

## **Socio-Economic and Cultural Life of the Bediyas of Bengal during British Rule**

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**Abstract:** *Bediya is the generic name given to a number of gipsy tribes wandering in different parts of Bangladesh. In ancient and medieval Bengal, the Bediyas have been mentioned in contemporary literature as the 'antyaja' castes, displaying snake games and playing magic. During British rule, the Bediyas would live in boats or in houses raised on piles in different parts of Bengal. Unlike the settled cultivating class, they subsisted by selling snake venom, fancy goods, and small articles; by practising indigenous medicine; and by displaying magic, gymnastics, and shows of snakes and animals. A few Bediya families elected their own Sardar, whose decision was binding to all of them. A Bediya woman was more industrious compared to her husband. Their occupations, food habits, social organization, and everyday life were different from those of the settled communities of the country. In society, the Bediyas were treated as low-grade people. Most of the Bediyas followed Islam but were addicted to alcohol and ganja. They worshipped the goddess Manasa and observed many Hindu rituals.*

**Keywords:** *Bediya, Gipsy, Women pedlars, Major earners, Culture, Social change.*

### **Introduction:**

People from various ethnic groups lived in Bengal from ancient times. As time passed, these people took on new occupations and developed their own culture and religious beliefs. The *Bediyas* of Bengal are one of the indigenous tribes of Eastern India. Since ancient times, the Bengal landmass has been dotted with hundreds of rivers and channels. Bengal received heavy rainfall under the influence of the southwest monsoon, and a vast tract of Bengal remained under water or became muddy during the rainy season, causing difficulty in operating inland transport. For this reason, communication in the medieval and early modern historical periods between different parts of the country was established through waterways. Another reason for the development of communication by water was that water transport was cheap. That is why the wandering *Bediyas* travelled across the country in their own boats in small groups in order to earn a living. The *Bediyas* were a gypsy-like wandering community. The vast majority of them made a living with their income by practising indigenous medicine, through micro-trading businesses, and by displaying gymnastics, magic, and shows of snakes and domestic animals. In the remote areas of Bengal, far away from the urban culture, the fleet of the *Bediyas* arrived with the display of their miscellaneous commodities to do business. For business, the *Bediyas* and the *Bedenis* carried with them fancy goods necessary for use by women, toys for children, cages for keeping snakes, medicinal herbs and amulets for medical treatment, and their pets for animal show. Their income varied

in different seasons. The *Bedenis* were hard-working, while their husbands were indolent. A *Bediya* woman earned much more compared to her husband to sustain the family. The *Bediyas* were Muslim by religion but Hindu by culture. They offered prayers in accordance with Islamic practice and observed fasting during the month of Ramadan. At the same time, they worshipped goddess Mansa, observed *Mangalchandi's* vow, and paid homage to goddesses *Durga* and *Kali*. They contracted their marriages according to Islamic practice, but the dowry system was prevalent among them. This research is a descriptive and analytical work. Its objective is to explore the socio-economic and cultural features of different classes of the *Bediya* population of Bengal. It has also been shown in this paper that the *Bediya* women were the principal earners compared to the male *Bediyas* in their society.

### **Historical Background:**

The *Bediyas* are the gipsies of Bengal, wandering in different parts of present Bangladesh. We get the reference to the *Bediyas* in Bengal from the ancient period. In ancient and medieval Bengal, there is a wide range of literary evidence about the society and culture of the *Bediyas*. The eminent historian, Niharranjan Roy, classified the *Bediyas* of ancient Bengal as an “*antyaja*” community. In medieval Bengal, snake-bite and consequent loss of human life was a frequent incident. The worship of the goddess *Manasa* gives ample testimony of it. A *Bisbaidya* or a *Bediya* was an important royal physician. The *Bisbaidyas*, or *Bediyas*, also held a vital place in society (Roy, 1416 BS, pp. 251, 471). In the *Mangalkabyas* of mediaeval India, the *Bediyas* have been depicted as snake charmers. In the *Manasa Mangal* composed by Ketakdas Kshemananda, we get a reference to a *Bediya* who has been called “*saper sapure Rama*” (Khemananda, 1977, p. 83). During the rule of the Mughals in the seventeenth century, we find reference to a class of people, *Bahurupi* by name, who entertained people by taking many disguises. The present-day *Bahurupi Bediyas* might be their predecessors. (Bandyopadhyay, 2017, p. 97). In his *Annadamangal*, Bharatchandra, the court poet of Raja Krishna Chandra Raya of Nadia, mentioned the name of the *Bediyas* while narrating the names of different castes of Bengal in the early eighteenth century. Bharatchandra composed, “*Kurmi Koranga Pod Kapali Tior, Kol Kalu Byadh Bede Mal Bazikar.*” (Raya, 1350 BS, p. 13). In the *Mahua pala* of Maimansingha Geetika, we get a social perception of the *Bediyas* in contemporary society (Sen, 2013, pp. 8-12).

