

Badias : Past and Present

There are about 246 Muslim groups in India and these groups have been identified following their ethnicity, status, and occupations. Badia alias Shershabadia is one such ethnic group. Number of people of this group and their proportion to the total Indian population are difficult to estimate because ambiguity persists in identifying them as a separate group. Separation of the group from other communities like *Bediya* and *Bedia* is not an easy job because the Badias remained unknown or little known in academic arena (Mondal,1998a and Siddiqui,1992). The Badias are often confused with the Bedouins who move elsewhere with their origin at Arab (Samad,1991). Sometimes Badia is considered synonymous with *Bediya* or *Bede* --- a nomadic group who mainly follow the religion of Hinduism. Of course, possibility of 'cultural oscillation' cannot be ruled out for maintenance of religious identity of a particular community. *Bediyas* as well as the Patuas do also maintain both Hindu and Muslim identities in different parts of India (Bhattacharjee,1980). But the Badias strictly adheres to the religion of Islam. They are supposed to be originated from a race settled in Al-Badiyah region of Syria (Hitti,1964).

Name of a group is often derived from the place of their origin or from the traditional callings. The Badias might have a relation with the place called Al-Badiyah in Syria. In the history of the Arabs Al-Badiyah occupies a significant role. "Maysun was a Jacobite Christian like her predecessor Na'liah, Utheman's wife, who belonged to the Kalb tribe. She took her son Yazid, subsequently the successor of Mu'awiyah, to the badiyah (Syrian desert) particularly Palmyrena, in which her Bedouin tribe roamed and where the youthful Crown Prince became habituated to the chase, herd riding, wine-bibbing and verse making. Al-Badiyah from this time on became the school of the Umayyad Princes where they acquired the pure Arabic unadulterated with Aramaicisms and where they also escaped the recurrent city plagues. Later Umayyad Caliphs, including Abd-al Malik and al-Walid - II continuing the tradition, built country residences on the border of the Syrian desert and called the Al-Badiyahs" (Hitti, 1964: 195).

In India, Shershabad region is thought to be the place of origin of the Badias. History of the 16th Century Bengal corroborates Badias' claim of their affinity with the Pathans. In the first half of the sixteenth century Afghan reign started in Bengal when Hussain Shah was overthrown by Sur Afghan leader Sher Khan, a formidable minister of Bihar, in the year 1538. He became the master of Bihar first (in 1534) and then of Gour Bengal. Sher Khan (Shah), by his artful management of military force having a handful of soldiers, was able to administer the Bengal province. He adopted the policy of division coupled with central supervision. Several fief-holders or Jaigirdars were made at that time. A

trunk road from Sonargaon (now in Bangladesh) to the Indus was built to keep contact with the Mughals as well as to attack some Mughal provinces. Bengal became the most important single power in North-Eastern India during 1565 to 1572. But the Afghan dynasty did not last for many years. It suddenly ended in the year 1576. Within this short period of 38 years, territory of Bengal was extended upto Orissa via Bihar and North-Eastern India via Koch kingdom (Sarkar,1972). The kingdom of Sher Shah was called Shershabad Pargana at that time and predecessors of the Badias were there in Sher Shah's military force. It is also thought that the Badias are the "Shershabadia Musalmans" and the descendants of Pathan soldiers who were left behind in Bengal by Sher Shah (Rahaman,1996 and Samad,1991).

Notion regarding derivation of 'Badia' from 'Shershabadia' is propped by another opinion of the scholars that the physique as well as the ethnic characteristics of the present-day Badias akin to that of the army personnel of Sher Shah with local influence. They are tall, stout and having fair complexion (Mondal,1998a).

Distinction between the Badias and the Bedias, Bediyas or Bedes is discernible. Bedia is "a small agricultural Dravidian tribe of Chhotonagpur... and has long been separated from the parent (Santal) tribe ... and it seems not impossible to think that the Bedias of Chhotonagpur may be actually a branch of the Santals. The tribe has nothing to do with the Bediyas of Eastern

Bengal....Bediya is the generic name of a number of gipsy like groups" (Risley, 1981:83). Ancestral relationship between the Bediyas or the Bedes and the Badias has been discarded also because the Bediya or the Bedes have originated from an Indian race while the Badias are said to be the descendants of the Afghans. Regarding the social characteristics of the Bediyas it has been mentioned that "the Bediya ... bears a bad character along the Jamuna and in Oudh, but has quite respectable sub-caste in Bengal, where many have accepted Islam" (Baines,1912:108-9). This statement has been made while discussing the nomadic castes specifically thieves who have affinity with the Sauriya - the thief par excellence of the North. Being influenced by such ethnographic account an allegation of dacoity is labelled with the Badias. But the allegation stands cancelled for the want of enough evidences in the court of law (Samad,1991).

Differences of opinion exist regarding origin of the Badias in West Bengal. "Most Badias consider themselves as descendants of Shershah and his military personnel. They are of opinion that their predecessors engaged in administration and army to maintain law and order at different parts of Bihar as per directions of the rulers during Muslim regime. In Bihar they were mainly concentrated at Shahabad, but due to various reasons in successive periods a section of the Badias moved to Murshidabad of Bengal and joined army under Nawab Aliwardi. But later, due to loss of Muslim political power at the hands of the British colonialists, they had to leave their traditional martial profession and accept other occupations for their livelihood. Thus from Murshidabad some of the

Badias migrated to Malda, Dinajpur and Darjeeling. Due to this continuous process of migration they are known as Badias, which means nomadic people. While in the notion of some others the Badias are so named as they are basically residing in marshy lands locally known as Bada and practise cultivation to earn their livelihood. So they are called Badias or Bhatias i.e. the people of Bada or Bhata, which means dwellers of low land. There is also an another view prevalent regarding the name of the Badias, that to Bengal they were migrated from Shershabad or Sahabad in Bihar, thus named as Badia, which signifies migrants of a specific bad or area" (Mondal,1998a:194-5).

