the purposive sampling method was used for the data collection from the Bede people. The necessary data was collected and summarized here on the basis of the interview guide. The Bede people lived in a group, where each of the groups took on the identity of a sub-tribe led by a top person named "Bede Sardar." The Sardar has made the decisions and also controls and guides the entire population under his supervision. The Sardar makes the decision for the next route of trading for every group. The people under his guidance must obey his decisions; otherwise, they get penalized for violating the rules. The other Bede community is also well bonded with each other and communicates with the ethnic head for better trading or finding a place to live.

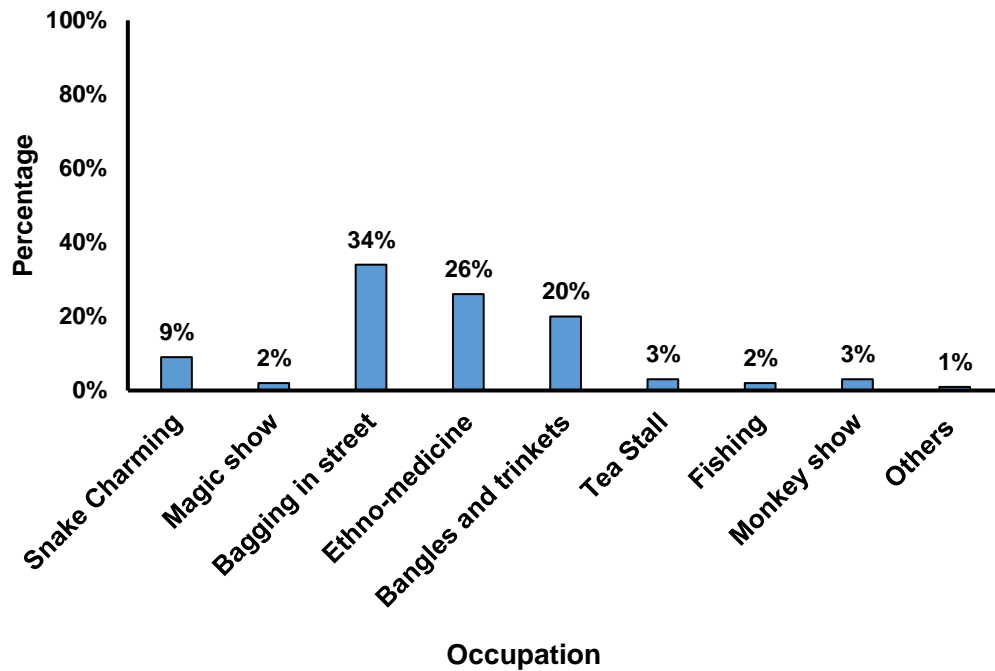
141 Housing is one of the basic needs of man to lead a comfortable life, so it is necessary for
 142 each and every person. Even the birds' animals are made up of their own nests. Likewise,
 143 humans construct buildings as houses for their living purposes. The result shows that the
 144 housing system of Bede peoples is mainly Khupri (94%). Khupri is one of the temporary
 145 houses made of bamboo and polythen, which is a very small house for living. Normally, 1-2
 146 people can sleep in this type of house; however, the Bede family used this house for their
 147 entire family. Ekchala ghor was used by only 4% of the Bede people. The roof of this house
 148 is made from tin, and the fence was made from bamboo or thick polythene. However, tin-
 149 shed houses made of tin and brick were used by only 1% of the Bedes. Importantly, none of
 150 them live in permanent or rented housing in these areas. As a result, the majority of people
 151 living in thatched huts and tents lack their own shelter. During the data collection, we asked
 152 about their duration of living in the same place. For more than 15 years, the Bede people's
 153 traditional lifestyle has shifted from boating to terrestrial life. Although previously they didn't
 154 live more than 2-3 months in the same place, right now they live in the same place as much
 155 as possible for economic reasons. Despite their ancient nomadic nature, the majority of the
 156 Bede peoples abandoned the traditional gypsy boat life. The results indicated that the Bede
 157 people's traditional ancient nomadic life has changed drastically now.