### **Transformation of community from pre-colonial to colonial period:**

In pre-colonial Bengal, the different groups of gipsy tribes were found in all parts of the country. But it is very difficult to come to the conclusion that all these vagrant groups have a common origin. Those gipsy tribes have been designated as *Bediyas* since the nineteenth century. In the colonial period, the *Bediyas* would move from one part of the country to another for their livelihood throughout the year. They lived with their own people as a distinct community away from mainstream society.

Ordinarily, their economic and socio-cultural lives were different from the settled communities of the province, and they were despised by all but their own people. Even the mainstream Muslims would not associate with them.<sup>1</sup> Their way of life resembled neither that of the Muslims nor that of the Hindus.<sup>2</sup> In society, cultural exchange is a normal sociological process. But very little change took place in the lifestyle of the *Bediyas* in the colonial period because they lived an isolated life within their own community, within their own society, and within their own culture.

### **General Discussion:**

In common parlance, *Bediya* is the generic name given to a number of gipsy-like human groups wandering in different parts of Bangladesh. At present, the *Bediyas* live not only in Bangladesh but also in many parts of eastern India. Their ethnicity cannot be determined with certainty. The *Bediyas* do not lead a settled life and travel across the country either on foot or by boat in small or large gangs. They stay temporarily under railway sheds, on some open government land, in temporary shelters like tents, or on water in their own boats. Their occupation, way of life, social customs, food habits, and social organisation are different from the rest of the communities in the country. Risley has differentiated the *Bediyas* into seven distinctive groups: *Babajiya*, *Bazigar*, *Mal*, *Mir-shikar*, *Samperia*, *Shandar*, and *Rasia*.<sup>3</sup> Almost all of these *Bediya* classes had a variety of occupations, social customs, and traditions. During the census operations under British rule, the census workers felt much difficulty in counting the exact strength of the *Bediya* population in Bengal. In his Dacca District Gazetteer, Allen described the *Bediyas* as a “gipsy caste”. Citing Gait’s report on the census of Bengal in 1901, Allen reported the number of *Bediyas* in Dacca district to be 1829.<sup>4</sup>

It is very difficult to ascertain the original homeland of the *Bediyas* because they are a gipsy-like tribe divided into various groups. Most of the *Bediya* population in eastern India, even today, are vagrant tribes divided into various groups. Most of them travel across the country together with their family members, domestic animals, utensils, and other domestic articles to earn their livelihood. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the *Bediyas* wandered mainly in the districts of Bagura, Mymensingh, Pabna, Dacca, Bakarganj, and Noakhali. From the district gazetteers of Mymensingh, it has been learnt that a peculiar *Bediya* caste known as Gains has been living at Kendua Mauza, roughly three miles away from Kendua Police Station, for the past 300 years. This caste used to undertake trading chiefly by boat. This community was also called *Baigars*, *Paijees*, or *Samajies*. These people were especially distinguished because their daughters, without exception,

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<sup>1</sup> Gait, E.A. (1902). *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. VI., Part I., Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, p.439.

<sup>2</sup> James Taylor. (1840). *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*. Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1840, p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> H.H Risley. (1891). *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. I. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, pp. 83-5.

<sup>4</sup> B.C. Allen. (1912). *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca*, Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 64.

adopted the professions of dancing, singing, and prostitution.<sup>5</sup> Beveridge, the Magistrate and Collector of Bakarganj, designated the gipsies or the *Bediyas* of Bakarganj as “*bebajias*”. He recorded that people belonging to this class lived in the district in boats or in houses raised on piles. They did not undertake the cultivation of land as their occupation but subsisted by selling fish-hooks and small articles. They also kept ducks and poultry. The largest *Bediya* settlements in Bakarganj district were in Amtoli and Bakarganj. They were also found at Jhalukatti, Kalaskatti, Sarikal, and Dakhin Shahbazpur (Beveridge, 1970, p. 228). Jasim Uddin in *Beder Meye* described the habitation of the *Bediyas*. He narrated that the *Bediyas* do not build their houses on land and that water is their courtyard. Wherever they go, they live in boats on the water. Poet Jasim Uddin wrote:

*Mora ghar bandhi na matir pore uthan moder jal,  
Re Bede, uthon moder jal;  
E deshe thane o deshe jeye kartyachhe talmal.*  
(Hasan, 2011, p. 154).

