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The Gypsies Of Rural South Bengal: A Socio-Political Analysis

Sudeshna Das, Assistant Professor, Dept of Political Science, Dhruba Chand Halder College

Abstract:

The Bede or Bedia community - often called the Gypsies of India - represent a nomadic community with deep historical and cultural roots in the riverine South Bengal. Despite their close connection with the folk culture of rural Bengal, they remain politically, socially, and economically marginalized. This paper traces the historical life path of the Bede community from colonial times to post-independence India, analysing the impact of state surveillance (through various Acts), legal exclusion, and socio-political neglect on their current situation. Since they have no permanent residence, they are not eligible to become citizens. As a result, they are deprived of human rights, civil rights, etc., in this country. This article argues for urgent state intervention to preserve their cultural identity and enable political and economic inclusion.

Keywords: Gypsy, Bede/Bedia, snake charmers, Nomad, criminal tribes, etc.

Introduction:

The term "Gypsy community" in India typically refers to the nomadic Bede or Bedia people. Like the Gypsies of Europe, the Bede community leads a wandering lifestyle. They have been living in various parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh for centuries, though they are also found in several other states of India. In West Bengal, they are particularly found in districts like Bardhaman, Purulia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, and others. Today, however, they are on the verge of extinction. Due to government restrictions on their economic activities, legal complications, and social neglect, these ancient wanderer cultures are now crippled. Even though they are part of the mainstream society, they remain marginalized and isolated, living in a world apart.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore the connection of the Bede or Bedia community with the folk culture of Bengal.
2. To assess the impact of the modern state system on the traditional livelihoods and cultural identity of the Bede or Bedia community.
3. To explore how a vanishing community can integrate with the basic structure of the modern state

Research Questions:

1. How much is the social life of Bedias connected to the folk culture of rural Bengal?
2. Why has modern society made them born criminals?
3. Why have they not been able to become citizens of this country, or are they deprived of civic privileges?

Methodology:

This article is written using a mixed-method approach, which includes, survey and interview methods.

In the eyes of foreigners, India is often seen as the land of snake charmers, Maharajas, beggars, yogis, temples, and so on. One could say that the list has no end. However, simplifying the ancient and complex culture of a country like India in this manner is not appropriate. Though it cannot be denied that these elements do play a part in Indian culture, it would be an oversimplification to define it entirely through them.¹ In this essay, I will discuss a community that, while having made significant contributions to Indian folk culture, has not yet received proper recognition in the larger context of Indian culture. This community is the Bedia or Bede community. They generally lead a nomadic lifestyle and are often referred to as India's Gypsies.

The word 'Nomad' comes from the Greek word "Nemein," which means pasture, and refers to people who travel from one place to another in search of better pastures for their livestock, thus having no permanent settlement.² This definition highlights the key idea that a "Nomad" is a community that does not reside permanently in one place but instead moves from one place to another. The Bede tribe of India belongs to such a community. They perform tricks, make bears, monkeys, and snakes dance, distribute medicines, and sell goats and sheep.

However, it must be noted that having no permanent home does not automatically make someone a wanderer or nomad. If that were the case, then most people in any city would be considered wanderers. Soldiers or many government employees, for instance, could also be seen as wanderers. But they are not. Even those who travel from country to country for various reasons, whether they are hippies or ascetics, are not considered wanderers. This is because each of them is on a quest for something, with a specific goal or purpose. The Bede community, however, is a notable exception. Their life is aimless, and the historical, political, and economic reasons behind their wandering are not entirely clear. But what is clear is that the Bede people are without ambition. They have no interest in changing their fate. It is as if they still live in the primeval world. In their eyes, the world is one and indivisible; cities and towns are nothing but forests or fields. Though they were content with this way of life, it is natural for them to feel somewhat disturbed by the initiatives of civilization. As an elderly Bede once said, "What a strange time! Whether you want it or not, people will come and try to make your life better."