158 **Fig. 2. Housing system of the Bede peoples.**

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 161 The results of the occupation of the Bede people are presented in Figure 3. The result
 162 shows that 34% of Bede people are engaged in begging on the street, at bus stands, train
 163 stands, local markets, picnic spots, parks, or in front of schools or colleges. It is regrettable
 164 that Bede men took advantage of the circumstances to engage in begging by using their
 165 youth and marrying young Bede women. Bede people don't consider begging a sin or an
 166 undignified job. Bede women used small snakes hidden inside small boxes to force people
 167 on the street to give them money. People on the street got frightened and gave them money;
 168 occasionally, Bede women created the extra level of bargaining with the street people if they
 169 refused to give money; sometimes it became fighting with the people. They were compelled
 170 to engage in begging as a result of the circumstances. According to the results, a small
 171 percentage of the Bede people are still engaging in their primitive occupation, which is
 172 related to snakes, and practicing traditional ethno-medicine. However, the percentage of
 173 snake-charming is very low (9%). The majority of the Bede people are engaged in selling
 174 ethno-medicine (26%) such as jharfuk, kobiraji and applying "Shinga" to the audience in the
 175 street or other places. Shinga is a special type of therapeutic treatment that uses a conical,
 176 funnel-shaped thing that is made from the horn of a cattle or goat. Basically, Bede women
 177 are involved in providing therapeutic treatment (shinga) to village people, particularly the
 178 elderly, as well as selling bangles and trinkets to village women and girls. They are also

179 doing other subsidiary occupations such as selling tea and confectionary items and
180 engaging in fishing in the local river or stagnant water paddy field area. The findings
181 revealed that the ancient profession of the Bede peoples has been steadily declining. Their
182 traditional way of life as a nomadic society was forcibly changed due to the current socio-
183 economic conditions.



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Fig. 3. Occupation of the Bede peoples.

187 The results show that the monthly income of Bede people is low (Figure 4), making them
188 one of the lowest-income groups in Bangladesh. The average monthly income of the
189 maximum number of Bede people ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 BDT, which is not enough to
190 lead their lives due to the high price of the necessary foods and household utensils. Only
191 10% of Bedes have a monthly income of more than 10,000 BDT. The scenario was really
192 bad because Bede peoples cannot afford to fulfill the family's one-third demand. The results
193 indicated that Bede people are living below the poverty line, which makes them particularly
194 vulnerable in society.

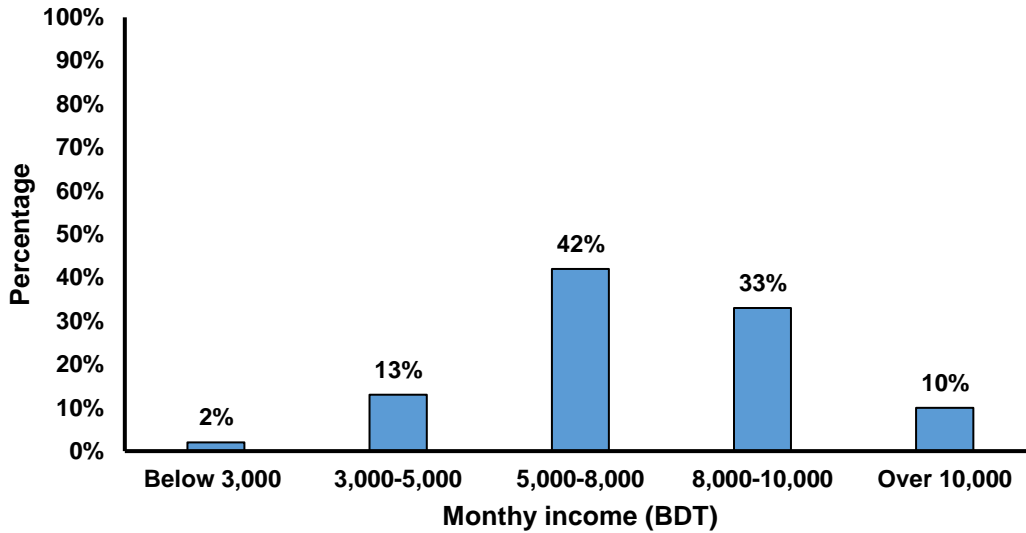


Fig. 4. Monthly income of the Bede peoples.