Surgeon James Taylor described the *Bediyas* living in the Dacca district as eaters of “all kinds of animal food, and are much addicted to the use of *ganjah* and spirituous liquors, and consequently they are regarded as a very impure race”<sup>6</sup>. He observed about the *Bediyas* that:

It is difficult to determine whether they are Hindoos or Mussulmauns, their religious sentiments, apparently, being adapted to those prevalent in the country they settle in: a considerable proportion of them here profess to be followers of the Prophet, and like the Gurwarus worship the river deity “Bhuddur.” The Bhudiyas reside on the water throughout the year, and move about from place to place generally in parties of eight or ten boats, and according to a custom among them, boats parting company or anchoring at a distance from the fleet at night have to pay a fine before they are re-admitted.<sup>7</sup>

The British census enumerators might have felt much difficulty in enumerating the actual population of the *Bediyas* in Bengal districts since they lived away from the mainstream population of Bengal and always wandered across the country for their livelihood. For example, Hunter, in his *Statistical Account of Bengal*, recorded the numerical strength of the *Bediyas* in Murshidabad district at only 235 and in Pabna district at only 40, which might be too small for their actual strength.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> F.A. Sachse. (1917). *Bengal District Gazetteers, Mymensingh*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, 1840, p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> W.W Hunter. (1876). *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. IX., Trubner & Co., London, pp. 56, 282.

### **Economic Life of the *Bediyas*:**

In the colonial period, the *Bediyas* wandered all parts of Bengal and earned their livelihood by displaying their gymnastics, magic, and sports with snakes and monkeys. Since hundreds of years, the *Bediyas* of Bengal have made money by displaying monkey sports. Quoting the Sanskrit verses of Umapatidhar and Govardhan Acharaya, historian Niharranjan Roy asserts that the principal occupations of the ‘*antyaja*’ castes like the *Bediyas* in ancient Bengal were displaying the snake game and playing magic (Roy, 1416 BS, pp. 251, 471). They also practised native medicine and resorted to the medical treatment of children and elderly people with some selected physical ailments. The *Bediyas* would go to far-off places with their household articles, bamboo poles, tents, ropes and cords, birds, horses, donkeys, and hunting dogs, and female gymnasts to show their performances. A full show of the *Bediyas* was much more expensive which has been supported from the following verses:

*Baidyar tamsa koraita koisho teka lage,  
Baidyar tamsa koraita aksho teka lage.*  
(Sen, 2013, pp, 8-12)

A troop of the *Bediyas* travelled throughout the country in their residence-plus-transport boats, carrying with them their family members, their articles for trade, and their domestic animals. In his *Sojon Badiyar Ghat*, poet Jasimuddin has depicted a realistic description of a *Bediya* fleet making their journey on the river Madhumati. The following are the verses composed by him:

*Beder bahar bhasia chalechhe kul-e dheu achharia.  
Jaler upore bhasaia tara gharbari sangsar.*  
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*Samner naye bouti daraye hal ghuraichhe jor-e.*  
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*Chhaier niche swami bos-e bos-e lathite tulichhe ful.*  
.  
*Beder bahar bhasia chalechhe Madhumati nadi diya.  
Belwari churi, rangin khelna, Chiner sindur niya;  
Mayurer pakha, jhinuker moti, nanan puntir mala,  
Tarite tarite sajano rayechhe bharia Beder dala.  
Naye naye dake morog-murgi jata pakhi posh-mana,  
Shikari kukur rahiachhe bandha ar chhagaler chhana.*  
(Jasimuddin, 2022, pp. 121-2, 124)

Different sub-groups of the *Bediyas* adopted different occupations. Their ancestral trade was catching and playing with snakes. The *Bediyas* were skilled fishermen. Some of them were skilled in cane-work and made cane baskets (*dhama*), chairs, and flower pots. The distillation of wine was their special hereditary knowledge. When a *Bediya* was on his trade in villages, he was accompanied by his *Bedeni*, his

children, snakes in cages, monkeys, goats, and a bamboo flute (Bandyopadhyay, 1368 BS, pp. 106-10). The *Bediyas*, living in different parts of Bakarganj district, subsisted by woodcutting, fishing, and peddling.<sup>9</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the *Bediyas* undertook a variety of occupations. A specific group of *Bediyas* were skilled in certain works. And in earning their livelihood, the *Bediya* women played the leading role.

The *Babajiyas* were pedlars. They dealt in different kinds of wares like gaudily painted wooden bracelets, waist-cords, tape, brass finger rings, nose rings, glass beads, wooden cups for oil, playing cards, looking glasses, sandal wood chains, and fish-hooks. They went to Sylhet and brought shells for making lime and pearls to be used in native medicine. They also kept dancing monkeys and taught their daughters to do acrobatic performances. The *Babajiya* women were believed to have had the reputation of being skilful in the treatment of paediatric diseases. They were said to be competent to cure nervous and rheumatic pains. They were also semi-skilled in tattooing.<sup>10</sup>