According to ancient stories, the Bede community once had lineage, respect, and dignity, but no wealth. However, due to the curse of Chand Soudagar, even what they had was taken away. Unable to prevent the death of Lakhindar, Chand Soudagar cursed the Bedes, saying, "You have broken your word, the trust I had in you has been betrayed... I will remove your place from this society, from this land... No one will touch you, nothing touched by you will be accepted, and you will find no place in any settlement." The truth of this legend may be debatable, but when observing the current social status of this community, the story comes to mind. The Bedes have no country or time of their own. Aimlessly, they wander from one place to another. However, today, settlements of the Bede community (Bede Para, Bede Chak, etc.) have been established in many regions of India. Yet, our society still does not accept them as part of it. They have been pushed away, considered impure and dangerous, and thus relegated to the outskirts of cities or villages.

It would be a mistake to separate the Bede community based on their geographical boundaries. They are a wandering people, divided into various groups, traveling from one country to another. However, a portion of the Bede community has been living in the riverine regions of Lower Bengal for a long time, passing down their nomadic lifestyle through generations. They are on the verge of losing their ancestral way of life and their distinct cultural identity. While their population is small, their contribution to Bengali folk culture cannot be overlooked. In fact, the preservation of this culture is not only important in terms of recognition but also in terms of its conservation.

In South 24 Parganas of West Bengal, areas like Baruipur, Bhangar, Canning, and in North 24 Parganas, places like Bangao, Barasat, Howrah's Uluberia, and Nadia's Krishnanagar, as well as various parts of Burdwan and Purulia, are home to members of the Bede community. However, they are known by different names. For example, in Purulia, they are called "Gulgulia" or "Aghori," while in East Bengal, they are referred to as "Bebajiya."

Although their numbers are small, the Bede community has played a significant role in Bengali folk culture. A notable contribution can be seen in the widespread practice of "Manasa Puja" (worship of the serpent goddess Manasa) in rural Bengal, which owes much to their involvement. In Purulia and Bankura, Manasa Puja has become one of the district's major festivals. During this time, the "Jhapana" festival is also celebrated in Bankura. During this festival, snake charmers, healers, and Bedes perform dangerous stunts with venomous snakes. Additionally, in almost every village of South 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, and Nadia, there is at least one temple dedicated to Manasa, and Manasa songs are very popular. These folk songs, often based on serpent legends or the story of Chand Soudagar, are performed over several days during specific times of the year. The Bede community earns its livelihood through the very snakes that are considered the vehicle of the goddess Manasa.

In India, the Bede community is divided into several subgroups, such as the Dom, Dubburi, Mishigiri, Sandar, Mal, and Mirasi snake-charmers, among others. They are often referred to as India's Gypsies, although their characteristics differ significantly from the actual Gypsies.³ Despite their distinctive lifestyle, much about their rituals, customs, language, and culture remains unknown. Historians have not yet been able to compile a comprehensive and accurate historical account of their community. They continue to carry the characteristics of their primitive, clan-based society. When their livelihood becomes difficult in one place, they leave, saying "Not here, not there, but somewhere else," wandering aimlessly in search of better opportunities.

The British first passed the *Criminal Tribe Act* in 1871, aiming to monitor certain nomadic communities.⁴ The purpose was to keep an eye on people who had never accepted British rule or their imposed laws. Nomadic groups, by their very nature, were independent and did not want to be restricted by boundaries. They were among the first to come into conflict with the British authorities. Since the British could not maintain control over such mobile communities, they passed the Criminal Tribe Act to label several nomadic communities as "born criminals" and regulate them.⁵ This law led to the collection of data on these communities and required many of them to report regularly to police stations.

In 1876, this law was implemented in some parts of Bengal, and the Bede community came under its purview. By 1837, local administrators were granted the power to take necessary measures to control these "criminal" communities and reduce crime.⁶ Although the law was not intended to abolish the nomadic lifestyle, it was meant to regulate minor crimes and ensure the rehabilitation of these communities.