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The Bede tribes are in danger of going extinct someday. Poverty forced them to reconsider whether they could continue to live as nomads or change from their traditional profession to a conventional one. A significant change in occupation is occurring in the community since Bedes are no longer able to support themselves. The study identified that most Bede people (78%) want to change their unique cultures and life styles, and only a few Bede people (16%) are not interested in changing their lifestyle. However, very few Bede people (6%) are satisfied with their parental profession. The last two groups are composed of older aged Bede people. These aged Bede people have maintained their traditional way of life for a long time and believe in various superstitions and curses. Despite the fact that they believed that if they changed their way of life, curses would come from the devil, and they would suffer greatly as well as no longer be part of the nomadic Bede community.

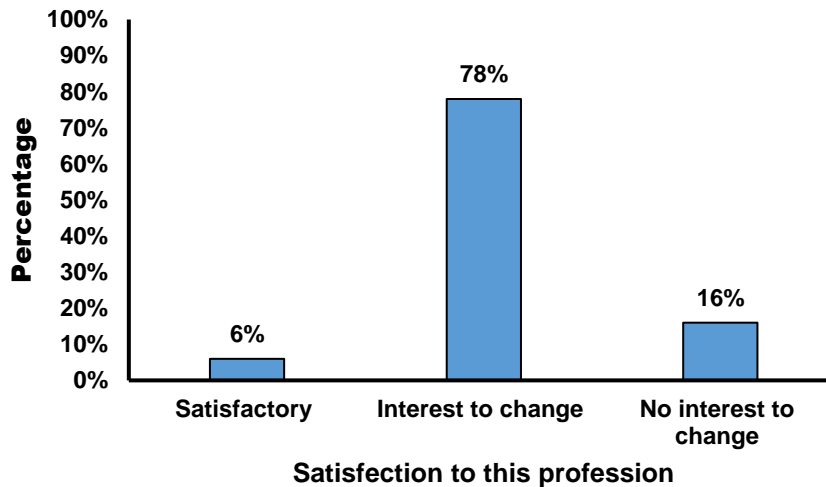


Fig. 5. Satisfaction about profession of Bede peoples.

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Fig. 6. Few glimpses of the life style of Nomadic Bede peoples in study area.

215 **4. DISCUSSION**

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Bede used to be a well-liked traditional form of entertainment that both rural and urban residents could enjoy. However, wandering Bedes are very uncommon today. Modern entertainment has mostly replaced older forms. Therefore, it is difficult for Bede to live nowadays. A previous study reported that Bede worked hard to use a variety of tactics while performing with snakes in an effort to make the show safe and entertaining for the audience [9]. Despite the fact that their numbers are extremely low as compared to the whole population, they still have an impact on society. A recent study reported that a large number of Bede people have settled in Savar Municipality, with families residing permanently [10]. With their newfound stability, they have reshaped their social structure. They now have a certain amount of land to live on, private property, and modern recreational amenities.

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Even twenty years ago, the Bede community displayed charming snakes, played flutes, and sold traditional ethno-medicine as their main source of revenue. They were the true mass entertainers at that time, and their home was always in the boat. However, their nomadic past is tinged with pride and melancholy. Traditional lifestyles are drastically changing in order to live in a permanent location [9]. In Bangladesh, the majority of the people no longer rely on them for entertainment or ethno-medicine. In Bangladesh, technological advancement and infrastructure development have occurred over the last two decades. People from villages to cities are holding smartphones and using the internet for YouTube, Twitter, Likee, TikTok, and Facebook for passing the time [10]. The gap between rural and urban life has shrunk dramatically. Another study reported that due to medical advances, changes in river channels, river pollution, and natural disasters, they are forced to leave their boat houses [4]. It has shifted the profession and traditional lifestyle of the nomadic Bede community to permanent settlers.