Empirical studies on the Badias, though negligible in number, provide a rough sketch of their settlement. Bihar and West Bengal are the two States which constitute huge number of Badias. In West Bengal, Badias or Shershabadias are mainly concentrated in Malda and Murshidabad districts along with various other Muslim groups. Besides these two districts they are also found in North Dinajpur (or undivided district of West Dinajpur) and Darjeeling. Jalpaiguri district also possesses a few people of Badia community. Chance of availability of the Badias are not unlikely in the districts of Cooch Behar, Nadia and Birbhum. Presence of the Badias has also been observed in the Bogra district of undivided Bengal . The Badias are even scattered in the neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan. Terai region of Jhapa district in Nepal and Hilly areas of Phuntsoling in Bhutan have been marked by Badia settlements (Banerjee,1993; Hoque,1986; Mondal,1998b; Mukherjee: 1971 and Samad,1991).

Earlier they settled in both sides of river Bhagirathi or Gour Ganga flowed from the southern side of the then Ramkeli Gour. Various reasons are their for such settlement. After the fall of Pathan dynasty, it was not possible for all the soldiers to flee-away with the rulers. Naturally the soldiers moved here and there and began to settle in the 'crown land' or vested land. But this movement was restricted longitudinally on the bank of the Ganga or the Bhagirathi. Losing military job they tried to cultivate the most infertile fallow land with hard labour. Formation of colonies of ex-military personnel were common in the Mughal period. These were made deliberately to transform soldiers as cultivators. Such type of colony was also formed in Shershabad Pargana. The sub-division or the then outpost of this Pargana was Jahangirpur of Murshidabad district (Hunter, 1872; Mitra, 1951 and Samad, 1991).

Settlement colony of the Badias in the Shershabad Pargana does never mean that they are not settled in other parts of India. In the undivided Punjab province some Pathan soldiers are settled and for that matter the area is even considered the source of origin of the Badias. It is an undeniable fact that the Afghans entered into India from this region and conquered Bengal afterwards. It is argued that "Sher Shah after conquering Bengal left some of his army men who originally came from the Punjab side" (Roychowdhury, 1963:151).

However, in Bengal, Badias are found scattered from Godabari area of Rajshahi district (presently in Bangladesh) to Rajmahal hills (now in Bihar). These dispersed settlement in the early phase is due to economic insecurity along with fear psychosis of a defeated military force. In course of time both the constraints have been minimized and the people of the group lead the life following a great tradition of Islam.

Contemporary settlements of the Muslim Badias in different parts of West Bengal as well as bordering countries like Nepal and Bhutan is due to migration from Malda and Murshidabad districts. Habitation in Northern districts of West Bengal has been made possible owing to their engagement in earth-work in the railways. Another reason of migration of the Badias to present settlements from Malda district is the frequent floods.

The emic concept regarding the name Badia is not uniform. A section of the Badia community feel that the remnant of their original place name has been assigned to them. Hence they have migrated from Shershabad or Murshidabad they are addressed as Badia by the other people. The scholarly people are of the opinion that Badia has been derived from the Arabic word 'Badbi' which means low marshy land. As they cultivate such type of land for years together they have been named so. Still another section of the Badia community possess the view that they are actually *Bhatia* and are addressed so by the local Hindu and Muslim people as they have come from *Bhatir desh* meaning low-tide areas.

It would not be irrelevant to mention here that local people of North Dinajpur and Darjiling districts use the term *Bhatia* for the migrants of lower Bengal and refugees from Bangladesh irrespective of their caste and creed.

The etic approach does not differ very much in this regard. Any group may be named from the place name from where they have originated. Badias are originated either from Al-Badiyah (in Syria) or from Shershabad (in India) region. So they have been recognised as Badia or Shershabadia. In southern parts of West Bengal cultivable low land is colloquially known as *Bada*. Being settled in the *Bada* areas and in the river sides the Badias tried to eke out their livelihood through cultivation. For their affiliation to the cultivable low land they have been named so. Occupation of the Badias is also assumed as one of the reasons for such naming. Traditionally they were engaged in breeding as well as castration of cattle. It has been observed that some members are still engaged in the activity of castration (Hoque, 1986). Castration means exclusion of testes and in Bengali, this sort of activity is known as *bad dewa*. As their traditional occupation is castration, possibility of the referred community to be known as Badias is difficult to rule out.

It is also regarded that absorption in military force and agriculture are the later pursuits of the Badias than castration. Now-a-days many people feel that castration is a derogatory work. The activity of cultivation, in Bengali, is called

chas abad. So, the Badia people's later engagement in cultivation is another reason and probably a strong reason for referring them as Badias.

Observation

Out of about 246 Muslim groups of India the Badias is considered as a significant one though empirical study on this group is almost nil. History narrates that the Badias' appearance in the Indian soil is evidenced from the Pathan invasion. History of the Badia settlement in West Bengal is connected with the rise and fall of Afghan Rule in Bengal. 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.