

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

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. Importantly, the young generations are not interested in their Nomadic Bede life and 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 that they may survive as a people in the society's mainstream.

Keywords: Nomadic Bede; life patterns; snake charming; Traditional habitat, identity crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is known as the "Land of Rivers" because it has over 700 rivers and tributaries. The country's rivers are extensive, defining both the country's geography and the people's daily lives. Throughout history, rivers have been a focal point of human activity. Rivers have played an important role in the history of civilization in many countries around the world,

including Bangladesh [1]. Numerous diverse communities in Bangladesh have developed as a result of cultural and ethnic diversity. The Nomadic Bede people, also known as the snake charmer, sapuria, river gypsy, or water gypsy, are spread across the country. Bede is a "Nomadic Indo-Aryan" ethnic group that is also referred to as "Manta" [2, 3]. They travel in groups and never stay in one place for more than a few months at a time. In Bangladesh, the Bedes are a racial minority group. Although the exact number of Bede people in Bangladesh is unknown, a study found that approximately 17 lakh Bede people live scattered in 53 districts of Bangladesh [4].

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

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

Bedes have been experienced as the best entertainers for the village people in Bangladesh regarding the performances and acts of snake-charming that are considered to be their major source of income [1,2,9]. They have good knowledge of the local flora and fauna and prepare herbal medicines for various diseases as an additional source of income for themselves. Two decades ago, the Bede people performed snake-charming and related activities on a regular basis, as they were accustomed to them. However, our previous study identified that Bede people faced a number of obstacles in their day-to-day activities due to their occupation and in comparison to other communities or groups related to their socio-economic status [9]. This study aims to identify the actual scenario of the Bede community in the selected area of Bangladesh.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was conducted in three upazilas of Narayanganj district, such as Sonargaon upazila, Bandar upazila, and Rupganj upazila. 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 Bedes 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. We removed unnecessary and unworthy data from the analysis.

