

General Observation

The discussion has been held to find out the culture of a specific group called Badia alias Shershahbadia following the Islamic religion. The study aims at revealing the existing socio-economic condition of the Badias. The specific objective of this study is to highlight the social as well as cultural life of the Badia Muslim group regarding whom no Sociological and/or Social Anthropological study has been made so far. It is also envisaged to find out how far the Badias adhere to maintain the uniqueness of their cultural traits.

Primary data for this study has been collected with the help of Sociological and Social Anthropological methods. Fieldworks have been conducted in seven Badia settlements of Malda, North Dinajpur and Darjiling districts of West Bengal.

Sporadic information regarding the distribution of the Badias reveals that their main concentration is in the State of Bihar. In West Bengal they are found in a good number in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda, North Dinajpur and Darjiling. So far the historical materials available, the Badias appear in the Indian soil during the period of Pathan invasion. It is assumed that the Badias intrude in Bengal through Punjab province. During Pathan rule the territory of Bengal was expanded from Orissa to North-Eastern India via Bihar and Koch Behar respectively. In this entire region, therefore, presence of Badias is quite

impossible to deny. Ambiguity remains in identifying the Badias so also exists the controversy regarding affinity. It is fashionable to assume their ancestral relationship with Bediya or Bede, Bedia and Bedouin. But the physical feature and social characteristics including religiosity, places of origin and settlement, occupations etc. help to believe firmly that the Badias are the descendants of the military personnel of the crafty Afghan ruler --- Sher Shah. The fate of the Badias was at stake after the flee-away of their leader. The people of the Badia group were ultimately engaged in agricultural practices along with non-agricultural labour in order to lead an easy economic life.

Present study is an outcome of information collected from seven Badia settlements (Bastis) in three districts of West Bengal. These seven Bastis are distributed in six Mouzas. In Milangarh-JorePakri Mouza of Darjeeling district there are two distinct and adjacent Bastis ^{members of which} ~~are~~ have migrated from Malda and Murshidabad districts. After the name of the district of origin these two Bastis are called as Malda Basti and Murshidabad Basti. Other two Bastis of Darjiling district are in Hakragach Mouza and Chikanmati Mouza. Two settlements from North Dinajpur district have been included in this study. These two are from two different Mouzas viz. Dhamargach South and Dhamargach North. A portion of Badia settlement of Durgapur Mouza in Malda district has also been incorporated in this study.

All the seven settlements under study are in rural areas and three of them are very close to the respective Block Head Quarters. Road communication and transportation facilities are developed in only one of these three settlements. So,

physically, the settlements under study are almost isolated. Barring Bablabona, the Badia settlement in Malda district, all the settlements are of recent origin. The oldest one of the other six settlements is hardly of forty years old. Reason for migration to these settlements is mainly to get rid of poverty. They have been experiencing repeated flood occurrences in their place of origin. Agricultural resources have been limited. In order to maintain their families they moved towards northernmost part of West Bengal. Initially they got involved in earth work of various development projects like Hydrel Electricity Project, Extension of railway lines, Teesta Barrage Project etc. Gradually they settled in these bastis purchasing land with much lower rate compared to that of their earlier habitations. Since 1968 they have settled in Darjiling and North Dinajpur districts.

Altogether 2716 persons are found living in these seven settlements in 455 households. They have a sex ratio of 929 which is quite similar to that of total Muslim population in India (930). Fifty two per cent of the population belong to the category of children below 15 years of age. About 60 per cent of total population have not yet been married. Small family norm is not followed by majority of the Badias though they have a tendency to live in nuclear type of family. Only ten per cent of total households are considered as of joint type.

Among the Badias literacy rate is 43 per cent. Females are lagging much behind the males in respect of literacy. For the males the literacy rate is about 50 per cent whereas for the females it is only 36.5 per cent. Among the literates majority (more than 70%) have read upto class IV. Only 17.5 per cent of total

literate people belong to the secondary stage of formal education. Percentage of literate people beyond Madhyamik (School Final) standard is negligible.

Only 10 per cent of the Badia households belong to the category of small farmer as they hold 2.5 acres to 5 acres of cultivable land. About 90 per cent of the household have either a marginal holding (42.9%) or landless (46.2%).

The Badias are mostly living in thatched houses. Pucca houses with brick walls and concrete roof are rarely found. The walls of the thatched houses are mainly built of mud supported with bamboo splits as and when necessary. Many houses are found, specially in Darjiling district, having no mud walls. The sides of the rooms are built either with splitted bamboo or simply with jute sticks. The Badia houses are arranged lineally on both sides of roads. The settlements have normally developed by the side of a river or stream.

Badias do keep buffaloes and cows in their households. Domesticated animals have an economic value to them as these are helpful for agriculture and transportation.

Rice ~~is~~^{is} their staple food. The Badias₂ are also fond of taking kalai-ruti (chapati made from black gram). As an ordinary meal they take rice with available vegetables. Meat and Polao (fried rice) are occasional dishes for the Badias. A major section of the Badias are found taking simply rice with dal or fried jute leaves at noon. When economic condition permits they prepare delicious dishes like simui, Malpoa, Pituli (sweet rice ball) etc. Alcoholism is extremely limited in Badia society. The utensils used by the Badias are mainly of stainless steel and bell-metal.

Badias do prepare many equipments and furnitures as a part of their handicrafts. They make kuthi (container of grains) with bamboo splits by

themselves. Badia women are found engaged in stitching clothes (kantha) as a pastime activity.