The *Bazigars* were known in Bengali villages as *Kabutaris*. Their other familiar name was *Dorabaz*, or rope dancer. They practised juggling and conjuring. The *Bazigar* women and girls were the principal performers. Their men played tricks with balls and knives. Their girls were trained to twist and bend their bodies into the most bewildering figures. The women also practised indigenous medicine and prescribed remedies for children suffering from fever and indigestion. They practised massage for the treatment of rheumatism and affected toothaches. In the Dacca district, the *Bazigars* mainly lived on boats in the rivers and water bodies. But in Faridpur district, they were absorbed into the village population. Here, they would purchase standing crops and sell them at a profit. They also took a grove of date palms on lease and made money on the sale of sugar manufactured by them from date juice.<sup>11</sup>

The Mals were also known as Ponkwah for their dexterity in extracting worms from the teeth. The Mals were petty *Mahajans*, or bankers. They advanced small sums on loans, rarely exceeding eight rupees, upon good security. They charged heavy interest, usually around 50% per annum on the principal amount. But the amount of interest they charged was less than that exacted by town bankers. Their women were employed for cupping, for relieving obscure abdominal pains by friction, and for treating uterine diseases.<sup>12</sup>

The Mir-shikars, or *Chirimars*, were the smallest subdivision of the *Bediyas*. They were mainly hunters and fowlers. The *Chirimars* captured singing birds like

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<sup>9</sup> J.C. Jack. (1918). *Bengal District Gazetteers: Bakarganj*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, p.33.

<sup>10</sup> James Wise. (1883). *Notes on the Races, Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (Not published). London: Harrison and Sons, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> Wise, 1883, pp. 216-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

Bulbuls and parrots with birdlime or horse-hair nooses and with the *Satnali*, or light lance, divided into sections like a fishing rod. Some of the animals caught by the Mir-shikars were highly prized for medicinal purposes or for charms. Some of the animals which the Mir-shikar caught were highly prized for medicinal purposes or for charms. The flesh of the scaly ant-eater, or Banrahu or Bajrakit (*Manis pentadactyla*), was believed to restore virile energy. It was also believed that if its scales were bound on the arm, they could cure the palpitations of the heart, and if worn on the finger in the form of a ring, they were a sovereign prophylactic against venereal diseases. They also caught the *pan-kori*, or mahokha, the common crow pheasant of India. It was believed that its flesh could cure enlargement of the spleen and puerperal disorders if the bird was killed on Tuesdays and Saturdays. They caught a spotted owlet (*pencha*). Their claws and droppings, pounded with betel nut, were believed to be a very powerful and certain love potion. It was believed that the dried flesh of the dauk (*Gallinula phoenicura*) was very beneficial for rheumatism .<sup>13</sup>

The Samperias were the snake-charmers, hawkers of miscellaneous goods, and makers of fish-hooks and similar articles. One of their principal occupations was an exhibition of snake dancing. They usually exhibited the cobra, Dudh-raj, Mani-raj, python, whip snake, etc., caught by them from the forests. The Samperias tore out the fangs of the poisonous snakes but left the poison bag intact. They collected poison from the snakes and made a profitable trade in it. They sold a *bhari* (10 gms. approx.) of poison for an amount of 15 to 16 rupees. They also dealt in the tick (Kilni), which they occasionally found on the hood of the black cobra. In this article, many fabulous stories were told in the countryside. When a Samperia exhibited snakes, he would play a pipe while his wife or child chanted a monotonous Hindustani song and irritated the reptile to strike with threats and shouts. The Samperias were also sportspersons. They tamed jungle cocks to entrap the wild ones, and the Kora (*Gallicrex cristatus*), a bird famous for its pugnacity. Like other Bediya groups, the Samperias kept tame cormorants to drive fish into their nets. They caught fish for their own consumption. The Samperias were keen sportsmen, and when they got an opportunity near a jungle, they stalked deer and shot partridges, paddy-birds, and egrets .<sup>14</sup>

The *Shandars* were the Bediya divisions who got the reputation of being the most orderly and industrious among their similar classes. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, many of them settled in Dayaganj, a suburb of Dacca. Others lived in boats. The *Shandars* were the only people who could make a special variety of comb (dhangi) through which the warp threads passed. This was in great demand by Tantis and Julahas for their looms. These combs were made of split bamboo, and the teeth (gaibi) of well-seasoned wood. They were also called *manihars*, or

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<sup>13</sup> Wise, 1883, pp. 217-8; Risley, 1891, pp. 83-4.