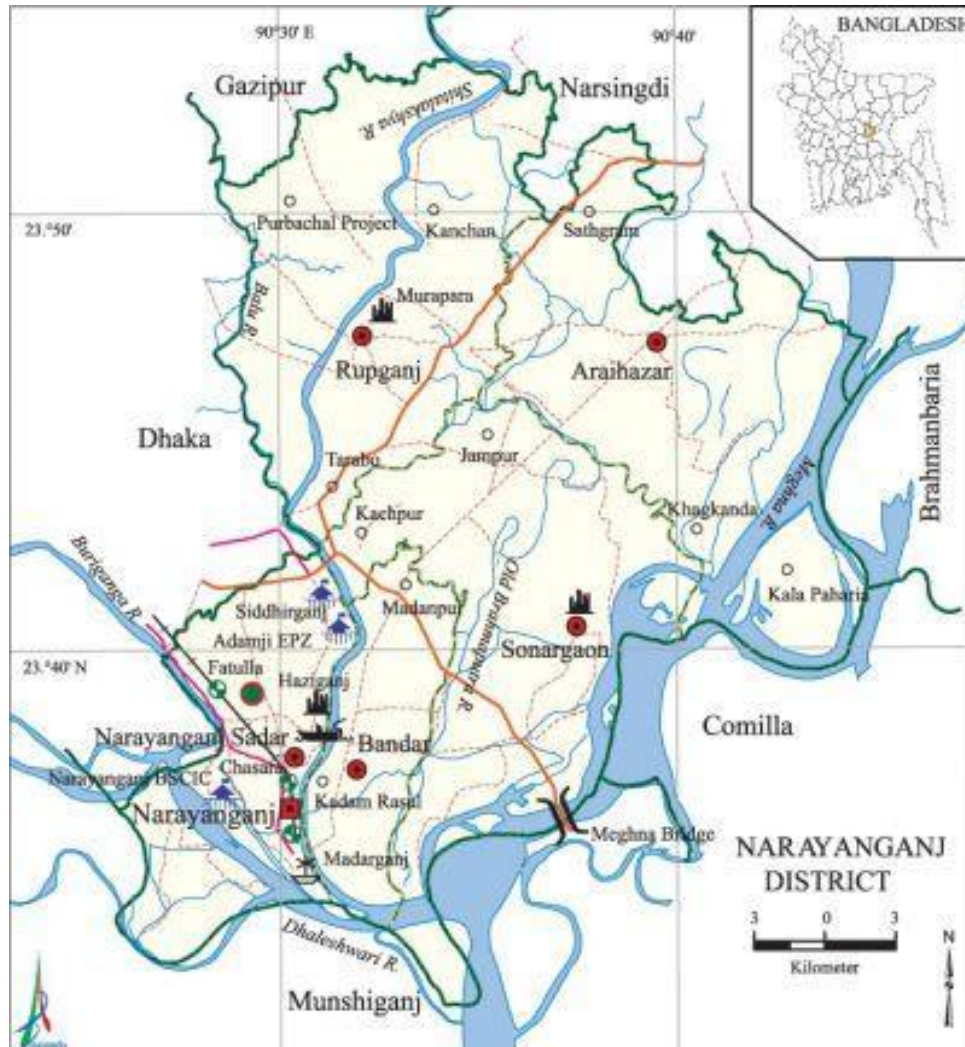


Fig. 1. Map of the study area.

3. RESULTS

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.

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

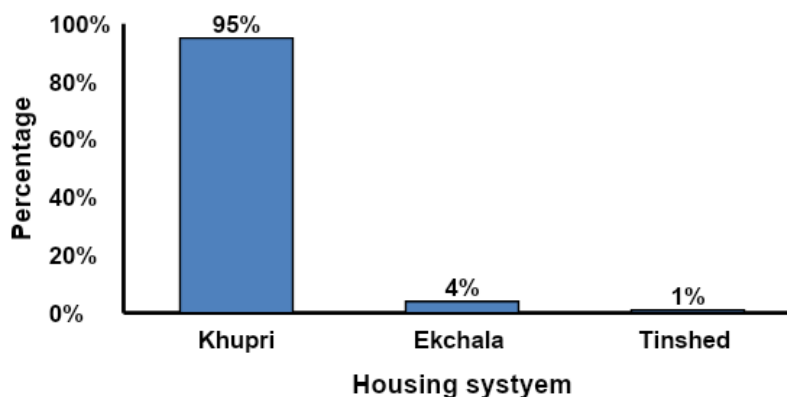


Fig. 2. Housing system of the Bede peoples.

The results of the occupation of the Bede people are presented in Figure 3. The result shows that 34% of Bede people are engaged in begging on the street, at bus stands, train stands, local markets, picnic spots, parks, or in front of schools or colleges. It is regrettable that Bede men took advantage of the circumstances to engage in begging by using their youth and marrying young Bede women. Bede people don't consider begging a sin or an undignified job. Bede women used small snakes hidden inside small boxes to force people on the street to give them money. People on the street got frightened and gave them money;

occasionally, Bede women created the extra level of bargaining with the street people if they refused to give money; sometimes it became fighting with the people. They were compelled to engage in begging as a result of the circumstances. According to the results, a small percentage of the Bede people are still engaging in their primitive occupation, which is related to snakes, and practicing traditional ethno-medicine. However, the percentage of snake-charming is very low (9%). The majority of the Bede people are engaged in selling ethno-medicine (26%) such as jharfuk, kobiraji and applying "Shinga" to the audience in the street or other places. Shinga is a special type of therapeutic treatment that uses a conical, funnel-shaped thing that is made from the horn of a cattle or goat. Basically, Bede women are involved in providing therapeutic treatment (shinga) to village people, particularly the elderly, as well as selling bangles and trinkets to village women and girls. They are also doing other subsidiary occupations such as selling tea and confectionary items and engaging in fishing in the local river or stagnant water paddy field area. The findings revealed that the ancient profession of the Bede peoples has been steadily declining. Their traditional way of life as a nomadic society was forcibly changed due to the current socio-economic conditions.