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The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 81,000–138,000 people were died globally by snakebites each year, and nearly three times that number survived but suffered severe impairments and amputations [11]. The WHO added snakebite envenoming to its priority list as one of the neglected tropical diseases in 2017 and 2019 and has taken several strategies for snakebite prevention and control [11]. Snakebite poses substantial economic burdens on the victims due to the high cost of treatment and loss of productivity. However, there was no perfect estimate of the risk of a snake bite for the majority of countries in the developing world, including Bangladesh [12]. In the Bangladeshi countryside, people are looking for a Bede to treat them after being bitten by a snake. The jhar-fuk, jadutona, tabij-kabaj, and many more totkas of Bedes became well-liked during the last two decades when there was no modern medicine and no doctor available in villages [13, 14]. As a result, Bede people earned money by using their traditional activities related to snakes and ethno-medicine practices and were thus able to live with their families. The present study identified that only 9% of the Bede peoples were involved in snake charming. Previous studies also identified that a very low percentage of Bede peoples (17% and 8.3%) were involved in snake charming as a main source of income that was consistence with our current study [4, 15]. According to Beurden [16], the livelihoods of Bede people varies that is traditional activities such as involved in snake charming or providing spiritual healing services, having small businesses or informal occupations like driving rickshaws, running tea stalls, or selling sweets. Despite the fact that Bede frequently duped people, and despite the fact that they did not always succeed, they represent a vibrant rural culture. It was unclear how many people were cured by Bede's healing practices; that is a big question.

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According to Parven [15], approximately 98% of Bedes live in extreme poverty, are not engaged in mainstream economic activities, and are primarily engaged in informal, traditional, and hereditary activities today. Their daring way of life, rituals, gestures, dance,

265 music, and charms are all highly alluring [17, 18]. According to recent studies, the majority of
266 Bede people fall into the low income generation category, earning between 5,000 and
267 10,000 BDT per month [4, 10]. The causes of this economic predicament can be attributed to
268 a number of factors, such as literacy levels, a lack of professional diversity and abilities, the
269 decreasing popularity of their traditional professions today, and their social alienation from
270 other professions. Our current study also identified the consistence result with the previous
271 studies [4, 10]. We understand that people are more concerned about snake bites, and they
272 do not contact a Bede person to heal the victims, instead transporting them to a nearby
273 hospital. But why has the snake charmer vanished as a form of entertainment in society?
274 The reasons are that snake catchers are already having difficulty collecting snakes from
275 Bangladesh's forests due to deforestation and overexploitation. Nowadays, wildlife activists
276 have spread throughout the country, and the Wildlife Act is more stringent against the illegal
277 trading and rearing of wild animals by humans, which must be punished by imprisonment
278 and with a monetary penalty. As a result, their profits from snake-charming and snake
279 trading eventually fell. Carmen Brandt, a German researcher, reported that Bede was the
280 "Bad Muslim" in a country where Muslims predominate [19]. Carmen Brandt contends that
281 Bede is compelled to change culturally and professionally since they are perceived as bad
282 Muslims in the culture. Singing and dancing are strictly prohibited and restricted in Islam.
283 Carmen Brandt also emphasized that although there is a chance Bede may be of Arab
284 descent, they are not regarded as a low- or high-caste population among Muslims [19].