<sup>14</sup>Wise, 1883, pp. 218-9; Risley, 1891, pp. 84-5.

pedlars. They mainly undertook retail in beads and trinkets; waist-strings (Kardhani); and needles, thread, and tape, procured from Mughuliya shops in the rural areas of Bengal. The Shandars were expert divers also. When they anchored in suitable areas, they gathered the common bivalve shells (sipi) and sold them to the lime burners. They also caught birds using the Sat-nali, or bamboo rod of seven joints, tipped with birdlime. They caught birds like bulbuls and other small birds. They kept tame Koras, jungle cocks, and cormorants. The better-off *Shandars* took out a gun licence in order to shoot games. The Gayan, literally a singer and an offshoot of the *Shandars*, was ordinarily a peasant. When their males were absent from their homes, their women looked after their crops and tended their cattle. Away from home, the Gayans sang Bengali songs in public while playing with the violins, *sarangis*, and *behla* to get some money as rewards from their percipients.<sup>15</sup>

The *Rasia Bediyas* occasionally met with the Dacca district. But they were most numerous in the district of Pabna. The *Rasia Bediyas* used boats of a curious construction. Only half of their boats were covered over, while the tilt was bottle-shaped, tapering gradually towards the stern, where there was a small round opening, through which a man could crawl with difficulty. They worked with zinc, which was bought in pigs, melted, and run into moulds. This zinc worker *Bediya* group was called by this distinctive name (*Rasia*) due to the similarity in colour between zinc and mercury (*rasa*). The *Rasias* made anklets, bracelets, and collars for the neck (*hansli*), which were worn by both the Hindu and Muslim females of the lower orders. At their homes, the *Rasia Bediyas* undertook cultivation as their occupation.<sup>16</sup>

In the western districts of Bengal, the snake-charmer class of the *Bediyas* was locally known as *Bishbediya* or “*Bishbede*”. The *Bishbediyas* approached the Ganges by boarding their fleet of boats. They carried bamboo cages full of snakes, cooking vessels, monkeys, and goats in their boats for play. The *Bediyas*, belonging to various other classes, also arrived in various parts of the country, either by boat or on foot, carrying loads on their shoulders for their hereditary business. The *Bishbediyas* walked around the open fields and riverbanks in different parts of the country in search of snakes to catch. The *Bishbediyas* kept their fixed customers practising native medicine (*Kabiraj*) in and outside Calcutta, to whom the *Bishbediyas* visited and sold venom instantly collected from poisonous snakes caught by them. They made their journey by boat through many rivers and channels and went up to Calcutta. The other classes of the *Bediyas* also travelled from village to village in Bengal, displaying snake dance and games of goats and monkeys. (Bandyopadhyay, 1919, pp. 47-8)

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<sup>15</sup> Wise, 1883, pp. 219-21; Risley, 1891, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Wise, 1883, p. 221; Risley, 1891, p. 85.



### **Social Life of the *Bediyas*:**

The *Bediyas* adopted a tribal social life. They were divided into many wandering groups. Each of these groups abode by the leadership of a Sardar. Almost all the *Bediya* families owned their family boats. A few families' boats formed a group, and their family boats constituted a fleet. Each fleet of the *Bediyas* took the shape of a sub-tribal identity, headed by a Sardar (Mentioned as 'Nardar' by Dr. James Wise) or Murabbi. The Sardar would divide the fleet into a number of small groups and appoint directors for all groups. He coordinated the community affairs of the *Bediyas* through the directors. The Sardar resided in the central locality, within easy reach of the *Bediya* families under his command. He selected the trade routes and areas of operation for each *Bediya* group. The Sardar promoted the common interests of the tribe and also determined which boats to form a fleet. He punished the offenders in cases of disobedience, such as leaving a pre-formed fleet and joining another. He settled all disputes that had arisen among the tribe. When a serious difference occurred, he took evidence and delivered his judgment. Fees were paid to the Sardar at the time of marriage, and clothes were presented to him on other festive occasions. Once every year, the different *Bediya* tribes gathered on a pre-fixed date and in an agreed place to consult and to lay in a supply of commodities for retailing during the ensuing year. Each fleet brought their own Sardar here. All of these Sardars unitedly elected their supreme head of all the *Bediya* tribes. The elected supreme head of the *Bediyas* directed the affairs of the whole tribe as long as it remained together.<sup>17</sup> In spite of their society being patriarchal, the *Bediya* women always played a vital role both within the family as well as in their outside world.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was difficult to determine whether the *Bediyas* were Hindus or Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Hunter observed about the *Bediyas* in the latter eighties of the nineteenth century that they had been rapidly becoming Muslims. The Collector of Dacca district recorded that when he had known about the *Bediyas* for the first time, upon being asked to which religion he belonged, he generally hesitated as to whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. But at a later period, they invariably professed themselves to be the followers of the Prophet. But they did not abstain from the consumption of intoxicating liquors.<sup>19</sup> In the Bakarganj District Gazetteer, Jack mentions that the census report divided the Muhammadans of Bakarganj into different castes – Jolaha, Nikari, Bediya, Behara, Dhari, Sheikh, Pathan, and Syed. He described the *Bediyas* as being “really vagrants without any definite religious belief, who call themselves Hindu or Mussalman indiscriminately”. The *Bediyas* were chiefly found in the southern thanas in the Bakarganj district. They were a wandering gipsy tribe known as the *Bebajias*. They