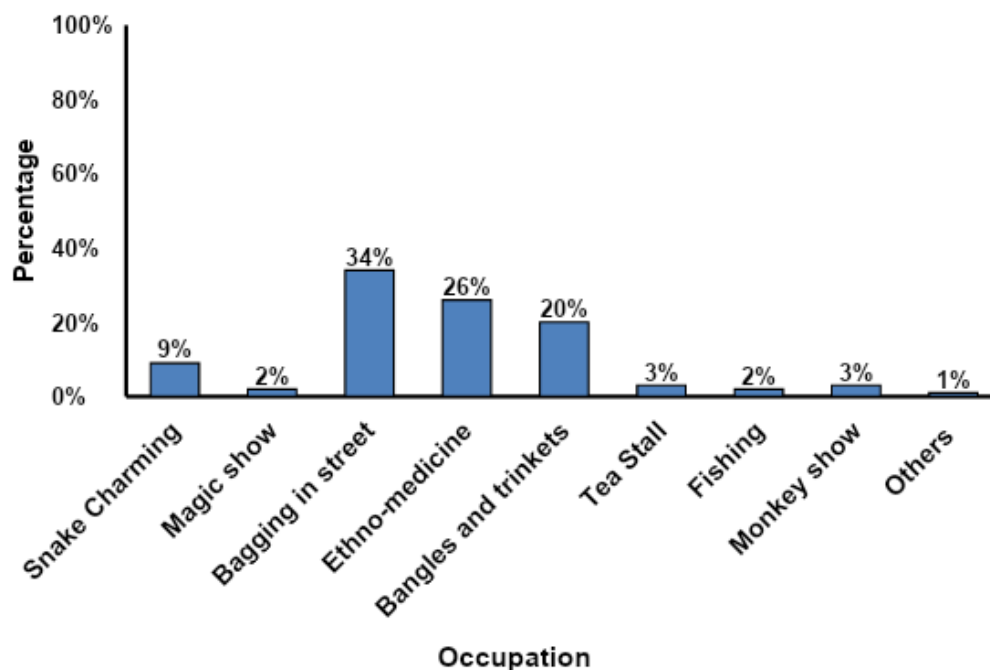


Fig. 3. Occupation of the Bede peoples.

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

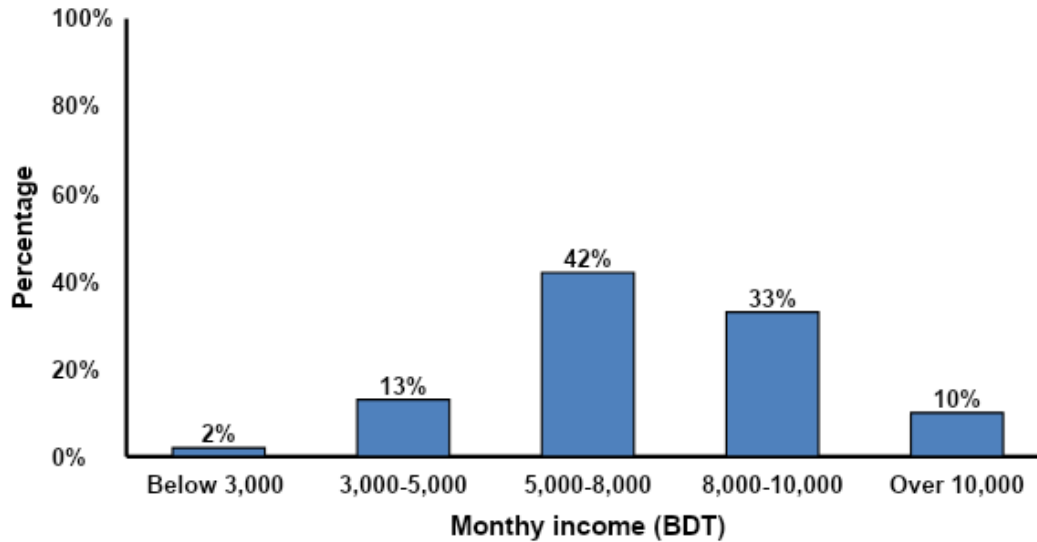


Fig. 4. Monthly income of the Bede peoples.

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.