Later, when this law failed to control criminal activities and improve the living conditions of these communities, it was replaced in 1911 by a new law. Under this new law, members of these communities were issued identity

cards and their activities were closely monitored. The law also made provisions for the education of children as young as six years old.⁷ Additionally, local authorities were given the responsibility to create job opportunities in industry and agriculture, establish schools for minor offenders, and arrange permanent housing for these communities. A manager was appointed to oversee these activities. Without permission, members of these communities were not allowed to leave their designated areas.⁸ This law also made it difficult for them to return to their villages, and they were deprived of the opportunity to go back to their old settlements. Despite the oppressive nature of this law, there was no protest or discussion when it was passed. Although, in 1910, Gopal Krishna Gokhale had pointed out some flaws in the law, his efforts did not lead to significant change.⁹

In 1924, the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was amended again. According to this law, a list of names of individuals belonging to certain criminal-prone communities was created. The law also stated that these people could not leave their respective areas without the permission of the local administration. However, the most significant aspect of this law was that it mentioned the rehabilitation of these communities.¹⁰ Later, shortly after independence, the CTA (Repeal) Act of 1952 was passed. As a result, the people from these nomadic communities were overnight transformed into *Denatified Nomadic Tribes*.

During the British era, these communities were subjected to neglect and discrimination, and this continued even after independence. As a result, these communities have been slowly disappearing. Neither the mainstream society nor the government seems to be particularly concerned about them. This could be due to the political silence of these communities; they cannot effectively raise their demands before the government, nor have any leaders emerged from among them to lead them politically. Additionally, they generally stay away from the patronage of national leaders. Policy-makers and planners have shown extreme indifference to them, and some even question their very existence. This attitude is reflected in various Five-Year Plans.

Modernization and development have posed a threat to the cultural identity and self-respect of marginalized groups. In a culturally diverse country like India, where there are provisions to protect various marginalized cultures, this still happens. We must reshape the model of economic development and ensure that political participation reaches the most marginalized groups, especially the nomadic communities, who need it the most.¹¹

Although the government has formed various commissions for the development of these communities, the following commissions were established:

1. The Criminal Tribes Inquiry Committee (1947)
2. The Aiyangar Committee (1949)
3. The Kalelkar Commission (1953)
4. The Lokar Committee (1965)
5. The Mandal Commission (1980)
6. The Venkatachaliah Commission (2002)
7. The Reneka Commission (2005)

Despite the formation of these commissions, little tangible progress has been made, and their condition has only worsened. Political illiteracy remains their biggest challenge. These nomadic communities once lived freely, distant from politics, but in today's competitive society, they need to understand politics to survive. Administrative steps must be taken to ensure their participation in the larger political framework. For example, if seats are reserved for them in local panchayats or municipalities, they will have some representation in

mainstream politics. But in reality, lawmakers do not pay attention to them, as their votes are not considered important for political calculations. If the recommendations of the commissions were implemented even partially, it would have made a difference. But local administrators do not even recognize their existence. As a result, government recommendations don't reach them, and they remain invisible in the political arena.

The Bede community may be at the twilight of its history. They face a grim future, with an uncertain and dark night ahead. However, some believe a bright future lies ahead for them. The days of wandering aimlessly might be over. The Bedes are beginning to settle down, build homes, work in fields or in schools, and integrate into mainstream society. In fact, some have already built homes, and their children are attending school.

These nomads have always struggled to survive. To do so, they often pretend to be poor, but they have no regrets. Despite their poverty, they smile and laugh freely, believing that the greatest sin in life is not to smile. Their life is one of resilience, and a cup of hot tea at the end of the day is enough to make them feel like kings. Some of them go door to door with snakes to beg, yet they joke and laugh heartily while doing so. Despite their hardships, poverty is their lifelong identity, a tool to keep others at a distance. Their ragged clothes and begging are deliberate acts to build a barrier—both physical and social—to keep others away. They want to say, "Let me live in peace, leave me alone." In their way, they create an invisible wall of fear and mystery around themselves, using their unique lifestyle to avoid being understood.

However, no one can remain untouched by external influences. Shadows are inevitable. Bedes have always resisted these influences, but society will never accept their ways. Hence, various government programs are now aimed at socializing the Bede community. Their traditional professions are fading. Now, they are finding new jobs as drivers, selling oil in the black market, or working as daily laborers. While this transition may seem simple, it is far from smooth for them. The Bedes feel melancholic as they see their way of life come to an end. For centuries, they were self-sufficient, unaffected by the outside world, but now they are forced to face a future they never anticipated.

Moreover, their social status and legal recognition have not changed. Whenever a small theft occurs, they are immediately blamed without any investigation. Their children are often kept separate from other children, creating further social isolation. If this continues, how can social integration be possible? The Bedes may eventually reject this civilization that does not offer them human dignity and turn back to their old way of life, where they felt more comfortable and free.