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<sup>17</sup> Wise, 1883, pp. 212-3.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, 1840, p. 237.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, W.W. (1875). *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. V., Trubner & Co., London, p.43.

professed Islam but did not intermingle with other classes of Muhammadans.<sup>20</sup> Even in the twentieth century, when asked about his caste and religion, a Bediya unhesitatingly replied that he was a *Bediya* by caste and Muslim by religion. At the same time, the *Bediyas* could not relinquish worshipping Goddess *Manasa*, the deity of the snakes. They observed the vow of *Mangal Chandi* and paid their devotion to the goddesses *Kali* and *Durga*. They also sang the puranic songs of the Hindus. The mainstream Muslim society kept the Bediyas aloof from having any social relations with them (Bandyopadhyay, 1368 BS, p. 108).

The social status of the wandering *Bediyas* in Bengal was very low. They were despised by both the Hindus and the Muslims. Surgeon James Taylor described the *Bediyas* living in the Dacca district as a “low and impure caste” .<sup>21</sup> Their social position was just like the Hindu untouchable castes. The majority of the *Bediyas* in Bengal followed Islam as their religion. However, most of Muslims avoided any social contact with the *Bediyas*. In Dacca District, the Samperias and Bazigars were classified as Muhammadan functional groups (Taylor, 1840, pp. 244-6). Their social position among different classes of Muslims was very degrading. They were not allowed to pray in the mosques together with Muslims. They were also prohibited from using the burial grounds of ordinary Muslims. The British administrators held them to be a criminal tribe. The *Bediyas* were often charged with being thieves, and whenever a robbery was committed near a *Bediya* fleet, they were suspected. The bad reputation of the *Bediyas* was often taken advantage of by professional thieves who escaped detection by casting suspicion on the *Bediyas* .<sup>22</sup> The Bakarganj police in 1871 reported that the *Bediyas* were “expert pickpockets and notorious gamblers”.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, Beveridge made his observation about the Bediyas of Bakarganj by recording that: “They do not appear to be thieves.” (Beveridge, 1970, p. 228). In the Bakarganj District Gazetteer, Jack mentioned that the *Bediyas* of the district were peaceful, industrious, orderly, and honest.<sup>24</sup>

### **Cultural Life of the *Bediyas*:**

Unlike the settled communities of Bengal, the culture of the wandering gypsies was unique in nature. They still possessed some of the cultural traditions of the tribal societies. Their religion, their dress, and their ways of everyday life were quite different from those of the rest of the Bengalis. They speak in their own Bengali dialect. Their variant habitats, their adherence to nature, their own spoken language, and their distinction from the greater Bengali society in their economic, social, cultural, religious, and political activities suggest that they are one of the indigenous tribes of Eastern India. They possessed an unusual capability to adapt to the

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<sup>20</sup> Jack, J.C., *op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, 1840, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> Wise, 1883, pp. 214-5.

<sup>23</sup> Hunter, W.W. (Vol. V.), *op. cit.*, 232.

<sup>24</sup> Jack, J.C., *op. cit.*, 33.

unfavourable environment. The *Bediyas* still hold on to the practice of community living and abide by the directives of their Sardars. Their marriage custom, practice of dispute settlement, religious perception, and rituals were and are a combination of those observed by mainstream Hindus and Muslims. Their addiction to alcoholic beverages was very high. The marriage of the *Bediyas* was contracted by a Muslim Mullah. Their marriages and cultural exchanges were restricted within their own community. They did not burn their corpses but buried them (Bandyopadhyay, 1919, pp. 106-8.). A large number of the *Bediyas* assembled at Munshiganj during the *Kartik Baruni* festival, held in October every year.