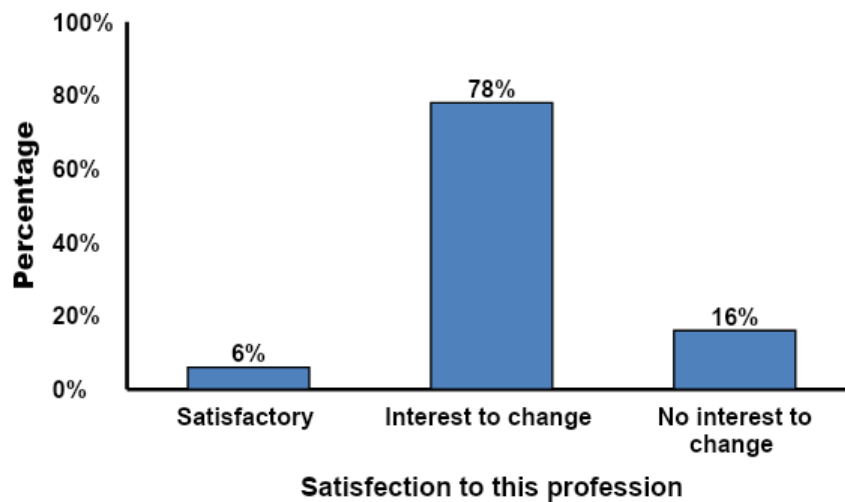


Fig. 5. Satisfaction about profession of Bede peoples.



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

4. DISCUSSION

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.

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.

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. 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.

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, music, and charms are all highly alluring [16, 17]. We understand that people are more concerned about snake bites, and they do not contact a Bede person to heal the victims, instead transporting them to a nearby hospital. But why has the snake charmer vanished as a form of entertainment in society? The reasons are that snake catchers are already having difficulty collecting snakes from Bangladesh's forests due to deforestation and overexploitation. Nowadays, wildlife activists have spread throughout the country, and the

Wildlife Act is more stringent against the illegal trading and rearing of wild animals by humans, which must be punished by imprisonment and with a monetary penalty. As a result, their profits from snake-charming and snake trading eventually fell. Carmen Brandt, a German researcher, reported that Bede was the "Bad Muslim" in a country where Muslims predominate [18]. Carmen Brandt contends that Bede is compelled to change culturally and professionally since they are perceived as bad Muslims in the culture. Singing and dancing are strictly prohibited and restricted in Islam. Carmen Brandt also emphasized that although there is a chance Bede may be of Arab descent, they are not regarded as a low- or high-caste population among Muslims [18].

From our study, it's well identified that the majority of Bede women are involved in begging in the street as an easy way of earning money, and next to it, they sell herbal medicine and give therapeutic treatments known as "Shinga" to the people. Previous studies reported that Bede women are highly engaged with giving "Shinga" and earning money [4]. Bede women demanded a minimum of BDT 500 per shinga treatment, and in some cases, they took more money for this purpose. Although the majority of women remain in their traditional professions, they seek alternative employment opportunities. Because of social change, their professions are at risk of being attracted to people, and they believe that wandering from village to village is not their life. Our current study also described that most of the Bede people wanted to change their nomadic Bede life to become human beings. Maksud and Rasul's (2006) research showed conclusively that Bedes are gradually losing their inherited identity and traditional nomadic life [2]. A sizable portion of the Bede community claimed against local people that they abused Bede people when they interacted with them for business purposes. Local people think the neighborhood is not very valuable or socially significant. The circumstances as a whole caused the community to shift their nomadic habitat and characteristics.

5. CONCLUSION

Our research focuses on the current situation of the Nomadic Bede community in Bangladesh's Narayanganj District. The basic requirements that serve as the cornerstone of survival of human being. For the development of a robust society, access to basic requirements like food, clothing, and shelter is crucial. To live comfortably, access to all utilities is necessary; otherwise, it will be difficult for any group to survive. Our research showed that the Bede people lived in the same places for a very long time or permanently, therefore, their ancient profession has altered drastically as a result of the changing of socioeconomic status of Bangladeshi society. The study also believes that in order to provide facilities and supports for education, the development of technical skills, alteration of attitudes, beliefs, and habits, the Bede community urgently requires assistance from the government and other NGOs. Our study also suggests that the Bede people must be integrated into modern civilization in order to improve the socio-economic condition of them and also ensure their own survival.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