In fact, such tendencies are already visible in the Bede settlement at Baruipur. Several families, once engaged in their traditional professions, have returned to them, and they have begun to settle in old, abandoned areas. I visited a place in Moinak village, Barasat, North 24 Parganas, and saw Bede families living in makeshift tents made from black plastic tarps in an abandoned brick kiln. According to a local man, what was once an empty plot of land on the outskirts of the city, was now full of Bede families. The area, once desolate with just a few trees and stray dogs, had transformed into a small settlement in the evening. They live here, performing their traditional snake charmer act and other tasks to sustain themselves.

They mentioned that they have been living here for six months, and after finishing their performances, they make a decent living. When asked if they plan to move to another place, they sighed deeply. The men often travel long distances in search of new places, but finding abandoned land is becoming increasingly difficult. However, if they find a place, they will move there.

In India, there are two major laws regarding wildlife conservation: The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 (PCAA) and The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WPA). According to these laws, any business or ritual involving wild animals is illegal. Snakes, which are the main livelihood for the Bede community, have been

effectively taken away from them without providing any alternative means of survival. Enforcing these laws has led to the harassment, arrest, and violence against the Bede community by the police and forest authorities. Sukur Ali, a snake charmer from Alipur, was arrested by the police one day, and his family did not hear from him for a long time. His belongings were never returned, and after two years, he was released without any explanation. They do not enjoy the basic rights guaranteed under Article 20 of the Constitution, because they are not recognized as citizens.

In addition to these legal constraints, there are also environmental challenges. Many traditional snake species have been displaced due to deforestation, excessive pesticide use, and urbanization. This has made it increasingly difficult for the snakes to survive, and as a result, the Bede community is also facing a loss of their livelihood. Studies show that the destruction of natural habitats and the increasing use of pesticides are taking a toll on the snakes' population. Many Bede families are now struggling to survive as their livelihood based on snake charming becomes increasingly untenable.

Research Outcome:

Today the Bede community faces multiple issues:

1. They have yet to overcome the stigma of being labeled as "criminal tribes."
2. Their cultural identity is under threat.
3. They have no place in the national economy, relying solely on day labor or begging.
4. Although the government has passed the *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006* for forest dwellers, no legal provisions have been made for the cultural and economic rights of nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes like the Bedes.
5. They are still subjected to police harassment and persecution, which is creating growing resentment towards the state and society.

Recommendations:

To improve the condition of these neglected, deprived, and helpless people, it is important for the government to take some humanitarian steps. The government must pay special attention to them and protect their lifestyle. If the government's intention is to house them in a proper manner, then I don't know if it will be of any benefit, but these communities will be finished. There is a special law for the development of these people from the United Nations. The "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" (UNDRIP) is a law that aims to provide them with redress and rehabilitation. However, all the laws that exist in India have not provided them with any redress, on the contrary, they have been made criminals by birth. The recommendations that can be made for their development are -

First: - Special provisions for protection should be made in the Constitution for them.

Second: - The local administration should go to them. Their problems and benefits should be heard from their mouths.

Third: - They should be included in the national census.

Fourth:- The administration should make a deep survey of the problems they are facing while adopting the household lifestyle and make arrangements for their redressal.

Fifth:- A specific place should be arranged for them to stay, and an institution should be established that will protect their way of life.

Sixth:- Public awareness should be raised to remove the wrong ideas that people have about them. Otherwise, the general public will not be able to easily adopt them.

Seventh:- The Veda people do not get the same opportunities in education and employment as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, immediate arrangements should be made for the protection of these extremely backward people. Otherwise, they will lose their enthusiasm.

Conclusion:

This situation requires immediate attention and intervention by the government, not just through legal reforms but also by providing rehabilitation and support for these communities, including access to education, livelihoods, healthcare, and shelter. The hereditary tradition of these nomadic communities not only talks about clinging to the past system. As the situation changes, they try to adopt different lifestyles. But they are aware that this change must be culturally acceptable to them. Indeed, it is often not possible to measure the overall results of the development process, because in many cases the goals of the plan are not thought out properly. Or the plan only benefits a small number of people. However, those involved in development planning must keep this in mind.

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