Since the *Bediyas* followed the customs and practices of the tribal societies, they extended their cooperation to one another in times of need. The *Bediya* societies were patriarchal, but the *Bedenis* took an active part in all important everyday affairs. The *Bediya* women were used to doing all the hard work for the family. The *Bediya* males were lazy. But the *Bedenis* were industrious, and they not only looked after their family members but also earned a major portion of their family income. After their business in Bengal villages in the favourable seasons, the *Bediyas* returned to their fixed habitat where they celebrate their festivals. At the *Bediya* festivals, young men and women chose their life partners. The *Bediya* youths got full freedom to choose their own wives or husbands. After marriage, the bride went to her husband's house. The *Bediya* wife vowed to take care of her husband and their children. The marriage of a *Bediya* girl outside of their own community was permitted. In such cases, the non-*Bediya* bridegroom had to pay some money as a penalty. Child marriage, polygamy, and the joint family system were absent among the *Bediyas*. The *Bediya* widows were permitted to remarry. Divorce was allowed in *Bediya* society. In such a case, their family wealth, including their children, was divided between the wife and the husband, where the wife got the larger share. The amount of penalty realized from the *Bediyas* by their Sardars for violation of any settled norm of the *Bediyas* or for any committed offence, as well as money received from others who took their girls as wives, was used in the mass feast of the *Bediyas*. There was a well-settled rule among the *Bediyas* that at every encampment, both the *Bediyas* and the *Bedenis* must be on their boats before the jackal's howling is heard in the evening. Any *Bediya* member who was absent, especially a female, was immediately expelled from their tribe.<sup>25</sup> The *Bediyas* ate rice, dal, vegetables, fish, and meat. They ate fish caught by them. For meat, they ate animal flesh. At the same time, they ate the flesh of birds hunted by them. Almost all the *Bediyas*, irrespective of their sex, were addicted to alcohol and *ganja*. The *Bediya* men wore *lungis* and shirts. Their women wore *saris* and blouses. The dressing style of the *Bediya* women was peculiar and carried their own customs. Both of their children, men and women, were fond of colourful dresses.

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<sup>25</sup> Hunter, (Vol. V.), *op. cit.*, 232.

In the Gangetic delta, boats being the principal means of conveyance, the nomadic tribes would move about in vessels that varied in their construction according to the particular division of the *Bediya* communities. All the *Bediya* communities generally lived in groups on *machans* (platforms) on the river-side or on boats in the rivers or other water bodies. In Bakarganj district, the *Bediyas* lived in boats and had their Sardars, or headmen, at fixed headquarters, principally in the south of the district but also in Jhalakati and similar parts, to whom all disputes were referred.<sup>26</sup> At present, all the *Bediya* tribes assemble at Munshiganj or at Chittagong every year on the full moon between *Kartik* 5 and *Agrahayan* 15, the Bengali year, together with their Nardars.

Many narratives and fabulous stories about the *Bedenis* have been in circulation in the society of Bengal since the long past. Their charming beauty, their magical power to attract handsome boys to them, their attractive physical gestures – all were the points of discussion among the mainstream Bengalis. In the recent past, Swapan Kumar Das, a researcher on the *Bediyas*, had spent three days with the *Bediyas* on their boats in order to observe the lifestyle of the *Bediyas* with his own eyes. According to his observation, the everyday life of the *Bediyas* is full of hardships. But they remain complacent with the minimum and lead a happy life. If a *Bediya* group earns a lot more money than they expected from their village trade, they throw a party to celebrate their success. Researcher Das further narrated some mysteries and secrets of the *Bediya* women, citing the personal observation of Billal, a resident of Kalindi, Keraniganj, Dhaka. Billal was born into a Muslim family. Falling in love, he married Tanu, a *Bediya* girl. Billal believes that once a non-*Bediya* gets entrapped in the charming net of a *Bediya* woman, he cannot be free from it. He will be floating on towards the love of the *Bedeni*. It has also been reported that the love-affected man forgets all of his past. One of the characteristic features of a *Bedeni* is that she always remains engrossed in how she can keep her husband happy. There has been a sharp debate about the knowledge of the hypnotisation of the *Bedenis*. Billal discloses some secrets of the *Bedenis* in this matter. He reports that the oriental ratsnake (*daras sap*) has a fleshy body full of fat. The *Bedenis* severs the head of this snake and takes out the fat from its severed body. They prepare a special kind of oil by heating this fat collected from the body of the oriental ratsnake. On the new moon and full moon nights, the *Bedenis* massage the bodies of their husbands with this oil, extracted from the fat of the oriental Indian ratsnake. The husbands of the *Bedenis* wait for these two nights because they fully enjoy the massages. According to the version of Billal, if a *Bedeni* applies this oil to the body of a man, that man can never part with the *Bedeni*—he will always feel that he is in heaven (Das, 2011, pp. 46-51).

The *Bediya* Sardars practised polygamy. Even in the present day, a section of them keeps more than one wife. The male members of the *Bediya* family are indolent

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<sup>26</sup> Jack, *op. cit.*, 33.

while their women earn the lion's share of their family income in the present days. The *Bediyas* pretend to be orthodox Muslims and emphatically claim that their children and grandchildren are studying Islamic education in religious institutions. When asked about their journey routes, the *Bediya* Sardars assert that they travel different parts of Bangladesh and go up to Bihar, Jharkhand, and Assam.<sup>27</sup> The *Bediyas* adopted a culture of their own. Since they wandered from place to place throughout the year due to their occupational compulsions, the *Bediya* parents could never think of sending their children to *maktabs* or schools for their formal education. They always thought that their children would adopt the wandering occupation of their forefathers. Due to their nomadic lifestyle, the *Bediyas* were unable to access the healthcare or other facilities provided by the local government.