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

REFERENCES

1. Lasker MS, Dio LM, Chowdhury MH, Hossain MS, Islam MN, Chowdhury MJ. Lifestyle of the Nomadic River Gypsies and their threat Narrative: A Tale of two villages in Bangladesh. *Int J Environ Sci Nat Res*. 2019;17(5):154-61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19080/ijesnr.2019.17.555973>
2. Maksud AK, Rasul I. The Nomadic Bede community and their mobile school program. International conference on what works for the poorest: knowledge, policies and practices. BRAC Gazipur, Centre for Development Management, Bangladesh. 2006. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: <https://grambanglabd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Final-Paper-on-Mobile-School-Program-for-BRAC.pdf>
3. Shejuty NN. Identity in flux: a comparative study of Manta and Beday. Doctoral dissertation, BRAC Univeristy. 2018. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: http://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10361/10295/15217004_ANT.pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1
4. Daize AS, Lima ML. Traditional Profession and Livelihood Strategies of Bede Community in Bangladesh: A Sociological Study. *Soc Sci Rev*. 2021;38(1):109-32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3329/ssr.v38i1.56527>
5. Tingle JL, Slimani T. Snake charming in Morocco. *J North Afr Stud*. 2017 Aug 8;22(4):560-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1296357>
6. Faiz MA, Rahman MR, Hussain A, Yunus EB, Das JC, Karim SA, Khan IH, Mollah AS, Huq JM, Chowdhury MK. A hospital based study of snake bite in Chittagong Medical College. *J Bangladesh Coll Phys Surg*. 1995;13:3-8.
7. White J, Warrell D, Eddleston M, Currie BJ, Whyte IM, Isbister GK. Clinical toxicology—where are we now? *Antivenoms. J Toxi: Clini Toxicol*. 2003;41(3):263-76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1081/clt-120021112>
8. Kasturiratne A, Wickremasinghe AR, de Silva N, Gunawardena NK, Pathmeswaran A, Premaratna R, Savioli L, Lalloo DG, de Silva HJ. The global burden of snakebite: a literature analysis and modelling based on regional estimates of envenoming and deaths. *PLoS Med*. 2008;5(11):e218. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0050218>
9. Shawon RA, Rabbi EM. Present social awareness and economic condition of nomadic Bede Community at Narayanganj District in Bangladesh. *Ame J Ru Dev*. 2017;5(4):106-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12691/ajrd-5-4-3>
10. Muenuddin M, Islam A. The Untouchable Muslim: A Preliminary Discussion of the Bede Community in Bangladesh. *Adv Soc Sci Res J*. 2022;9(5):108-120.
11. Suraweera W, Warrell D, Whitaker R, Menon G, Rodrigues R, Fu SH et al. Trends in snakebite deaths in India from 2000 to 2019 in a nationally representative mortality study. *Elife*. 2020;9:e54076. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7554/elifesciences.54076>
12. Rahman R, Faiz MA, Selim S, Rahman B, Basher A, Jones A et al. Annual incidence of snake bite in rural Bangladesh. *PLoS Neg Trop Dis*. 2010;4(10):e860. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0000860>

13. Ahmed O. Bangla lokoshahitya mantra. Asiatic society of Bangladsh, Dhaka, 1995. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: https://franklin.library.upenn.edu/catalog/FRANKLIN_9922189713503681
14. Jalil A. Uses of Tantra and Mantra in Folk-treatment. Bishwa Shahittya Bhaban, Dhaka, 2001. Davis, D. C, folk medicine, Fawcett books, U S A, 1995.
15. Parven S. Women Empowerment of Manta Village in Darkness. The Daily New Nation. 2018. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: <https://thedailynewnation.com/news/175807/Women-empowerment-of-Manta-village-in-darkness>
16. Ahsan MT. Snake-charmer's healing in three villages of Rajshahi and Chapai Nawabganj District. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: https://www.academia.edu/36873649/Snake_charmers_healing_in_three_villages_of_Rajshahi_and_Chapai_Nawabganj_District
17. Islam S. Dissecting the Nomadic Lifestyle of 'Bede' Community. The Daily Sun. 2018. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: <https://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/298572/Dissecting-The-Nomadic-Life-style-Of-%E2%80%98Bede%E2%80%99-Community>
18. Arif ASMR. 'Bede' community and their professional transformation. The Daily Observer. 2017. Accessed 15 November 2022. Available: <https://www.observerbd.com/details.php?id=106654>