At present Badia people are mainly engaged in agriculture. In many areas they have settled clearing forests. They have transformed the infertile land into an agricultural field. But possession of land is not sufficient for maintaining their families. Nearly 50 percent of the households under study do not possess any land for cultivation. The Badias are engaged in various types of occupation like agricultural, daily labour, rickshaw/ van pulling, masonry, carpentry, peddling, bidi roling etc. Involvement in small business has also been found. All these economic pursuits are the predominant fields of the males. More than 80 percent of the females are engaged in household work. The rate of their participation in gainful employment is low among the Badias. It is only 33 percent. Naturally dependency ratio is high (120.81).

A little more than thirty per cent of people are engaged in gainful employment. Among the earners, three- fourth are males. Females mostly earn through rolling bidi at home. Participation of women in agricultural field is noticed but the rate of such work is very low.

Badia people are poor. The average annual family income is *only* Rs.11,585/-. Members of sixty per cent of the households live below poverty *line* with an annual income below Rs.11,000/- in their family. Only about three per cent of the households have an annual income above Rs. 30,000/- from all sources. About two-third of total households are living just at the subsistence level.

Badias consider marriage as an essential part of life. Regarding selection of spouse they try to maintain a safe distance from other group of Muslims. Even for intra-community marital alliance they consider Sefad and Akida. These are nothing but the manners and practices of a localised section of the group. Both parallel and cross-cousin marriages are found among the Badias. Nikahnama, Meher and presence of two witnesses along with an Ukil are the obligatory aspects of a legal marriage in Badia society. Divorce and widow remarriage are well accepted in their society. Age at marriage is found low among the Badias.

Mean age at marriage is only 16.98 years. Incidence of polygyny is negligible. Out of 492 married persons, eight males are having two wives.

Family in Badia society is of patrilineal and patrilocal type. Size of family is not small among the Badias. On an average six persons live per family. One-third of the total households have restricted their family size within four members. The Badias consider welfare of all the members are the responsibility of the head of the family. Property is inherited by both male and female successors according to the rules of Sharia. Mutual adjustment between brothers and sisters in regard to inheritance of property is a common phenomenon of the Badias living in the settlements.

The Badias follow the instructions of Islam laid down in Quran and Hadith in their religious-cultural life. Extra islamic activities are very limited in their way life. Only a few superstitious activities are done by the Badias. Pirs or the spiritual saints are accepted to them. They believe in equality and mankind. In practice it is observed that the Badias are of orthodox type. They do not allow the elements of little tradition to take much room in their culture. Distinctiveness in performing namaj is also noticed. For the obvious reason the local non-Badia Muslims do not interact with them at large. On the other hand, the Badias also try to maintain a separate identity and reflect it through performance of various socio-religious affairs according to their own customs. To other Muslims they are la-majahibi or a non-religious group.

In Badia society position of women is not considered at par with the men. Though Meher is considered as a sole property of the woman, in most cases it is kept unpaid at the time of marriage. Mutual adjustments with brothers, in regard to inheritance of property, also deprive the women of their actual share.

More than 80 percent of Badia women are confined to household work. Economically they are solely dependent upon their male counterparts. Bidi rolling is the only source from which a good number of women earn at least something. About 15 percent of women are engaged in such type of work in the

studied settlements. Literacy rate of the Badia women is low (35.5%). Among the literate women, majority (87.98%) have read upto class IV. However, women extend immense service for their families. They are overloaded with household duties. As a wife, Badia woman is unable to enjoy a high status but as a mother she is esteemed high. Observance of purdah is considered by them as a kind of social honour and respectability. The condition of women in Badia society is also not static. They are experiencing some changes.

The Badias were the army personnel of Sher Shah at the initial stage of their settlement in Indian soil. Castration is supposed to be one of their traditional occupations. At present castration is done by ^{handy} ~~skilled~~ ^{the members} ~~skilled~~ of this group. They are now considered as a good agricultural people.

They still prefer to settle in low marshy land wherefrom they can easily draw water to irrigate their cultivable land. This sort of land is also available at a cheaper rate. Apart from agriculture the Badias are engaged in various other occupations. Masonry and carpentry are the two economic pursuits where the Badias have begun to stride.

In the field of literacy, the Badias have failed to reach the national average. But some of them have already achieved the highest degree of formal education. Few of them are working as teachers in schools and colleges. Advocates and Physicians are also reported to be there among the Badias.

The changes in economic and educational spheres have brought about some social changes in Badia community. Kinship system and type of family are

also being changed. Change is also observed in the outlook of the community. Political participation of women has now been experienced by the Badias.

In the local social hierarchy they are placed at a lower position. The Badias of Darjiling district do not have any hesitation to show respect to the local Muslims. They offer a high status to the local Muslims of Barelvi group of Sunni sect. They address the local Muslims as Miya Bhai. The local Muslims, on the other hand, look down upon the Badias. Local Muslims are hesitant to interact with the Badias even at the time of performing Namaj. The Badias have, therefore, founded separate mosque in their settlements. Separate gorosthan (burial ground) is also used by the Badias.

Inter community dispute is resolved through paich or jamat. Interaction with the neighbouring communities, specially the Muslims, have developed now-a-days. But the Badias still maintain their distinct identity by cultivating some socio-religious institutions which are unique to them. Non-acceptance of Pirs, non-involvement in popular Muharam, non-~~participation~~^{participation} in Milad, unique marriage practices and use of separate Mosques and burial grounds have helped the Badias for boundary maintenance.