### **Bad Reputation to the *Bediyas*:**

The *Bediyas* have always had a bad reputation in the eyes of mainstream society and the British government alike. Hunter recorded that the *Bediyas* had the bad reputation of being expert thieves and also branded them a hereditary robber caste outside Dacca district. While comparing the *Bediyas* with the civil society, he noted: “*Bediyas* are a class of professional thieves.”<sup>28</sup> The British government passed the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, to deal with the habitual criminals in British India. Several amendments were made to the Act, and finally, the Criminal Tribes Act, 1924, was enacted. According to the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, “If the local Government has reason to believe that any tribe, gang or class of persons is addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences, it may report to the Governor General in Council, and may request his permission to declare such tribe, gang or class to be a criminal tribe.” (Section 2 of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871). Between the years 1871 and 1949, a large number of tribal groups in India were declared “criminal tribes.” The *Bediyas* were included in the list. After the independence of India, the *Bediyas* were notified as a “Criminal Tribe” in West Bengal.<sup>29</sup> Later, the stigma of criminality was withdrawn by the *Bediyas* through legislation.

### **Recent Trend in Socio-Economic Life:**

In recent times, the *Bediyas* have been building their houses in rural areas among the mainstream settled communities of Bangladesh. They are sending their children

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<sup>27</sup> Interview of Motaleb Sheikh, a Sardar of Motaleb *Bahar* of the *Bediyas*, taken by Sufia Khatun on 06.05.2022 at Bagmara in the Rajbari district of Bangladesh. In the interview taken at Bagmara in the Rajbari district of Bangladesh on 06.05.2022, Motaleb Sheikh, the Sardar of Motaleb *Bahar* of the *Bediyas*, stated that he was the spokesperson of the entire *Bediyas*, temporarily settled at Bagmara. He was found smoking a cigarette while sitting on a chair. He reported that his three wives had gone to nearby villages for their trade. He revealed that they were Muslims and that two of his grandchildren were studying Qur'an. He further stated that the *Bediya* troop under his command would go to Jharkhand, Bihar, and Kamrup in India via Kushtia and Jessore in Bangladesh.

<sup>28</sup> Hunter, (Vol. V.), *op. cit.*, pp.43, 232.

<sup>29</sup> *Report: The Criminal Tribes Act Enquiry Committee (1949-50)*, Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1951, para.48, p.13.

to schools and colleges to get a higher education. They are buying shopping establishments in the markets and doing small businesses in many places like Savar, Kanchanur, and Dhaka in Bangladesh. The *Bediyas* are voluntarily giving up their hereditary businesses and running businesses like rice trading in the markets in Sylhet, Sunamganj, and Sonapur. A section of *Bedenis* has accepted employment in the garment industries of Bangladesh and established their skill and excellence in the field. Members of the *Bediya* community are exerting their efforts to become owners of landed property. (Laiju, 2020, pp. 139-146). In the medieval and early modern historical periods, the civilization and culture of the *Bediyas* were those of a tribal society. This trend continued in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a change developed in their mental world.

### **Conclusion:**

The wandering gipsy tribes of Bengal are known as *Bediya*. Mention of these ethnic groups can be found in ancient and medieval Bengal from contemporary literary sources. The *Bediyas* were described as an '*antyaja*' caste in this literature. The British ethnographers classified the *Bediyas* of Bengal into seven classes, i.e., Babajiya, Bazigar, Mal, Mir-shikar, Samperia, Shandar, and Rasia. These *Bediya* groups lived either in temporary tents, or in boats, or in houses raised on piles. In view of the above discussion it has been found that different *Bediya* classes had different occupations, different social customs, and different traditions. In order to earn a living, these nomadic tribes sold venom collected from poisonous snakes, or traded in fancy goods and small articles. They would also display magic, gymnastics, and shows of snakes and animals. The practice of native medicine with medicinal herbs and amulets and tattooing was another source of their livelihood. Each small *Bediya* troop was led by their Sardar, elected by them, who guided them in economic, social, and cultural matters. Hundreds of *Bediya* parties travelled across the province by boat or on foot with loads of their household goods, bamboo poles, tent canvas, ropes and cords, snakes, birds, pets, and female gymnasts. The female members of the *Bediyas* were more diligent compared to their males. The *Bediyas* were held in one of the lowest-class communities in Bengal. Their occupations, food habits, social organization, and everyday life were separate from the rest of the settled communities of the province. The *Bediyas* preached Islam but were addicted to alcoholic drinks and *ganja*. They worshipped the goddess Manasa and observed many rituals similar to those of the Hindus. In modern times, a portion of the *Bediyas* shifted from their traditional occupation and lifestyle. The society and culture of the *Bediyas* have changed to some extent in the twentieth century in comparison to what they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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