285 From our study, it was well identified that the majority of Bede women are involved in
286 begging in the street as an easy way of earning money, and next to it, they sell herbal
287 medicine and give therapeutic treatments known as "Shinga" to the people. Previous studies
288 reported that Bede women are highly engaged with giving "Shinga" and earning money [4,
289 10]. Bede women demanded a minimum of BDT 500 per shinga treatment, and in some
290 cases, they took more money for this purpose. Although the majority of women remain in
291 their traditional professions, they seek alternative employment opportunities. Because of
292 social change, their professions are at risk of being attracted to people, and they believe that
293 wandering from village to village is not their life. Another studies revealed that Bedes
294 possess some skills linked to traditional medical care, entertainment, and small-scale
295 trading. However, the demand for their traditional services and goods is declining [4, 20] and
296 45% of people have left their previous traditional professions while 55% continue to do so in
297 order to support their families. Our current study also described that most of the Bede people
298 wanted to change their nomadic Bede life to become an easy and doubtless life leading
299 persons in the society. Maksud and Rasul's [2] research showed conclusively that Bedes are
300 gradually losing their inherited identity and traditional nomadic life. Our previous study
301 identified that because of their way of life, extremely strict traditional obligations, and
302 ceremonial ties that prevent them from interacting with other outgroup peoples and their
303 social acceptance was uncommon [9]. A sizable portion of the Bede community claimed
304 against local people that they abused Bede people when they interacted with them for
305 business purposes. Local people think the neighborhood is not very valuable or socially
306 significant [2]. Despite being a small minority, the Bede community is deeply bonded with
307 one another. A significant portion of the Bede peoples (88.3%) made sure to establish
308 positive relationships with the residents of their surroundings. However, study reported that
309 Bede peoples associated with local community that create a lot of problems maximum times
310 [4, 9]. Around 56.7% of Bede peoples claimed to have no conflicts with local community,
311 however, 43.3% said they have few clash with local peoples [4]. Previous study reported that
312 if the existing situation persists for an extended length of time, the Bede community will
313 experience a lack of Bede culture, and the new generation won't know anything about Bede
314 [21]. As a result, the new Bede community generation prefers contemporary facilities than
315 living on boats. Bede children are expected to develop into members of the general
316 population. The current study also identified the similar findings that was consistent with the

317 previous study. The circumstances as a whole caused the Bede community to shift their
318 nomadic habitat and characteristics soon.

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320 5. CONCLUSION

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322 Our research focuses on the current situation of the Nomadic Bede community at
323 Narayanganj District in Bangladesh. The basic requirements that serve as the cornerstone of
324 survival of human being. For the development of a robust society, access to basic
325 requirements like food, clothing, and shelter is crucial. To live comfortably, access to all
326 utilities is necessary; otherwise, it will be difficult for any group to survive. Our research
327 showed that the Bede people lived in the same places for a very long time or permanently,
328 therefore, their ancient profession has altered drastically as a result of the changing of
329 socioeconomic status of Bangladeshi society. Although contemporary technology has
330 brought new sorts of entertainment, decreasing the incentive for snake charmers to work,
331 less Bedes may have been active in snake charming as a means of continuing their parental
332 profession. The study also believes that in order to provide facilities and supports for
333 education, the development of technical skills, alteration of attitudes, beliefs, and habits, the
334 Bede community urgently requires assistance from the government and other NGOs. Our
335 study also suggests that the Bede people must be integrated into modern civilization in order
336 to improve the socio-economic condition of them and also ensure their own survival. Bede
337 has reared snakes in captivity as well as collected wild snakes, retaining a latent talent for
338 ecology and snake behavior. Despite the fact that the majority of Bede peoples are illiterate,
339 wildlife activists and wildlife volunteers can assist Bede communities by facilitating training
340 and herpetological knowledge. Furthermore, by utilizing the Bede people's specific ability,
341 conservation programs for the continuous improvement of a balance between animal
342 concerns and human livelihoods might be developed. This is a preliminary study that
343 attempted to identify the reality of the Bede community in a small representative part of
344 Bangladesh. Future study is needed to discover more information about the Bede
345 community that lives around the country.

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348

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350 help to capture the images of Bede peoples during data collection.

351

352 COMPETING INTERESTS

353

354 The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding this publication.

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356 ETHICAL APPROVAL

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358 This study does not require ethical approval. During this study, all photos were taken with
359 the permission of Bede people.

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